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A bi-monthly publication of the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), in partnership with the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ethiopia

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The COVID-19 pandemic: Implication for Africa and Ethiopia

The already faltering global political, economic and social order has now encountered an additional challenge following the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19. Though significantly a health crisis, this pandemic appears to be pushing the world towards a new global reality with trajectories that have yet to be understood. COVID-19 has strengthened the onslaught on multilateralism, inserting a stiff competition among big powers to access health infrastructure and products to manage the damage of COVID-19. The virus outbreak has triggered cascading crises, according to many observers, reverberating across the world. The economic paralysis created by the pandemic and the magnitude of the damage inflicted on the globalized economy are unparalleled.

Although the situation demands cooperation and multilateralism, these have been in short supply. COVID-19 has imposed virtual diplomacy conducted through mechanical equipment to replace traditional face-to-face diplomacy, dissipating the human sympathy aspect and the role of charisma in international relations and cooperation. COVID-19 has encouraged the re-emergence of racial discrimination and expanded fault lines among communities locally and internationally. COVID-19 has completely stopped the free movement of people and made people-to-people relationships meaningless. It has yet to fully obstruct the movement of goods and services, but it has already forced interactions to go virtual.

In terms of damage, this pandemic is expected to break a number of records in relation to similar health crises in human history. The outbreak has already tested the resilience of those countries that possess the material and human resources necessary to combat such calamities. Ventilators now have more meaning than nuclear arsenals.

The gravity of the situation stems from the fact that the virus spares no one, regardless of social status, identity or wealth (though its impact depends on the age and pre-existing conditions of those affected)—at least until testing and treatment are at issue. But reports (e.g., The New Yorker, 7 April 2020) show how much this virus exacerbates existing inequalities, with the virus disproportionately devastating the black community in the US, for example. There is little doubt that the world’s inequalities will be laid bare on a global scale when the pandemic’s epicenter shifts to Africa.
What is known about the virus and the disease it causes?

Harvard Medical School’s Coronavirus Resource Center explains a virus as follows:

A virus is the smallest of infectious microbes, smaller than bacteria or fungi. A virus consists of a small piece of genetic material (DNA or RNA) surrounded by a protein shell. Viruses cannot survive without a living cell in which to reproduce. Once a virus enters a living cell (the host cell) and takes over a cell’s inner workings, the cell cannot carry out its normal life-sustaining tasks. The host cell becomes a virus manufacturing plant, making viral parts that then reassemble into whole viruses and go on to infect other cells. Eventually, the host cell dies.

Coronaviruses are a type of virus. Their name stems from the way they look under a microscope, as they are covered in pointed structures that surround them like a “corona,” or crown. These viruses are common in various animals and often cause colds or other mild respiratory illnesses. According to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, “Rarely, an animal coronavirus can infect humans.” Although this is indeed rare, it has happened before; in fact, it’s the same way that SARS originated. Ebola and HIV were also animal viruses that jumped to humans. In the case of this novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19, genetic analysis indicates that a bat was probably the original animal in question.

There are several things that make the COVID-19 disease different from other respiratory illnesses. First of all, the virus itself is highly contagious. This is due to a combination of the properties of the virus and the way that humans interact, which epidemiologists quantify with a figure called R0, which refers to the number of other people a sick person is likely to infect, on average, in a group that is entirely susceptible to the disease, with no immunity.

COVID-19 is also more deadly than other respiratory illnesses. Although the case fatality rate has yet to be established and seems to vary widely from country to country, it is clearly much higher than that of seasonal flu—particularly for older people and people with underlying health conditions.

But in an odd twist, there is an enormous range in the severity of the illness caused by this virus. A significant percentage of people infected with this coronavirus have only mild symptoms or remain entirely asymptomatic, yet they can still spread the disease to other people. The rate at which this happens is unknown as of yet, but it has been established that some percentage of
asymptomatic cases are nevertheless contagious. And people who are pre-symptomatic during the virus’s incubation period of up to 14 days have also transmitted the disease during that time.

All of this means that this novel coronavirus has been able to cause a pandemic. And although significant advances have been made in understanding the genetic code and mutation structure of the virus, the world still has a long way to go in developing a cure or even treatments for COVID-19, let alone a vaccine for the virus that causes it.

**The shake-up**

Many countries were caught off guard in dealing with the emergent pandemic, believing either they were immune to the threat or would be able to easily defeat the virus when it reached their shores. Some leaders wished that the virus would just go away. But the tenacity of this coronavirus and the developing pandemic compelled states to close their borders and restrict the movements of people internally.

