

Why Africa's Structural Marginalisation Persists

The Covid-19 pandemic has yet again cast the spotlight on an old fact: that Africa occupies the lowest rungs of global power structures and domination.

The ongoing inequities and glaring disparities in access to Covid-19 vaccines is only a fraction of the grim story. Fortunately for the vast majority of African peoples, the early [cynical and apocalyptic prediction](#) that the virus would devastate the continent has not as yet come to pass, perhaps to the utter disappointment of the Western media, always yearning for 'the African story', which in essence is a story of misery, suffering and desperation requiring external humanitarianism.

The structural status and place of Africa in the global political economy has scarcely changed in any fundamental way since the continent was fully integrated in the circuits of capitalist accumulation at the height of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

This [triangular trade](#), an evil enterprise of extraordinary proportions, which combined Africa, the Americas and Europe did not just drain Africa of its most important resource, its people, it also set a legacy and permanently cemented the continent as the go-to-place for rapacious exploitation. It handed the Africa the status of being perpetually peripheral.

The physical and psychological humiliation of the Atlantic Slave Trade was only second to the fact that for every African who arrived in the Americas, another one died in transit.

The overarching logic of the Atlantic Slave Trade was clear: to exploit servile labour on a large scale and to propel capitalist development in Europe and North America. Similarly,

the logic of colonial conquest and occupation that followed in quick order proceeded on the slavery foundation – to despoil the colonies using the direct and forced labour of the natives. The postcolonial and neo-colonial era has not departed fundamentally from this trajectory.

The goal has remained one of extraction of African resources at the cheap, and shamelessly so, often with African governments and elites as active but slavish agents. The Congo, from the time its people were enslaved to being declared the 'Congo Free State', which in effect meant that it was available for purchase by the highest bidder, and onto the contemporary times, has remained emblematic of the contours of global extraction.

Even for countries that do not enjoy natural resource endowments, their participation in the global economy has to necessarily entail handling the raw end of the stick.

As the late former Jamaican Prime Minister, Michael Manly, so eloquently and perceptively argued more than four decades ago, the structure of exchange in the global economy is such that, Africa, the Caribbean and other peripheral nations are condemned to near permanent poverty because the system is structured to disadvantage poor countries.

As [Manly put it](#), 'there is nowhere else to go except down. We are in the dilemma as a result whereby when we talk about progress we are trying to get to the second floor of progress on a system that has only a downward escalator...' Prime Minister Manly made these powerful and caustic assertions in 1977. They are even truer today.

This system has persisted, a system of Africa as a reservoir of labour during slave trade and natural resources extraction since the time of colonial conquest. It is entrenched and has a dynamic feedback loop that reproduces its survival.

The feedback works through the structural nature of the global

economy that necessarily inhibits escape from the extraction and export of primary commodities and raw materials. In effect, Africa is kept as a dumping ground of Western manufactures (now increasingly taken over by China) and as an unfettered source of cheap resources. It is in this context that we have to grasp the Covid-19 vaccine situation.

All currently available vaccines were developed outside of Africa and their manufacturing is happening elsewhere other than on the continent. Vaccine developers have pointed out that even if the patents were lifted, Africa simply does not have the capacity to churn out doses enmass. Yes, of course.

As a resource reservoir continent, Africa is not supposed to build manufacturing capabilities that would make possible production of vaccines. Manufacturing must take place from elsewhere and only given to African nations in a gesture of helping a hapless continent.

Even for the much emphasised aid and donor financing that ostensibly flows from the West to the continent, the end goal is not to build African systems and capacities that can engender self-reliance and independence. Rather, as a [group of African scientists](#) noted in a recent letter, the bulk of the donor money remains in Western institutions with only a paltry fraction ending up on the ground in Africa. The entirety of the funds of course are credited to Africa including those that never leave the Western donor's capital.

For a long time, the imagery painted of Africa was one of a continent stuck in poverty, hopelessness and desperation. For example, in 2000 *The Economist* magazine captured the pervasive cynicism of the time with a cover-title screamer of "[The Hopeless Continent](#)" while in 1984, *Time* magazine summarized Africa as "[Coups, Conflict and Corruption.](#)"

In the recent couple of decades, however, there has been a dramatic turnaround and shift away from the old cynical and

pessimist painting of Africa to a positive assessment and optimistic portrayal – that Africa is on the rise. It is an attempt at trumpeting a rising and roaring Africa, projecting and presenting a sanguine picture of the continent.

Not surprising, in December 2011, just about a decade after casting Africa as a hopeless continent, *The Economist's* Africa cover story this time was "[Africa rising](#)." A few critical scholars have questioned this simplistic narrative, among them the late [Ian Taylor](#) and [Ray Bush](#). I have [elsewhere contributed](#) to this debate.

The question is not whether or not Africa is rising; it is rather a question of rising from where and for whom. What is more, obsessing with a rising Africa obscures the endemic structural disadvantages and marginalisation that very much remain alive today.

To break out of the cycle of dependence and crass exploitation, Africa has to pull itself by the bootstraps, to grow its manufacturing sector, which in most countries remains only but a tiny fraction of the economy. Without upping national productivity and net output through value-added manufacturing, the narrative of a rising Africa will remain largely hollow.

To achieve this goal of structural economic transformation necessarily requires a deliberate nationalist strategy and a pan-Africa agenda. This is precisely what a few independence leaders on the continent tried to pursue through the strategy of import substitution industrialisation. Many did not last long in power; they were overthrown in coups, some sponsored by Western powers.