

COVID-19 and Beyond: A Perspective from Japan and South Africa

Insights from the JSAS Webinar, July 4th, 2020

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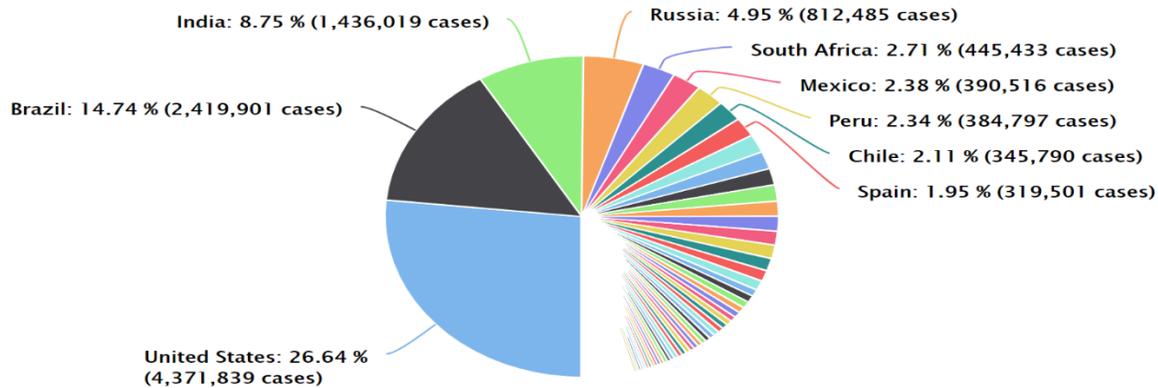
Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic continues to affect the global society through by freezing local and international mobility and disrupting work and the functioning of the economy (intensifying poverty and inequality). The pandemic has the potential to be the worst since WWII and to have widespread negative consequences. As the virus marches on, it is crucial to take stock of challenges and responses and to reflect on new directions for global development post-COVID-19. The Japan Society for Afrasian Studies (JSAS) in collaboration with the Centre for Japanese Studies (CJS) at the University of Pretoria hosted an online webinar via the Zoom platform. The discussions were centred on ongoing socio-economic initiatives put in place by Japan (Asia) and South Africa (Africa) to mitigate the impacts of the novel coronavirus respiratory disease (SARS-Cov-2, or COVID-19). The event was also supported by the Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, and the Institute for Future Initiatives, The University of Tokyo. Attended by around 110 people, the webinar ran under the title of “*COVID-19 and Beyond: A Perspective from Japan and South Africa*”. The event had a robust panel consisting of Christian Otchia of Nagoya University, Scarlett Cornelissen of the University of Stellenbosch, Ayako Takemi of the University of Tokyo, Sithembile Mbete of the University of Pretoria, and Masaki Inaba of the Africa Japan Forum. The discussion was moderated by Rangarirai Gavin Muchetu of Doshisha University.

On December 19, 2019, the first case of the coronavirus was reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan and was so contagious that by March 11, 2020, it had been declared a global pandemic. The ongoing pandemic has affected everyone, infected 16,412,815 and killed 652,039 worldwide at the date of writing (Worldometer, 2020). The pandemic has mostly affected developed countries such as the USA, UK, Italy and France, while developing countries such as those in Africa have recorded lower cases (see *Figure 1*).

The pattern of infections across the globe has been difficult to predict and to rationalize. While developed Japan managed to keep the crisis relatively in check without instituting heavy controls, developing countries such as South Africa (SA) were particularly hard hit. As of July 27, Japan had 39,382 cases (0.24% of total global infections) while SA had 445,433 cases accounting for 2.71% of the global cases (Worldometer, 2020). However, the small number of cases in Japan is partly due to the government’s initial reluctance to implement PCR testing.

Figure 1: Global spread of the disease as of 27 July 2020



Source: Worldometer (2020)

This webinar shed light on different responses done by Japanese actors to mitigate the spread of the disease and compare them to those by South Africans. From these two perspectives, this exercise sought to provide insights on state policy responses, socio-cultural responses, and multi-lateral responses and to identify research areas that would enhance international cooperation against such pandemics going forward.

