

# Evading Western Panic: Covid-19 Demonstrates That Africa Needs to Evade Western Panic in an Era of Global Instability.

An essay provided as background to a ['Walk and Talk'](#) video for the 'Existing Otherwise' art exhibition of The Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Ghana.<sup>1</sup>

<https://www.sccatamale.org/>

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Professor Jem Bendell

University of Cumbria, UK. [www.jembendell.com](http://www.jembendell.com)

## Motivations Fair and Creative

Three years ago, the environmental campaign group Extinction Rebellion asked me to walk and talk while being filmed. I shared my view that we need to promote fair adaptation to the climate-generated disruptions already underway. That is fair both locally and globally. By which I meant paying attention to equity, rights, and justice.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, since then, we have seen hardly any attention to adaptation and lots of doomer-bashing from reformists in the West, some of them claiming to be radical. But worse than that, the panicked pandemic response has set a new low in understanding and supporting fairness in many western countries. As soon as the mass media made them fear for their lives, some people's commitment to basic rights evaporated.

Apart from the nuclear threat, since World War 2, the West has not had much experience of mass vulnerability. Unlike the rest of the world, where massive disruptions often occurred, many of them due to the actions of aggressive authorities. In the West the story of continual progress, with ever more control of people and nature, has been pervasive. Elsewhere in the world, both failure and retreat can be part of the social memory, which exists alongside the massive technological advances of the last half century. Over the last two years I have come to learn that being able to allow the idea of a collapse of a way of life can actually enable greater resilience. I have also seen how attachment to existing comforts and certainties can lead to destructive behaviours at massive scales – transforming a challenge into irrevocable damage, not only for oneself.

I live in Bali, where the significant part of the economy that is tourism was decimated by policies around the world on Covid-19. Many people lost their businesses or their jobs, and

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<sup>1</sup> As this is an essay provided for an art exhibition, as a contribution to artistic reflection, and a companion to a video, it is not a referenced academic paper. Instead, some references are provided to help interested persons to follow up on a few key topics. The video that this accompanies can be found via SCCA website and on Jem Bendell's youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/jembendell>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jtKemrEMzA>

so returned to farming the land. Fortunately, either they or their families still had some knowledge of farming, still had some land, and the mechanisms for supporting small scale agriculture were still in place. The environment is great for it, with the thousand-year-old water irrigation systems that are still maintained, the fertile volcanic soils, and the tropical sun. One Balinese artist recognised how many people were returning to the land. He heard from friends that the physical exercise and meditative aspect of farming was benefiting them physically and mentally during what was a stressful period. To celebrate this transformation of adversity into something positive, the artist Made Jodog produced a Performance Art of planting rice as a meditative practice. He invited attention to how many people, himself included, are reconnecting with the spiritual essence of the religious traditions around rice cultivation. The images of his Performance Art are included in my 'walk and talk' [video](#) for the SCCA.

More food is growing because of the failure. Perhaps more people are 'growing' because of the failure. Perhaps more souls are growing because of the failure. But it wasn't their failure. The global agenda on the Covid-19 pandemic was shaped by western corporations, western-funded international institutions, western-owned media and western Big Tech firms, in ways that aligned with their own interests. Sadly, not all of the negative impacts of the pandemic responses could be transformed into something positive. The World Bank has reported that about 100 million additional people are now living in poverty as a direct result of the pandemic policies. That is an increase from circa 700 million in 2019. That has direct impacts on health through poor malnutrition and sanitation.[i]

## **Resilient Africa**

The damage from the pandemic policies could have been far worse. Fortunately, as my readers in Africa already know, most governments in Africa took a different path. Which is one reason why I am pleased to contribute my second ever 'walk and talk' video as a contribution to the art exhibition in Ghana that explores alternative ways of living than the norm in industrial consumer societies. And for which, this essay offers some background.

So, although many of my readers in Africa will know this already, I think it useful to recap on some of what happened across the continent over the last 2 years. At the start of the pandemic many African governments were assessing whether they should follow other countries by shutting down normal life. For instance, the Malawi government asked development consultants to assess the implications of a lockdown. They were advised that many more people would die due to the collateral damage of a lockdown, such as the severe impacts on the informal economy.[ii] So, they didn't lockdown. And neither did most governments across the continent.

The continent of Africa has very low Covid vaccination rates and yet is the least affected continent in the world. With 16% of the world's population Africa has had only around 5% of the world's Covid cases, with only about 7% of the population double-jabbed against Covid-19. [iii] Half of African countries have Covid mortality rates lower than 1 in 10,000 people - less than one-twentieth the rate in the USA. With 1.3 billion people, the African continent has had 240,000 Covid deaths since the epidemic began. Whereas each death may be a tragedy, there are more deaths from traffic accidents in Africa every year. Compare that to the most vaccinated region in the world, Europe, which is experiencing the greatest surge in

new cases, and a higher proportion of deaths from the Omicron variant than in African nations, including South Africa.