In this context rumors abound, including those that instruct that a squeeze of lemon or some-such will cure the disease. This sort of misinformation is unhelpful, but it may also keep people from taking vital precautions to protect themselves and others. Meanwhile disinformation and conspiracy theories continue to circulate, and these may be more dangerous, even actively harmful. Some assert that the virus was clinically produced and escaped from a laboratory. Others venture to associate COVID-19 with the development of biological weapons. Still others link the disease to 5G cell phone technology, or suggest that a government entity is using COVID-19 as an excuse to vaccinate people and thereby support pharmaceutical companies. The list continues, intensifying the fear that the pandemic already elicits in and of itself.

In a span of just five months, the infection and death rates have grown exponentially, with more than a million and a half people infected and more than ninety thousand dead. Countries are simply bracing for tragedy on a scale that the modern world has not encountered in a generation. Individual catastrophes, widespread economic collapse, political uncertainty and global power realignments are all occurring at the same time, with ripple effects consuming all sectors simultaneously. The pandemic has already proven to be more than a health crisis, threatening to alter economic, social and political realities within countries and across the world. More importantly, each country is taking measures that include a lockdown for a period of weeks or months and more or less strict social distancing to control the spread of the
disease. But this cannot continue indefinitely. The economic and other costs are simply unbearable. The true exit strategy is obvious: we must find a vaccine or a cure. But there is a need to bridge the gap between the current tight restrictions and the exit strategy in order to reduce the devastation, for developing and fragile states in particular.

**Global developments**

COVID-19 has implications for global relationships within countries’ societies and in their inter-state relations as well. The pandemic has exposed not only the weakness of the existing global order, which was already unable to cope with the changes that were taking place in the world, but also its decimation of the internal capacities of states whose governments have made targeted reductions of investment in the public sector. Every country is now trying to address the challenges its peoples are facing and there is no single entity at the helm to coordinate a global response to the crisis.

As the place where the novel coronavirus originated, China has made notable attempts to take the lead, if only by example. Following its initial hesitation, which still triggers criticism, China showed its resilience through first containing the crisis internally and then eventually embarking on providing bilateral assistance to others in their endeavors to fight the disease, including support for New York City, the spot hardest hit within the US.

Without understanding the challenges COVID-19 poses, perhaps it is not surprising that much of the international community was busy criticizing Beijing for its violations of human rights in completely locking down the province of Hubei, where the virus first appeared. When this happened other countries quickly shipped out, and even airlifted, their citizens from the provincial capital Wuhan and the surrounding areas. Uninformed about the nature of the disease and the possibility of asymptomatic infection, these countries unknowingly transported the virus into their own backyards. Meanwhile countries that left their citizens in Wuhan, despite the political pressure associated with that decision, had the opportunity to better understand the disease before it arrived on their own territory.

Since December COVID-19 has become a disastrous global challenge. Some blame China’s initial slow response and probable cover-up of the outbreak. Others, including experts in the US, charge the WHO with duplicity, forcing the world community to waste precious time and the early window of opportunity to contain the spread of the virus, which has claimed thousands of lives as a result and ensured the
expeditious expansion of the disease. The US government has threatened to slash its financial support of the WHO, labelling the organization China centric. But this is looking for an easy scapegoat, as there was sufficient warning to take action during the critical period after the WHO issued its alert. The reactions of the US and South Korea are mentioned as variations of actions taken by many states. It is widely known that the US continued at the highest level to belittle the danger of the virus until the last possible minute.

Eventually China’s institutionalized stringent measures helped contain the epidemic within the country, although Beijing continues to be blamed for its initial “faults,” including for infringements on “human rights” and for its decision to completely isolate Hubei province. Other governments’ panicky and discriminatory measures and collective failures to think together have even damaged historical relationships. This was evident in relations across the Atlantic, as the European Union vehemently condemned Washington’s ill-considered decision to prohibit entry of non-US citizens and residents coming from Europe, excepting the UK and Ireland.

A blame game continues to rage between the US and China, with both mired in a narrative war that only exacerbates the difficulties in putting in place a workable multilateral mechanism to address the common and unprecedented existential challenge the global community is facing. This is critical considering some of the efforts underway in the US to sue China in American courts, though China has sovereign immunity. Even if this is the case the act will have serious consequences for the relations between the two states.