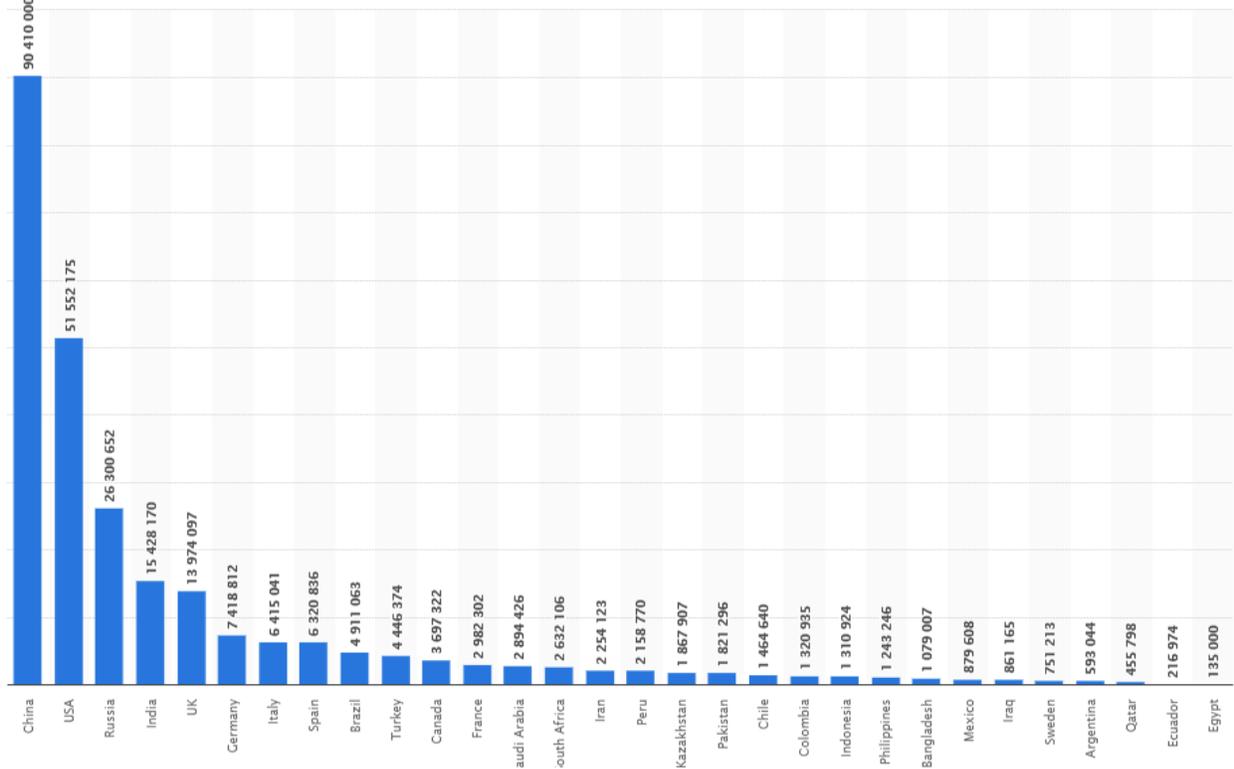
The COVID-19 crisis, global response and the Japanese approach

China has dealt with coronaviruses in the past (SARS-CoV in Foshan, 2012) and when SARS-CoV-2 was identified, the Chinese government instituted a lot of measures including restrictions to the movement of people, closures of some districts and eventually a total national lockdown lasting several weeks. Lockdowns became widely accepted as a short-term measure to fight the virus since no cure or vaccine has been developed yet. Although the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended thorough lockdowns throughout the world, for developing countries such as those in Africa, where over 60% of the livelihoods are informal, new questions are rising on whether African countries can afford continued lockdowns.

The webinar, to a great deal, elaborated the explanation about the temporal spread of the virus from China to the rest of the world and the different measures taken by different countries. In general, world governments utilised a combination of measures ranging from less drastic, such as the promotion of hygiene (thorough washing of hands), wearing of masks and discouraging the unnecessary movement of people. The main aim was to stop the virus and ameliorate its pernicious effect on the global economy. Some countries instituted heavy measures such as national lockdowns and national testing programs. The extents of success of those measures varied globally, however. Countries that acted swiftly performed relatively better. Countries with surges in infections that countered them with a rapid response, such as South Korea, have been hailed as presenting success stories. The pandemic has revealed various issues of global political economy and the weakness of international cooperation as evidenced by widespread rumours and conspiracy theories (some spread by some of the leaders of powerful economies) which undermined the effectiveness of global cooperation against the virus.

