

COVID-19 and the Re-discovery of Essential Life Businesses

A Kenyan proverb says that a flea can cause a lion more trouble than a lion can cause a flea. The upheaval caused by Covid-19 is still unfolding. Already, certain jobs not previously considered with much regard, are becoming more prestigious, while certain careers that once went with glamour and pomp have been consigned to the periphery, at best. This period in time calls for careful reflections and soul-searching, and one area that warrants sufficient investment of mental deliberation is what should constitute essential businesses in one's life and community, in a post-lockdown era. This piece attempts to offer some thinking points to readers.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theorized to the Western world some fundamental principles that had guided the traditional way of life on the continent of Africa since ancient times; that at the basic foundation of a man's needs are natural necessities for human survival, e.g. air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sleep. In that regard, traditional African societies ensured that every member of the community had food – through the availability of ample farmland for cultivation for the largely agrarian societies.

Africa's indigenous food production system is founded on principles that centered on respect for the environment. Waste is alien to that food culture. If the inner part of banana was eaten by humans, goats ate the peels, while the leaves were used in wrapping food and other necessities. The same banana tree provided organic, biodegradable materials for shelter, the sort that decomposed into manure and neither clog the waterways with synthetic waste nor pollute underground water with cancer-causing substances. Fewer people fell sick in traditional Africa, and those who did already knew what

Hippocrates the Greek Physician popularized in the West, which is, "Let food be your medicine and medicine your food." African communities generously utilized medicinal herbs and plant components in health management.

Further, African indigenous food production system values the interdependence of all life, be it plant, animal or human. It does not uphold the principle of mass destruction of the species and the environment in the pursuit of wealth for a privileged few. Contrast the situation in Africa's traditional setting with the outright disdain for the environment that pervades the cultivation of food for profit in the name of modernity. Take fishing, for instance, where methods such as the use of blasts and cyanide to kill fish have brought much harm to the global water body, while being at the root cause of several human health challenges. Global biodiversity is seriously threatened as a result of these harmful practices, and the rest of the species suffer ill-health and death because life is interdependent.

Many might argue that today's Africans are sicker and die younger than their forbears. If that were so, a contributory factor is surely the glitzy marketing of cheap, harmful chemicals manufactured in laboratories and sold as food. Africans must desist from copying the Western models of food production, which are not necessarily for the sake of providing nourishment to the community and replenishing the environment, but often for the sole purpose of amassing wealth. Indeed, food as an essential commodity in the global eco-system has been hijacked by big corporations whose interests rest squarely in the continuous growth of elite shareholders' profit. The result includes huge amount of food waste in the Global North, artificially induced hunger among urban and rural populations in Africa and the continued use of hazardous chemicals in the name of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

In indigenous Africa, every man was a farmer, whether of plant

or animal. This is because Africans have always known that there is no wisdom in completely outsourcing something as basic as the food that sustains one's life. But what we have today in abundance is a generation of Africans, living in cities, working so-called "modern" jobs, but who have consigned the business of agriculture to governments, corporations and organizations.

Africans need to rediscover and re-invest in the age-old nutritious indigenous foods and beverages that abound across the region. Innovation in the field of food production must be centered on the African philosophy of deep respect for the environment and the Ubuntu philosophy of the utmost regard for community. Novel food preservation methods should also be sought, which can simultaneously extend both shelf life and the life of the consumer.

The challenge for the African in a post-Covid-19 world should be how to reclaim the responsibility for food as an essential commodity. Agriculture should no longer be left in the hands of corporations, governments and institutions. The colonial mindset that still pervades much of Africa made it such that far too many Africans are trained to pursue so-called white-collar jobs that do not feature in the base of man's needs.

As an African, one should ask how s/he is contributing to one's community's food system. Every able-bodied African should seriously explore the idea of farming, even if as a part-time endeavor. Cooperatives of farmers can come together and develop a rural area with enough amenities to ensure a good life even for families with young, school-age children.

While Africans look forward to the day when governments within the region will be strengthened to invest in building infrastructure across rural communities, citizens can look for ways to work together and provide the comfort needed for self and community advancement at each point in time. It is hoped that the post-Covid-19 lockdown era will be a time when

Africa's 'citizen leaders' will emerge, armed with the realization that every African should be an active participant in creating the world s/he wishes to see in their lifetime.

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