Whatever happens, China has proven to the world its impressive capacity to meticulously and effectively manage the catastrophe, and to martial the utmost discipline from its people. The government is listened to on the matter and local-level governance structures are empowered to effectively deal with COVID-19. There were incidents in which local-level popular structures got the right to decide whether medically cleared individuals should join the community or not. Whether or not others replicate what the Chinese have done or manage to match their achievements, the strategy has effectively worked for China as far as the containment of the pandemic is concerned.

Outside of China, the global politics and in particular the politics behind the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring the emergence of a global pandemic remained a serious pre-occupation for far too long. In the meantime, COVID-19 moved quickly to Europe, with the mounting disaster
showing both the weaknesses and resilience of the health institutions in the areas affected. It has now been shown that COVID-19 moved to the US from Europe, probably triggering the unnerved decision from the US banning travelers from Europe.

As Beijing battled the initial outbreak and then extended assistance to others, Washington did nothing at all. The pandemic has shown that the US’s traditional role of coordinating and at times leading a global response to calamity will no longer be performed. Rather, it is unable even to contain the virus on its own shores and is expecting the deaths of one to two-hundred thousand of its own citizens, in the best-case scenario.

Overtaken by individual concerns, the EU member states are concentrating on barricading their respective borders rather than creating an EU-wide response mechanism, except agreeing to a financial stimulus for the economy. This has revealed the vulnerability of the entire Union and its cooperative mechanism. Italy and Spain are suffering most from the catastrophe currently, and there has been no EU-level logistical or financial aid thus far.

Meanwhile the WHO got bogged down in defending itself from questions related to declaring the disease a pandemic, until it was finally forced to make the announcement. There are others who mention that the fact that China controlled the disease internally kept the WHO silent and allowed it to be labelled as China’s mouthpiece rather than an institution that really envisions the pandemic as a serious threat, including to the global economy. Some are blaming the WHO’s “prolonged” inability to declare the disease a pandemic for the severity of the outbreak.

Whichever narrative you choose, the epicenters of the pandemic have so far remained in relatively well-developed parts of the world, originating in Wuhan, China, and moving to the major economic powerhouses in Europe and from there to the US. As this shift has occurred, countries have adopted various modalities and protocols to try to curb and contain the spread of the pandemic. These include all-but complete border closures and restriction of internal movements as well as aggressive testing campaigns to suppress transmission. But while aggressive community-wide testing has been employed with success in controlling the onslaught of the disease, those with limited resources have found they must resort to physical enforcement of isolation as a means to control the spread of the pandemic. All efforts have generated mixed results. The past few weeks have exposed the imperfections even in advanced countries, which have found it difficult to provide adequate personal protective
equipment for health workers and sufficient life-saving medical equipment for patients.

Either because of underestimation or fear of the economic consequences of a lockdown, some have disregarded the danger and squandered precious time in the effort to contain the spread of the pandemic. This was the case in Italy, Spain and the US, which thereby exposed their populations to greater risks and rates of infection. The epicenter of the pandemic has now moved to the US, with Latin America, India and Africa as the next possible destinations.

**The pandemic advances towards Africa**

Given the current trend, it is clear that the pandemic is gradually spreading to third-world countries, and the African continent appears set to be one of the final battlegrounds in the fight against the virus. As the danger looms, more and more countries are scrambling to avert impending catastrophe. Closure of borders, shuttering of schools and businesses, and forced quarantines are becoming the new normal among regimes desperate to contain the spread of the virus.

Third-world countries like those in Africa remain highly susceptible to the pandemic, with indications of the difficulties ahead in the troubles of the developed world. Though the reported cases in Africa are fewer than in the rest of the world, a disaster is in the making as there are growing fears about Africa’s ability to handle the virus when it hits. Simply put, the weak healthcare systems make it difficult to either test or provide the necessary treatments. The existing facilities are already overburdened and can't take additional pressures, let alone a pandemic of these proportions. New cases have already been reported in fifty-two African countries, with additional cases to be found in the days ahead. Countries in the northern and southern parts of the continent—including Algeria, Egypt and South Africa—saw an early spike in confirmed cases. But now others in the continent’s hinterland are beginning to encounter the virus.

**A global economic collapse to come?**

Besides the human catastrophe, the pandemic is leading the global economy into uncharted territory, leaving economists in a quandary. Global markets have faltered as prices of stocks fell at a rate unparalleled in recent times. COVID-19 has shaken the global markets as investors increasingly realize its economic consequences. As trillions of dollars are simply wiped out, governments are forced to put together stimulus packages to save the already
indebted sectors in their respective economies. The economic war between the two major superpowers, China and the US, has not helped either. In Europe and America, thousands of people have lost their jobs as well as any investments, and societies are terrified about their livelihoods in the immediate future.