Testing for the coronavirus is ongoing and, in some countries, it has been followed by strict contact tracing and monitoring of the population, igniting debates on democracy and the control of free movements. China, USA, Russia, India, the UK and Germany are among the top in terms of testing. SA has done approximately 2.63 million tests (ranked 14 globally) while Japan has done 697 thousand tests and is not even in the top 30 (see *Figure 2*). Japan, therefore, has one of the lowest tests per population among developed countries. The webinar did not specifically focus on comparing the two countries, but it sought to explain the trajectory taken by Japan and how these could be the basis for responses elsewhere.

Figure 2: Most COVID-19 tests performed by country as of July 24, 2020



Source: Statistica (2020)

Japan navigated through the crisis without restrictions on movement (only discouraged it in the State of Emergency – SoE), no tracker software to monitor the movement of people and no widespread tests. However, when the number of cases began escalating, the Japanese government instituted a national ‘soft’ lockdown (SoE) from April 7 to May 6, 2020 (SoE on some prefectures lasted until 25 May). In addition to physical measures, the Japanese government also established several socio-economic measures meant to rescue the economy from a financial crisis like in 2008. It adopted a US\$300 billion economic package for enhancing the employment adjustment insurance, enhancing financial support to business, establishing a rent support grant for Small-Medium Enterprises (SME), support for front-line medical staff and other contingency funds (ILO, 2020). Through this policy, every person received US\$935 as a COVID-19 social safety net. As of July 27, Japan had 29,382 cases which accounted for 0.75% of all cases in Asia. The most affected country in Asia is India (1,437,976 – 36.8%).

The webinar revealed that although Japan has won some battles so far, there was a general confusion in their initial domestic responses as evidenced by the lack of evidence-based governance systems (accountability, transparency and participation). And this has also been reflected in their bilateral foreign policy to fight COVID-19. Multilateral channels remain the best (e.g. the Access to COVID-19 tools Accelerator – ACP-A, and the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool – C-TAP) for international cooperation. The role of the civil society organizations (CSO) is to push governments to be accountable and transparent in the use of the law and national resources during this trying time. In Japan, the recent rise in CSOs has also helped not only the Japanese government but also other governments in the developing world as exemplified through the work of the Africa-Japan Forum which has worked to connect African CSOs to the Japanese ones. Going forward, CSOs will be important in consolidating global governance systems and cooperation in light of continued commitment by the Japanese government to fund some of the COVID-19 response packages in Africa.

Although no single mitigation response can explain Japan's relative success so far, the webinar speakers highlighted the importance of an extremely acquiescent society cultured to a high level of hygiene and the use of face masks. Thus, if these strategies can be encouraged through multilateral channels, they could improve global capacity to win the war against COVID-19. Indeed, speakers highlighted the significance of robust global governance mechanisms as both a short-term and long-term solution to the crisis. They argued that despite the level of globalization and interconnectedness that humanity has achieved so far, global governance systems of cooperation remained weak before and during the crisis. China-USA relations have a great impact on international cooperation. Recently, there has been a rise in tensions between the two countries which has undermined the capability of multilateral organizations such as WHO.

The COVID-19 crisis: Africa's response and the South African approach

Experts predicted devastating impacts of COVID-19 on developing countries especially in Africa with poor health care structures and capricious administrations. The continent recorded its first case in Egypt on February 14, with Nigeria recording the first case in the sub-Saharan region on February 27. A total of 850,628 cases (5.18% of global cases) have at the time of writing been recorded in Africa. South Africa, which recorded its first case on March 5, has since become the most affected country in Africa with over 445,433 cases (52.4% of African cases) (Lone & Ahmad, 2020, p. 1300; Worldometer, 2020). Most of the cases that found their way to Africa were imported from Europe or the USA. Most of the African countries are still fighting the first wave of the infection, and there has been a rapid rise in the daily number of confirmed cases while the number of tests is low. The pressure to reopen the economies to limit the economic damage could spark the second wave of the virus, as it is ongoing in several countries. Since SA is the current chair to the African Union and has the highest cases, it was important to understand the quality and extent of her mitigation policies. On March 27, the SA president declared a SoE with lockdown measures that have lasted until now.

