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### **RAR's Editorial Voice:**

#### ***Africa's Afflictions: AU's Initiatives and Responses***

Muhammed Haron (Editor-in-Chief: RA Reviews)

All of us are residing in an ever-changing global environment. It is one in which our numerous nations and their diverse cultural communities are intricately tied to each other through bilateral and multilateral trade treaties and other political agreements. Because of the complexity of these accords, they encounter endless challenges that appear insurmountable to tackle and solve; the current Covid-19 case is one glaring example. Before reflecting, albeit briefly, on the Covid pandemic's impact on Africa's communities, a few comments on the African Union's (AU) *Agenda 2063* strategic framework are necessary.

#### **1. AU's *Agenda 2063***

The continent, like others, has faced, and it continues to confront, several challenges. They include the dramatic climate changes that have wreaked havoc globally, the increasing concerns regarding food insecurity to avoid malnutrition and starvation, economic degradation and stagnation in many countries, the financial woes that have been spin-offs because of the economic meltdown since 2008, the rise in extreme poverty in expanding unequal communities, and the presence of diseases and their impact across continents.

Since this is what we have all encountered during the present period, the question for us in Africa is: what efforts have the AU, as the continent's representative body that officially succeeded the Organization of African Unity (1963-2001) during July 2002, made to deal with some of - if not all - these challenges? Evidence suggest that the AU responded to some of these via its various ambitious programmes; ones that were produced by its committees. These tasks were undertaken with the fervent hope that the continent would gradually transform and advance at a reasonable pace.

Over the first decade (circa 2002-2012) of the AU's existence, its members worked on various projects; among the key ones was *Agenda 2063* that came into effect during 2012. AU's strategic framework, which was underlined by a Pan-Africanist philosophy and outlook, came along with an appendage; one that

underscored its continental mission. This masterplan ambitiously aspired to construct ‘The Africa we (would) want (to see by the year 2063).’

## **2. *Agenda 2063*’s Aspirations: An Array of Questions and Concerns**

The *Agenda 2063* masterplan identified seven aspirations with the hope that the continent and its peoples would be radically transformed. In an abridged version, it aspired to be (1) a prosperous Africa, (2) an integrated continent, (3) a secure and peaceful landmass, (4) a landform characterized by good governance, (5) one that reflects a strong cultural identity, (6) a continent where people drive the development process, and (7) to be a key global player.

Alongside each of these aspirations, there are goals and these, in turn, are accompanied by a list of priority areas (<https://au.int/en/agenda2063/goals>). Since there is no intention to comment on each of the aspirations, the editorial selects two to raise a few concerns as the continent, under its present political leadership, heads into an unknown future. Currently, Africa’s future has, however, been heavily undermined and weakened on different levels by, inter alia, the Covid-19 health threat.

### **2.1 Global Player and Partner**

Now when one considers the general aspiration, it notes that *Agenda 2063* sketches the continent ‘as a strong, united, and influential global player and partner’. Though this is indeed a positive description with which one does not have a problem, it prompts the following questions: if it is indeed a global player and a partner in international ventures as suggested, then why do some countries from or associated with the North treat the continent as if it is ‘one country’? What are the main causes that force large sections of Africa’s communities to still live in poverty-stricken conditions? And why have many of these communities been emotionlessly exploited by foreign forces and transnational companies without sharing in the excavated resources?

While no attempts will be made to answer these or other similar questions raised later in this editorial, one wants to argue that the questions are related to the realities on the ground; places where Africa’s communities encounter endless socio-economic and political hardships because many African elites are in control of their affairs and these elites are, in turn, supported by foreign forces and transnational companies; groups that do not really care about Africa’s social well-being at all. Nay, they are in Africa to deliberately dig the minerals that would be economically beneficial to them and for those governments that support them. This is, for example, the case in Mozambique where Total’s LNG project was given all the support by France in its explorations of gas fields. Though Total had

to suspend for a few months its operations since it partially contributed towards the unstable and insecure environment in Northern Mozambique, it intends to restart its operations as soon as the circumstances are favourable.

Bearing this in mind, one observes on the continent appalling developments where some of these companies are set up. One of the reasons for the inexcusable situation may be attributed to the way these governments and conglomerates have undertaken their tasks in African countries; all reflect unequal partners within a global environment. Here mention may be made of the fact that wherever conglomerates such as China's Sinochem Corporation and USA's ExxonMobil stationed themselves to excavate, taking advantage of the mineral resources in African countries, they would nonchalantly bring with them their 'private' mercenary companies; the one reason being, they claim, that the local host authorities are not capable of defending these companies and their interests from possible attacks and aggressive oppositions on the ground. Obviously, the companies are not saying a word about how they exploit the communities/states and not sharing the wealth equally with their hosts and indigenous, local groups.