Countries that had hitherto benefited from global trade with growing demand from the supply side are now stuck with their raw materials, finished and semi-finished products, again causing job losses, not to mention huge material damages. Companies and industries particularly in Europe and North America are frantically preparing plans to cope with the disruption of raw material supplies. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world’s largest economies, including China, Europe and North America, and is now moving into third-world countries throughout Africa. The chain of events related to COVID-19 has affected the service sector, hospitality and tourism in particular. The aviation industry is amongst the hardest hit as a result.

Airline carriers that until a few weeks ago transported goods and services within and between countries are ceasing their services, causing job losses for the airline industry as well as for the hotel and tourism industries. The global connectivity that was taken for granted until recently has been disrupted. Even before the advent of COVID-19, many airlines were struggling to make ends meet. Now they are bound to close shop. In short, there is a global economic recession on the horizon, the likes of which no one alive will remember.

By way of coping with the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic, countries are taking remedial measures. The US has initiated a stimulus package of more than 2 trillion USD, while the UK government has decided to pay 80 percent of salaries for those who are “redundant”. The EU in turn has injected around five trillion EUR into the market and eased the regulations on spending, paving the way for paying subsidies to affected financial institutions and industries. Many in the developed economies have moved work from their workplaces and offices to their homes, which the hospitality business and the service industry have difficulty replicating.

Prices on almost every stock exchange have suffered enormous losses, in the realm of 30 percent, a drop unseen for many years. And there is no guarantee that this will not continue given the continuous trade tension between China and the US. In Europe and America, the populations that lost their jobs as the bottom fell out of the market are terrified about the future. The astonishing unemployment rates mean
more pressure on the capacity of states to respond to new demands.

Those that were well prepared for such a calamity are now seen to be hoarding resources for themselves or assisting those that are not faring as well, thereby expanding their influence on the global stage. Investment in, among other things, health infrastructure and sanitary services will undoubtedly help prepare developing countries for any future crisis of a similar nature. Vulnerabilities in the health sector and its infrastructure have now been exposed. Countries that had previously resorted to single providers have suddenly begun to see goods in the supply chain disappear, either for home use or due to diversion to better paying customers. This coronavirus is thus reshaping the geopolitics of global production and trade.

The crisis has called into question many assumptions about globalization and economic liberalization. Global supply chains dependent on production elsewhere have revealed deep vulnerabilities in western countries. Medical masks and basic medication supplies depend on production elsewhere. No doubt this will change in the future, with forced in-sourcing of production for things that are deemed essential or strategic through stimulus packages that disrupt the way the global economy was functioning. The EU has thrown caution to the wind and said that strict budget deficit rules for Euro zone countries might no longer be applicable.

Reducing the welfare state and public services, the dominant mantra since the 1970s and 80s, is an approach that may need to be abandoned. The lack of hospital beds and ventilators will lead to many losses of life. Some countries will resist better than others, but the US which has yet to face the full force of the storm is highly exposed with its elitist healthcare system. Governments will not only inject capital but also nationalize their strategic companies so that they don’t fail or fall prey to foreign takeover. More than the 2008 financial crisis, this coronavirus crisis will have profound implications, both for globalization with reduced trade and more protection, and for national government policies.

More importantly, there is disruption to the way we work and live. Hundreds of millions of students are out of class and this will have a serious impact on the education sector. Schools in almost all countries have been temporarily closed, impacting family life as well. In order to halt the spread, governments across the world have suspended public gatherings, sporting events, religious meetings and all events “of a huge public nature”. Where some schools may remain open, inter-school events have been suspended.
What are the lessons learned and how are they being applied? If the big multinational companies change the way global production is executed and make other changes due to major policy shifts in market protection, China and other countries that have benefited from the globalized production chains will be heavily affected since they have come to depend on international trade. This, according to observers, will undoubtedly force it to accelerate its shift towards domestic consumption and closer trade ties with Asian countries within its sphere of influence.

Citizens have lost huge sums in the stock markets, as well as their jobs, and the various economic sectors are losing further resources, with serious consequences that will also impact the financial sector. This is likely to provoke a crisis of confidence in the west. The credit system may not be able to sustain itself, and this may lead to a catastrophe. On the flip side, the pandemic has also, unwittingly, united people, not only across continents but also within countries. In more than a few nations the clamor for political power by various ethnic and other groups and inter-state conflicts that were raging have now given way to a common focus on fighting the effects of the virus. As the UN Secretary-General warned, the crisis will probably lead to the end of a universal global order and usher in a new era of heightened nationalism and dual or competing international orders, with profound implications for Africa.