This low impact is not because the virus evaded Africa. Seroprevalence studies find that Covid has been present across Africa, with even some studies in early 2021 showing near 50% past infection.[iii] Up to 80 percent of people in Malawi had Covid antibodies by mid 2021. That was even prior to the more infectious omicron variant. The low levels of hospitalisation and death in Africa are not related to genetics, as people with African heritage living in the West are experiencing relatively worse impacts from Covid than their fellow citizens.[iv] Although some of the effect is due to demographics, with Africa having a young population, the same is true of Latin America and many parts of Asia, that have followed the orthodox agenda of lockdowns, distancing, masks and mass vaccinations far more closely and been relatively worse impacted by Covid. Instead, the key in Africa appears to have been natural immunity building up over the various waves that spread widely without much impact, at least according to Kondwani Jambo, an immunologist in Malawi.[v] On top of that, Africa's less numerous hospitals and care-homes may have been an advantage when it comes to Covid, as these have been the major venues for spreading the disease to the vulnerable. For instance, Italian physicians warned in March 2020 that hospitals were driving Covid transmission to the most vulnerable people (so treating more people at home might have been better).[vi]

Despite Western pressure to prioritise Covid-19, African nations need to manage the allocation of their health resources carefully. The Ghanaian historian of medicine Samuel Adu-Gyamfi explains that “it should be up to African countries to determine their own public health goals, and Covid-19 is far from being the most serious public health concern in Africa today.”[vii] For instance, non-communicable diseases are increasing, responsible for about 43% of deaths in Ghana.[viii] Unfortunately, poverty and malnutrition are now increasing because of the increases in prices for grains and other foodstuffs, as a direct result of the pandemic policies of countries outside Africa having disrupted supply chains.[ix]

### **Learning with Africa**

In the West there is discussion about how much blame should be directed at China. On the one hand, some conclude that the virus came from a laboratory in China and so human error, or malfeasance, can be blamed. That conveniently ignores the virus was in sewage in Barcelona in March 2019, many months before the first outbreaks in China.<sup>3</sup> Others blame China for not sharing information rapidly with the rest of the world. Still others blame China for setting the wrong example of lockdowns that were copied by the West. Yet the choice to copy was a voluntary one. Since the pandemic began, China has made its old-technology vaccines available at subsidised prices to countries that want them, including within Africa. However, take up and deployment of those vaccines has not been high, as I explained before. A focus on the merits, or otherwise, of China in the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic can therefore be a distraction from analysing what has gone right or wrong in the responses to the pandemic. For that, a range of questions should be asked, and the lessons from and for Africa considered.

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<sup>3</sup> [SARS-CoV-2 detected in waste waters in Barcelona on March 12, 2019 - Universitat de Barcelona \(ub.edu\) https://www.ub.edu/web/ub/en/menu\\_eines/noticies/2020/06/042.html](https://www.ub.edu/web/ub/en/menu_eines/noticies/2020/06/042.html)

Is it sensible to deliberately scare the public and shame people into compliance? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to lock down the healthy with no symptoms? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to mask the healthy with no symptoms? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to experimentally jab the whole population rather than just the vulnerable? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to divide communities and families on vaccine status with false claims of risk and effectiveness? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to instigate constant digital surveillance and compliance-based restrictions on movement? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to suppress discussion of remedies and treatments for a high fever? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to bankrupt government finances by giving large handouts to corporations and to furloughed middle classes? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to allow the media to make disease management a topic of identity politics? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to work families so hard that the elderly must be housed in one place of infection spreading, called care homes? The experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

Is it sensible to focus on hospital treatment rather than outpatient treatment? With far less hospitals per capita than elsewhere, the experience across Africa suggests no, it is not.

These facts pass by the humanitarian and development professionals in the West, as they advocate and organise to vaccinate Africans for a disease that is relatively insignificant to them. Does that tell us something about contemporary racism? Or about people's motivations for working in those fields? Some people have been arguing that people not complying with draconian policies in the West must be racist. Not only are their arguments contrived, but they require a wilful blindness to African experiences. That clearly demonstrates a lack of authentic commitment to either racial equality or health. I will leave it to others to describe what such a lack of authentic commitment to racial equality implies.[x]

## **Western Panic**

Stepping back from those individual extremes, only a self-involved and frightened culture and its institutions could ignore the experience across Africa over the last 2 years. That self-involved and frightened culture may also be the reason why the West was hit the worst by Covid and, in terms of collateral damage, responded the worst. Western populations are highly influenced by corporate-dominated systems of communication. That is a result of the ubiquity of corporate media, both mass media and online, and the lower levels of in-person

social interaction when compared to other cultures. It means the general public in the West have become less engaged in conversations between peers with different views and more influenced by the narratives pushed at them by people with power, whether business or government. For instance, the establishment in the West reduced the issue of pandemic response to one of social distancing, lockdowns and jabs, thereby marginalising all kinds of other approaches to reducing the spread, that involve traditional community knowledge. Examples include nutritional supplements, good ventilation, rapid identification of symptoms, and treatment in the home using various methods of fever management. To illustrate, if you don't have access to the story of protection from a vaccine, you are more likely to stay home if you have a cough, or ask someone to stay home if they have a cough.