The outcome of these unequal partnerships led to social changes that snowballed into unstoppable and drawn-out conflicts as witnessed in Somalia and in the Sahel region. These have also caused ill-informed newspaper reporters to label those locals that countered these conglomerates as 'terrorists.' Jeremy Keenan, the British social anthropologist who has done extensive research in the Sahel, highlighted the incorrect reports that have been circulated by Western-owned papers; but despite Keenan's informed publications such as *The Sahara: Past Present and Future* (Routledge 2006), *The Dark Sahara: Americas War on Terror in Africa* (Pluto 2009), and *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa* (Pluto 2011), these reporters and editors prefer to ignore sound advice.

As a result, these questionable accounts have been published as credible facts even though these locals have had no track record of having been associated with or being members of terrorist groups. If one turns to Central African Republic (CAR) or Mozambique, the reports do the same; they smear and demonise the locals as ardent religious extremists without commenting on the terrible socio-political and economic circumstances that have been further subjugating them. At the same time, reporters describe the mercenary groups such as Russia's Wagner Group and (Rhodesia's) Dyck Advisory Group in glowing terms for defending the national interest and providing the required 'security' to local interests.

According to the newspaper reports, and even some African governments' agents, these security companies are legitimate forces; because they have been brought in since the respective local national armies did and do not have the necessary means to counter these insurgents. These types of reports undoubtedly inflame instead of dousing the widespread conflicts; on top of that, it leads to a continuous destabilizing setting on all fronts and for everyone (that is, the government, the conglomerates, and the communities).

Anyone who has read objective research reports would realize that many of these countries have witnessed – as mentioned - the presence of private armies such as Russia's Wagner Group; private security companies that have contributed towards the formation of unsettled African communities and that have literally destabilized the regions where they operate as influential military partners. The questions are: where is the AU's voice in speaking out against the employment of these private armies and their dubious acts? Why has it remained silent for so long? What measures have been taken to overcome to end or minimize the conflicts that emerged?

## **2.2 Its Peace and Security**

Shifting the focus to the other aspiration, one can concur with the observation that all Africa's communities would like to live peacefully in secured environments; none, as far as one knows, would want to reside in environs that are insecure or that have been destabilized because of either insurgencies or social fragmentation/fractionalization. One is quite certain that the affected communities are citizens in the Central African Republic (CAR), in Somalia, in Sudan, in Mali, and in Mozambique, who would want to reside in peacefully settled environment.

These are environments wherein they can calmly raise families and earn their livelihoods without being abused, manipulated, or exploited. Instead of enjoying their surroundings that are led by community-driven projects, they are, in a few areas, evidently forced to act in accordance with the imposed tunes played by others/outside; in other words, they should abide by the security agendas that were or are set by outside stakeholders. These governments, instead of generating and driving their own projects that would be of value to their respective communities, are held ransom by others; and these happenings add to the existing problems. Together they contribute towards an unsettling and destabilizing environment where 'peace' gradually becomes, or rather remains, a 'foreign' word.

As these communities' experience disruption and dislocation, popular news outlets and their reporters - in cahoots with academics that write subjectively or one-sided articles - describe Africa to be a 'basket' case. They do so to highlight the negative socio-political and economic challenges that African communities across the continent face; and they stress issues such as corruption and mismanagement without factoring in positive developments that are also taking place; they, at times, use extreme examples that show environs that are unsafe and insecure; and they ignore communal undertakings that have been constructive. These, regrettably, add to the damaging beliefs that have been and that are published. Mention was made of Keenan who tried to set the records straight via informed ethical research; an aspect that appears to be absent if not lacking in this world of biased and unedited newspaper reports.

Since these reports resulted in incorrect information and insights being published/circulated, they offer a very harmful, if not destructive view, of the African continent and its populations that generally uphold values such as *ubuntu*. Regrettably, there are also think tanks and academics that reinforce these detrimental interpretations; and their research outcomes' apparent impartiality should be critically questioned and empirically countered whenever and wherever possible. In the end, our continent needs to read measured and balanced reports.

### **3. AU and Covid-19**

Leaving aside *Agenda 2063*'s aspirations, it is important for one to comment on the current pandemic that has caused so much misery and havoc across the continent. The onslaught of Covid-19 pandemic has not only emerged as a health threat, but it has developed into a monstrous contagion that the international communities and world organizations, which are spearheaded by World Health Organization (WHO), cannot seem to stop in its deadly tracks.

Its spread and impact have not only affected the economies of most – if not all – countries (and Africa is not excluded), but it caused chaos among diverse communities' cultural practices across the globe. In addition, it disrupted commercial activities by reducing shoppers in marketplaces and supermarkets and by forcing people to be tested before entering these unsanitized areas; it crippled big and small business ventures such as those in the airline industry and those in the building sector; and it brought to halt activities in factories, public spaces, and other workplaces because of the imposed mandatory lockdowns and health protocols.