**Africa and COVID-19**

Contrary to disproven beliefs held by many Africans, including wide swaths of the general public and even certain political elites, factors such as weather and the environment, genetics and dietary habits cannot help to defeat a virus. But COVID-19 is slowly overtaking the continent. As the pandemic spreads across the globe, it will be hitting Africa hard. The continent is ill-prepared both infrastructurally and socially to withstand this disease. Cases have now been reported in nearly every African country, with the remaining reporting nothing as they do not have testing facilities.

Although the incidences in many of the African countries remain low, every country in the world is now suffering from the global economic collapse. The globalization that once created a thriving international marketplace and demand for African produce is now facing great stress. The stressors include disruptions in global supply chains, demand-side shocks, an investment slowdown, inflation due to shortages on the supply side, increased health spending, revenue loss due to low commodity prices, and debt unsustainability. The combination is devastating. And the lesson for Africa at
The advent of this coronavirus is a bleak one: that globalization is weak and when it stumbles may take the continent to its knees. A significant amount of wealth has been generated in the globalized world, creating a surplus of unused resources in the global economy as a whole. But this is only pitting countries against one another in a competition for resources and markets, thus creating a shift in the power dynamics among the major economies and making Africa the focus of this competition. How will Africa survive this and what kind of mechanisms should we create to help ensure our survival?

COVID-19 is expected to decimate Africa through huge rates of infection and death in spite of the current slow rates at the beginning of April 2020. The fragile economies and ill-equipped health sectors may not withstand the scourges of the pandemic. The capacities of the governments to survive the upcoming assault are limited. Some are already suggesting that a number of states will collapse and new actors may emerge in the process, although this may also be used as a regime-change agenda in the continent. If the best organized states around the world are faltering in their efforts to handle the consequences of this virus, obviously Africans will also suffer from the uncertainties and weak coordination in tackling the pandemic. Given the gravity of the situation elsewhere, Africans are likely to be left to fend for themselves, further endangering the public and fragile institutions that will face dangers posed not only by the virus but by other actors that may undermine peace and stability in each country.

African countries should not fail to martial their resources and devise a collective approach to battle the pandemic. The support that will be coming from elsewhere is going to be negligible as all are fighting the pandemic at home. Therefore, continental and regional organizations within the continent need to mobilize resources and coordinate a joint response, apart from what countries do internally. Unilateral measures with meagre resources won’t help African countries to effectively combat the pandemic. Given the close interaction and interdependence of communities internally and across continental boundaries, no single state will stand and survive by acting alone.

Given the social and informal institutions tying communities together, enforcing the social distancing rules that have been applied in earnest elsewhere is more problematic for African states. And a complete lockdown—though a novel idea—isolating communities or realizing any form of social distancing is unworkable, given the subsistence nature of African economies. The earlier phases of the pandemic inadvertently demonstrate the fact that this approach
is unlikely to work in Africa, where an alternative approach must be found.

For now, countries must capitalize on the slow pace of the pandemic’s spread into Africa. They should prepare more and educate their societies to take precautionary measures, while remaining ready to learn from the various strategies and action plans pursued elsewhere in combating the pandemic. China, for example, introduced an absolute lockdown, while others like South Korea and Singapore allowed movement with stringent testing of the population. Neither of these approaches are realistic in the African context. But it is essential to find a realistic African approach, taking multiple scenarios into account.

More problematic for Africa is the imperative to salvage its fragile domestic economies, which were just beginning to recover due to increased commodity prices in global markets driven by China’s sustained growth. Prioritizing this has a direct bearing on the social and political realities of all the countries in the continent. It must be accepted that it is necessary to jointly seek bailouts from traditional donors and lending institutions. Still, specific countries need to chart specific policies for their respective economies.

Even more importantly, African countries must build local resilience and combat the pandemic’s threat through the modalities of regional and continent-wide cooperation. Bringing resources and efforts together will establish the best route to address the challenges of the pandemic and the road to recovery. Traditional macro-economic modalities or grandiose and large-scale development projects are not going to address the dangers this pandemic poses. Rather, subsistence-oriented survival strategies, with attention focused on saving the populace from calamity, might prove more practical.

