

Pandemic. Impossible containment in sub-Saharan Africa?

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After a long interruption for health reasons, back in Africa, I dare to relaunch my blog. I apologize for my absence and I thank the friends who thought of me.

In the pandemic that is gradually invading the whole planet, we are struck so far by the low presence of the virus in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. It is true that these countries are much less crossed by the communication networks that crisscross the most developed continents. It is striking to see infected people disembarking here at an airport after passing through four or five countries in succession, sometimes on several continents. In our countries, apart from a few privileged members of the system, who do not hesitate to travel all over the world with the people's money, the **vast majority of people travel on foot or on public transportation, often of poor quality, and simply try to survive.**

About Africa, we hear anything and everything, like, for example, blacks are not affected by the virus (because of melanin?). This has been disproved by the facts. Or that the virus dies in the heat and that around 30° it is no longer dangerous, whereas it has spread to Dubai where it was over 40°.

In-depth analyses will help us to better understand in the future, but for the time being cases have appeared in almost every country in the world, including our regions, and all governments have a responsibility to contain them as much as possible and to carry out regular health checks. We are encouraged by the fact that in the worst affected countries, such as China, Italy and Spain, deaths do not exceed a small percentage. All this in an environment where, despite the limitations of the health systems, there were many means of intervention, which today are showing their limits. They have made it possible to save many human lives, but the tragedy is that today they are insufficient. Already in Italy and France doctors are forced to choose between several people to treat. This is a moral test that can weigh heavily on their conscience for a long time, despite the creation of ethics committees just about everywhere.

African governments have given instructions, very similar to those given in Europe, for example. But the context is very different. For example, it has been decided to close primary, secondary, university, public and private schools. This does not mean millions of children at home, under the control of parents! Indeed, as in megacities like Kinshasa or Nairobi, the father is almost always absent and the mother is on the street or on a small piece of land 10 to 12 hours a day looking for evening food, **the vast majority of her children find themselves on the street with very little supervision and control**, the small plank shack that serves as a dwelling that cannot be used as a playground or a place of refuge.

Talk of confinement means nothing. First of all, because ten people are not confined in a plank shack measuring 3 by 5 metres under a 2-metre high tin roof on which the sun beats down all day long, which is the most general habitat in the slums here. **Furthermore, confinement only works if there is a possibility of having a minimum supply of food and basic necessities** for all the confined people. In these sprawling cities, however, people only eat if during the day, family members who try their hand at small informal trade on the streets or in the markets have sold something. This is called "living at the day's rate"! Apart from that, there are usually no reserves and we are hungry. In the city where I am, we have started to close markets while society is in a dynamic of day-to-day survival. Now we reopen them, asking people to keep a sanitary distance of one metre when we rent them a space that is not one square metre. Another example is public transport. An effort has just been made in our country to limit passengers in taxis to three and in forty-seater buses to about twenty passengers. Just yesterday, there were about 20 passengers in a 15-seat taxi bus. It is unlikely that these guidelines will be followed given the loss of revenue that such a restriction represents.

For a city of about a million people, at the provincial referral hospital, there were 20 beds in isolation.

Instructions were given to people, such as to wash their hands (but water had to be fetched from quite a distance in some neighbourhoods), not to touch each other when greeting each other, not to gather more than 20 people, which led to the suspension of all the cults that always drain a lot of people, especially during Lent and Holy Week. In some places, the temperature is taken (port, airport, border...) but without being able to do it systematically. There are always some who sneak in elsewhere.

The purpose of this sharing is not to add to or criticize African governments for what they are doing today. We will be able to account for it later, when we come back to the appalling health structures in countries with immense resources that never benefit the population.

People have a faith that is pegged to the body, they keep relying on God. The closing of cults is not a good experience. But we feel the psychosis of the virus is spreading as more and more people in the city are connected to WhatsApp and listen all day long to the world's medical reports, mixed with a whole bunch of fake news that only make the situation worse.

We are doing a great deal of work to make the population aware of hygiene and solidarity with the poorest and most fragile at a time when traders are already taking advantage of the situation to raise the prices of basic necessities. But if the virus does indeed start to spread, without anyone but a small minority who can afford it being treated, the consequences could be quite similar to what happened during medieval epidemics. The worst is not the safest, we have to decide on trust, choose hope, care for those most at risk, and look after them as best we can, now that for many of us the activities have stopped. Thank you for having a thought for us while we also have a thought for you, also those of the privileged countries, because suffering has no borders or colours.

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