These mandatory Covid-19 measures were supported by all AU members states, and AU members imposed them to stave off the pandemic's spread.

Interestingly, and compared to countries in Asia and Europe, the infection rates – with exceptions - among Africa’s population of 1.4 billion was low. While some suggested that this may be attributed to Africa’s medical doctors’ quick response to and experience – aided by the AU’s Africa Centres for Disease Control (ACDC) - with deadly diseases such as Ebola and Cholera, others argued that other factors such as having a young population and friendly climatic conditions might be at play continentally. Hence, this is so across the continent and, in comparative terms, the infection rate as well as the mortality rate remained low.

Alternative opinions, however, differed with mentioned observations doubting that the low stats are dependable, and stating that with the third – and even a possible fourth - wave one will come across a rapid spike; this may then be attributed to variants such as Delta and Lambda that are accompanying it. Since the third wave has arrived, Africa’s rate seems to be on the increase according to formal reports. Whether this has happened or will have a lesser impact as compared to countries outside Africa is difficult to predict at this stage; and it is only time that will tell.

It may, moreover, be argued that as the pandemic extends its reach, many new cases will be recorded; and the question is: would the health care system in African states be able to cope with the influx and increase of patients into hospitals? This is what all have witnessed in South Africa where the medical facilities were stretched to their limits during the second wave and third wave. And since various mutations of this pandemic have developed, the concern is: will the ACDC be able to effectively deal with each of them if they weave their way onto the continent?

For all this while, Africa countries have not actively been involved in producing vaccines. Since they generally rely heavily on donors and outside partners to assist, the ACDC approached the World Bank in March 2021 for financial support for vaccines. The outcome of that discussion was positive by June 2021; and the ACDC secured packages of vaccines for African states and their communities. The first African country that received its package of vaccines by the beginning of August was Ghana, and others followed suite.

Here again another question comes to mind: why should certain countries be given first preference when the pandemic does not distinguish between one nation or the other? We all are aware that this scourge has affected and has continued to affect everyone; and we know that it criss-crosses geographical boundaries affecting everyone in its path. That being so, sound criteria should be devised by WHO and related institutions so that these may be employed all over and not work in the interest of one nation at the expense of others.

One should stress that all states and their diverse communities should be treated equally. Since African states and their communities have not been treated as equals in this global village, it is high time that this changes. The pandemic should be seen as a significant game changer and one in which we should demonstrate utmost respect towards one another in all sectors of our relations. In these abnormal circumstances, it is crucial that we deal with one another in respectful and dignified ways; and at no point should our communities' dignity be undermined because of the pandemic or any other disease. All the necessary efforts should be made to work with world bodies to counter this contagion, protecting each community from experiencing continuous trauma and unbearable hardship. and to bring them back to normalcy.

#### **4. Towards a Conclusion**

In wrapping up this editorial and as stated in the introduction, all of us are residing in a global environment that is undergoing rapid changes. Considering the nature of these transformations, the world's diverse communities' lives are intimately tied to one another through various treaties and agreements.

The AU, which has taken charge of our continent, has constructed a masterplan; this was produced with the fervent hope that the continent will transform itself into an integrated, strong, and culturally vibrant landmass; a continental environment where its peoples will not only enjoy safety and security but where they will reside in peaceful stable spaces.

It, however, seems that the continent continues to struggle trying to deal with several challenges such as climate changes, communal conflicts, and economic transformation; these have not been minimized but they have actually increased since the masterplan's implementation in 2014. Over the past seven years (2015-2021), the tests and trials have multiplied; and the one challenge that has wreaked havoc and affected us all globally is the Covid-19 pandemic. It is indeed this contagion that should force the AU to return to its masterplan that identified seven important aspirations. For this editorial, two of these were selected and commented upon; it did so, wanting to know whether these and the others would be realized now that we are facing this major pandemic.

The pandemic's impact has indeed dented - if not dashed - the AU's masterplan, hampering it from achieving its noble goals. So, it is perhaps necessary for its leadership and planners to revisit it so that the revised document can insert achievable realistic goals by – if not before – the year 2063. And since Covid-19 has affected each nation-state in and beyond Africa, the nation-states would have to return to their strategic plans and bring about the relevant

amendments to accommodate the pandemic and other (unforeseen) challenges' impact.

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### Review Team

Editor-In-Chief & Associate Editors:

- **Muhammed Haron**, Associate Researcher, University of Stellenbosch ([haronm@ub.ac.bw](mailto:haronm@ub.ac.bw)). (Editor-In-Chief);
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- **Mbaye Lo**, Associate Professor of the Practice, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies & International Comparative Studies, Duke University; ([mbayelo@duke.edu](mailto:mbayelo@duke.edu)).

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