The economic impact in Africa of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to be enormous. The already struggling hospitality sectors and service industries, some supported by African airlines, are bound to be ravaged. The mainstays of African economies, including agricultural production and the export of natural resources, are expected to be devastated unless there is enough stimulus to ensure that these sectors can remain active. Not only international trade but also internal capabilities for self-sufficiency will be tremendously affected. One has to expect a foreign currency crunch and acute shortages of essential goods that must be imported from abroad. This in turn will impact states’ capacities to withstand the pandemic as well as guarantee the day-to-day functioning of their societies.

Africa has no choice but to brace for the worst. Existing healthcare facilities are already overwhelmed, as ailments such
as yellow fever, malaria and HIV continue to afflict the continent. The health sector has infrastructural, logistical and personnel problems, and it will be impossible for Africa to combat COVID-19 with these shortcomings. Deeply entrenched awareness problems, most emanating from prevailing traditional notions and practices, further complicate efforts to combat the virus. People simply tend to believe traditional institution and religious/cult leaders, who are prone to spread misinformation out of their own scientific ignorance and firmly held convictions. Trust deficits in government apparatuses contribute to the problem of people easily disregarding whatever instructions and recommendations come from those at the top. The imperfections of state-society interactions may haunt Africans when all is said and done and the pandemic is over.

But all is not yet lost for Africa. Opportunities to contain and control the pandemic still exist. It only requires wisdom and a concerted effort on the part of African societies and governments. Foremost in this regard is the time factor. The fact that the pandemic has arrived relatively late and is progressing slowly in Africa should be considered a blessing, and one that must not be wasted. Countries should learn from the mistakes already committed in other parts of the world and make the most of the achievements of the success stores. In addition, all the requisite information and resources required to combat the spread of the virus must be amassed and then put to good use.

Africa has sufficient expertise and practical know-how to handle diseases and natural calamities. A repository of resilience has been developed in the fights against large-scale outbreaks of malaria, Ebola and HIV. As a result, societies are unlikely to easily succumb to the fear factor, and they will withstand all the downsides of protective measures, irrespective of the level and extent of hardship. Any strategy devised in relation to COVID-19 should also take this reality into account.

On this optimistic note, one also has to hope for medical and technological miracles in the form of a treatment or cure for this coronavirus before it peaks in Africa. But one must still presume humanitarian, social and economic devastation as well as the concurrent political fallout for this continent of nearly a billion people. The existing healthcare systems and economic standing of many African countries simply will not withstand the virus. If what has happened in the developed world provides any indication, then Africa as we know it stands little chance of survival. That is why hopes are pinned on someone, somewhere developing a vaccine just in time.
It is imperative that African governments, unilaterally and collectively, prioritize the task of battling the pandemic above all else. There is no more urgent business at hand. Similarly, any attempt at politicizing the struggle against the pandemic has to be disallowed, including by those at the helm. African statesmen and political elites should refrain from the kinds of political bickering on full display elsewhere and concentrate their meager resources and full attention on averting the impending catastrophe. The urgent task at hand now is surviving the pandemic. Taking to heart the lessons of the lack of testing infrastructure, African countries should avoid the great power competition which may destroy opportunities for building new infrastructure on the continent. Africa needs to ensure that it will not be a victim in this regard.

The case in point is the future of the Africa CDC, which recently became a contentious issue between the US and China. Within the FOCAC framework of cooperation in health, the Chinese had a plan to build the Africa CDC headquarters and another five branches elsewhere, contributing enormous resources. China had a plan to hold a groundbreaking ceremony and other public events to give the appearance that they were moving forward on 5 February 2020. But because of COVID-19 they decided to postpone all of these events, which triggered a competition by some African countries with the support of others bent on halting the support of China.

The Africa CDC has welcomed Chinese proposals to increase funding and strengthen their contribution to the organization, including by sending two technical experts from China’s own CDC as well as building the headquarters. Under the Africa CDC statutes, any relocation of the organization from AU headquarters would be subject to review by African heads of state, probably in January 2021 given the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