In addition to restrictions on movement, asking for people to be more hygienic and to wear masks, the SA state also availed a US\$26 billion (ZAR500 billion) recovery package. The package included tax adjustments to support employers so that they could pay their workers \$27 per month for the four months of the planned lockdowns (for low-income households) and US\$19 for the informal sector households (ILO, 2020). Other economic measures included tax holidays for specific companies, the establishment of the Solidarity Fund (for vulnerable groups), allocations for purchase of PPE clothing for frontline workers, and business growth reliance facility (for SMEs). The government hopes to balance the economy and protect the people from COVID through this approach.

The webinar speakers from SA emphasized the need to view the pandemic as a systematic shock that then requires systematic antidotes. In doing this, synergies can be built between local communities, national governments in the same continent and as well as trans-continental alliances such as between Japan and SA. Such a systematic approach would foster rapid development of the vaccine and would smoothen its distribution process. Thus, Japan-South Africa (Africa) relations could be improved through the reformation of TICAD so that it could be more Africa-centered. Currently, SA was not in the front line in terms of developing a vaccine. This implied that when the vaccine is eventually developed, they will have to wait in line with the rest of the countries as they do not have a seat at the decision-making table.

Indeed, poor households that depend on the informal sector may violate COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Africa. COVID-19 has revealed the depth of the divide between the poor and the rich as the lockdowns rendered informal sector livelihoods highly strained. The economy has taken a major blow as close to three million South Africans lost their livelihoods. The state had to balance between ensuring public health and securing economic imperatives; between enforcing the law and relying more on civil responsibilities. The webinar highlighted that, just as in Japan, the relative success (slowing down COVID-19 cases in densely populated cities such as Johannesburg) in the initial stages can be attributed to the cooperation the government could attain. As the lockdowns progressed, the poor majority felt the pain of poverty more than the pain from the COVID-19. Thus, unless people knew a relative, or someone from the neighbourhood, who had been infected or died, they didn't take it seriously.

Many lessons can also be extracted through a political economy reading of COVID mitigation policies employed by the SA government. President Ramaphosa used the 'social compact' approach in the initial stages to aggregate consent from the public. The decision making was simple in the beginning and was headed by the government. However, as the pandemic progressed, making democratic decisions became difficult. There was a mismatch between lockdowns and social security nets for vulnerable groups. While the state has acquired adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) in SA, governance failures were hindering the distribution of PPE to everyone who needs it. For example, many community health workers who are helping with the screening and testing only have limited PPE for their work. In the Eastern Cape province, there are PPE shortages in many hospitals because of poor planning and governance by the provincial government.

Conclusions and way forward

Through engagement with the audience, the webinar revealed the persistence of corruption which was a huge barrier for African countries to effectively deal with the crisis. For example, in South Africa, the food relief efforts – food parcels – were undermined by corrupt local councillors who gave them to their friends or sold them for cash. Thus, as development scholars formulate, anti-corruption mechanisms built in policy and programs are critical. Local and international CSOs can go a long way in holding governments accountable. No resolution is currently available to end this crisis; however, attempts should pay particular attention to: i) the facts and evidence of national status in the crisis, ii) effects of the development in the health sector on SA's foreign relations in the African region as well as the rest of the world, iii) how the crisis had affected Japanese-South African relationships. Some major recommendations also came in the form of: i) multilateralism matters ii) economic development and continental trade should be prioritized to improve the resilience of the people and iii) there is need for building the capacity of the state to enable itself to deal with such crises in the future. In terms of how Japan can assist Africa more effectively, it was suggested that the platform of engagement, TICAD, needed serious reform to put the people in Africa at the centre. More CSOs like Africa-Japan Forum should be fostered henceforth.

Going forward, it is important to research more on the type of joint, collaborative projects between South Africa and Japan (or Africa and Asia) beyond the current COVID-19 crisis. The projects can be related to academic research or something more practical, in the fields of human security, TICAD and livelihood support. There also could be collaboration in the development of intellectual property rights and the civil sector in line with the work being done by the Africa-Japan Forum.

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