**The need for digitalization of Africa in the era of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 outbreak has now reached more than 1.5 million people globally, causing countries to close their borders and declare internal lockdowns at the expenses of their economies. Half a billion people are expected to be pushed into poverty due to the consequences of the virus, as projected by the Australian National University (ANU) and King’s College London. There are more than 12,000 confirmed cases in Africa as of the 9th of April; but it is realistic to believe that there are many more unreported cases, given the limited tests being run and shortages of test kits in the continent.
With the increased export restrictions, closed borders, decreasing demand and a rapid slowdown in global supply, businesses will have to build resilience to survive and continue operations after the crisis. Only those entrepreneurs, businesses and institutions that are keen to adapt and innovate in a fast-paced world will be able to succeed. Due to the actions taken by many governments, people are advised to stay home, and this translates into consumers being unable to purchase most products. All of this puts businesses, especially SMEs, at risk in losing markets, income and produce. Early response is absolutely necessary for companies to remain competitive in this scenario, which indicates the need to shift to digitalization of businesses in Africa and particularly Ethiopia. Digitalization would require the use of digital technologies to change business models and provide new revenues and value-producing opportunities. Based on lessons from successful experiences in mobile banking and lucrative e-commerce platforms in Africa, it is absolutely crucial to design innovative ways to build a shield for local businesses before they completely crash and burn in these unprecedented times.

In the midst of all the pandemonium created by COVID-19, Africa must position itself to come out of this better organized by leveraging technology in business, agriculture, the blue economy, green growth, smart cities, and so forth, thus driving the continent’s industrialization. But regardless of its undeniable importance, it should be noted that digitalization comes with its own risks—of online fraud and security breaches, for example—as well as tremendous challenges due to the lack of technological advancements and infrastructure in many sub-Saharan countries, including Ethiopia.

**Ethiopia and COVID-19**

COVID-19 came to Ethiopia at a very challenging time for the leadership and the people at large. The entire political economy of the country is undergoing a significant transformation, and concurrent pressures are tremendously impacting its interactions with regional and global powers. The combined US-World Bank push nudging Ethiopia to sign an agreement detrimental to its natural rights over the utilization of the Nile waters is a case in point. Ethiopia’s economy, though on a positive trajectory compared to others in the continent, is also facing challenges. Coronavirus has reached Ethiopia’s doorstep within this broader context and in spite of all the beliefs about invulnerability commonly held by Ethiopians.

The first case was confirmed on March 12. But the required border temperature checks had already failed to detect many of the individuals infected. So
these people were allowed into the
country and moved around freely, not
realizing that they were transmitting the
disease to others, and only testing
positive for the virus after many
interactions within the country. Within a
single month more than 50 cases of
infection and two deaths were
registered, with a few of the cases
indicative of community spread. There
are also cases outside the capital in
Oromia and Amhara regional states and
in the Dire Dawa City Administration.

These early cases sent both the
government and the people scrambling,
with strict measures taken quickly but
not fully enforced. Among these
measures, schools and other education
institutions were closed, non-essential
employees of government institutions
were ordered to work from home, and
the Atakilt Tera fruit and vegetable
market in Addis Ababa has been
temporarily relocated to an open space.
The Prime Minister eventually declared a
five-month state of emergency on April
8, closing all land borders and
suspending constitutional rights.

Nevertheless, lack of awareness persists.
Despite a far-reaching sensitization
campaign, students have continued to
socialize even as schools are closed, and
the information communicated through
the media has remained non-committal
for much too long. More problematic for
Ethiopia is the absence of large-scale
testing, due to costs and supply
shortages of testing kits and
laboratories. These test kits are not
affordable for ordinary citizens and the
government’s capacity to provide them
is almost non-existent. At the beginning
all tests were done by way of samples
sent abroad, and although there are
efforts to expand the capacity further
just three testing laboratories are
currently equipped to test people with
symptoms in the continent’s second
most populous nation.

Thus the country lacks the capacity to
initiate mandatory testing, as has been
ordered elsewhere. In the four weeks
since the discovery of the first case in
March, Ethiopia has tested around one
thousand people, with more than 50
testing positive for the virus. This is an
alarming proportion in a country where
all had continued to believe the
government was taking all the
necessary precautions. And since many
of those infected remain asymptomatic,
in Ethiopia as in every other country,
potential carriers of the virus continue to
mix with the rest of society, further
complicating the situation. What mass
testing could reveal would be anyone’s
guess at this point.

It is this realization that has prompted
the government’s more stringent
measures. Daily activities have been
brought to a screeching halt, with all of
the attendant socio-economic and
political consequences. Combating
COVID-19 is the top priority. Yet the
traditional nature of Ethiopian society and its fragile political economy makes the country and its people especially susceptible to the threats the pandemic poses. Irrespective of all the warnings, we must note that people continue to mingle in great numbers, religious ceremonies are being performed, and the public’s attention has been fixated on rudimentary measures like hand washing and avoiding handshakes. Apart from those all-but token actions, the level of caution remains very low and social distancing has not occurred. It is evident that more stringent measures are required to effectively check the spread of the virus. If this cannot be accomplished, clearly the extent of the catastrophe the pandemic will cause in Ethiopia is going to be huge. The health infrastructure is already operating at full capacity and the supply of ventilators is dangerously limited.

Beyond the impending humanitarian catastrophe, there is the related threat to the economic and political stability of the country. Ethiopia is in transition, and the country was to conduct elections this August. There elections are critical for the legitimacy of the current government. But now the National Electoral Board has decided to postpone the elections due to COVID-19. And if this pandemic is not handled with care, any crisis will have consequences for all segments of society and risk the country’s continued existence. The transition process still faces challenges as there are fault lines in elite cohesion and communal relationships. Amidst these internal challenges the coronavirus pandemic is taking center stage, forcing the government to take measures that will shrink the economy, radically increase unemployment and cause huge losses of revenue and resources. Although the extent to which the pandemic will alter the transition process has yet to be determined, one can expect that it will have repercussions in the political and economic sectors. According to some estimates, Ethiopia’s economic growth is expected to shrink by 3 percent.

One should note the implications of the postponement of the August elections. The incumbent as well as contending political groups need to go through an election to take power or continue to govern. All have been staking their futures on the upcoming national and regional elections, and the fact that these elections are not happening further complicates the politics. There is now a declared state of emergency according to article 93 of the constitution, and pending elections will take place once the situation that triggers the state of emergency disappears. One way or the other, in the aftermath of COVID-19, Ethiopia will find itself at a crossroads.

In the economic realm, the prestigious national airline, the service sector and
the tourism-led hospitality sector have been the hardest hit from the get-go. Ethiopian Airlines has been stretched to the limits to stay afloat and has now cancelled more than 90 international flights. And it has already lost more than 900 million USD in revenue. In a desperate move, the airline is using its fleet to transport much needed cargo related to COVID-19. The company’s survival depends on how soon this virus can be put under control and when the skies are to open again for normal operations. The airline has proven its importance not only to Ethiopia, but also in connecting Africa to the world and by emerging as an essential wing of Ethiopia’s international relations. Its status, capacity and the repository of goodwill the airline has accumulated, particularly during China’s more challenging times, may eventually pay off, rejuvenating the company’s standing and the country it represents.

The other important economic sector for Ethiopia is horticulture, a sub-sector of agriculture. This was one of the growing sectors that brought foreign currency into the economy. Needless to say, it is suffering now. The other part of the economy that is suffering is that of the newly established industrial parks, which are globally connected to supply chains and companies that are themselves interconnected. These industrial parks have all been shut down, resulting in the layoff of tens of thousands of workers. This has serious economic and social implications.

Significant losses in revenue are already being registered in the hospitality sector, forcing some to dismiss their employees. Businesses large and small are being closed in the capital and other regional towns. This situation has to be assessed not only in terms of the economic fallout, but also in terms of the potential side effects affecting the stability and confidence of Ethiopian society. Every job loss has a direct bearing not only on the person who is laid off, but also on that person’s dependents. The spillover effects on the national economy, social cohesion and societal confidence in the government are beyond imagination.

As explained above, the country has just come out of a series of political upheavals of immense proportions. Admittedly, the shockwaves of these developments are still reverberating across society, and the government has yet to fully assert itself as well. Infighting among various political forces has become customary, and accusations and counter-accusations have become the norm. The coronavirus pandemic is expected to drive the wedge in further, and it is likely to be exploited as a political tool.

For now, the government is taking the necessary measures to inform society of the dangers of the pandemic and mobilize resources for the fight against
the virus. Ethiopia cannot completely lock down, as its citizens are too poor to survive enforced isolation for long. But a state of emergency has now been declared, and there is no option but to take a collective stand against the impending danger.

Of course, realizing this requires wise leadership and resilience to cope with the blows to the economy and political economy of the country as a whole. All doubts about our common humanity and our absolute interdependence should be put to rest. We do not need to see more evidence that hard power is not the only determining factor in relations among states. One hopes that the post-coronavirus period will provide a new and more humane basis for relations among nations, making some less arrogant as they realize that they are less powerful than they thought and their survival depends on others, no matter how big they are. It is increasingly evident that there will be no single winner here, and the only way out for Ethiopians is to stand united against the pandemic. No single political opinion or unilateral attempt at survival matters at such a moment of universal catastrophe. Ethiopians will either survive together or bear the consequences for generations to come.