In the West, attention to masks and vaccines may have been counterproductive if they diminished attention to other matters. For instance, I know someone in the UK who has cancer and was wondering whether it might upset the doctors that she did not want the booster jab before going to the hospital for an appointment. Despite the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring that they are not helpful against the omicron variant, it did not seem strange to wonder whether it might upset the doctors to not be boosted. Nor did it seem strange to wear a cloth mask during the hospital appointment, even though that doesn't stop infection. Yet what might actually reduce the risk to the cancer patient and the staff could be seen as strange – perhaps even annoying and impolite. First, there is the issue of symptoms. At no point was there correspondence between the hospital and the patient about how either side should react at the first sign of any symptoms. It might be regarded as strange – and perhaps impolite – for a cancer patient to require the staff to have their temperatures taken before seeing them. Second, there is the proven issue of avoiding key nutritional deficiencies. Yet it might be regarded as strange - and perhaps impolite - to ask if the hospital staff had topped up on their vitamin D3 and Zinc tablets. What is normal and what is strange in the way people take precautions is shaped by the agendas promoted by the medical establishment which is dominated by the ideas and information of the pharmaceutical industry.

Since 2018, I warned about how the anxieties from anticipating vulnerability and experiencing disruption could lead to harmful reactions. I offered a framework called Deep Adaptation to help people avoid contributing to those harmful reactions and instead find positive ways of responding to societal breakdown.<sup>4</sup> Since then, I studied more about psychology and have shared insights on the ways that attachment to industrial consumer society, and the values, comforts and identities associated with it, could lead to authoritarian sentiments in society.<sup>5</sup> I was therefore interested when Sociologist Elísio Macamo, from Mozambique, analysed risk in African and European societies, and explained how perceptions and approaches to Covid-19 are different because of the different levels of comfort and safety that people are accustomed to.[xi]

In contrast to African nations, what happened? The leaders in the West appear to have exhibited what sociologists call “elite panic” where they distrusted the population and sought to exercise authority and be seen to exercise authority. The content of their responses were entirely aligned with the interests of the largest corporations with influence on the matter of

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<sup>4</sup> [Deep Adaptation - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Psychological insights on discussing societal disruption and collapse | Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand \(aut.ac.nz\)](#)

health policies. And what of the general public? At the first experience of collectively-driven personal vulnerability, from the stories about Covid-19, there was some solidarity with neighbours and a readiness to sacrifice for the common good, but then a widespread authority-deference and aggression towards any non-conformity, even if coming from top scientists or close family members. Unfortunately, the West influences the global agenda, via media and institutions, and so it proceeds to shape the world agenda in ways that hurt millions of people around the world. All the time considering oneself to be doing the right thing.

There are parallels with the last waves of Western abuse of the rest of the world. The security crisis that was the 'war on terror' caused millions to die. The financial crisis, that was entirely Western in origin and fault, arguably caused millions to die. Now this medical crisis, where Covid-19 was not a major risk for countries with young populations and other health challenges, is likely to cause millions to die through the poverty caused by pandemic policies. Security, money and medicine - these are pillars of industrial consumer life that have buckled due to the corporate capture of the relevant intellectual fields, the regulators and the media. As these pillars break, the splinters have hurt millions of the most vulnerable people around the world.

### **Coping with Western Decline**

So what of the future? The comforts of people in Western nations depend on the transfer of resources from around the world - whether it is food, energy or manufactured goods. It is therefore likely that such nations will be deeply affected by the disruptions that increase due to the direct and indirect impacts of environmental breakdown. The reaction to Covid-19 suggests that the world's centres of industrial consumer life will not cope well with declining comfort, safety, certainty and supremacy.<sup>6</sup> The West therefore risks making life worse for people around the world when its societies come under further strain. Might the best thing for people in the West to do for themselves and the rest of the world be to allow the collapse of old ways of existing? Which means the old ways of consuming other people's resources, influencing other people's lives, and assuming to be the pinnacle of human endeavour?

"Your way of life is dying so the rest of the world needs to try and avoid your panicked reactions making things worse for everyone else" is not the easiest message to take on board. Embracing the decline, even hospicing, of one's own culture is a difficult invitation for anyone in the West – whether identifying as politically left, right or centre.<sup>7</sup> Although some people already understand that and in a spirit of solidarity with the rest of the world are seeking to re-localize their economic activities, campaign against economic injustice and military adventurism, nearly all holders of any institutional power will resist such ideas. Therefore, the rest of the world will need to organise better to insulate itself from an increasingly dangerous force in the world. I have very few ideas on how the people of Africa and elsewhere might be able to do that - and perhaps my ideas on that are not needed. But I do now recognise the need.

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<sup>6</sup> [The Collapse of Ideology and the End of Escape – Professor Jem Bendell](https://jembendell.com/2020/06/28/the-collapse-of-ideology-and-the-end-of-escape/)  
<https://jembendell.com/2020/06/28/the-collapse-of-ideology-and-the-end-of-escape/>

<sup>7</sup> [Hospicing Modernity by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira: 9781623176242 | PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/675703/hospicing-modernity-by-vanessa-machado-de-oliveira/)  
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/675703/hospicing-modernity-by-vanessa-machado-de-oliveira/>

I have not previously shared anything publicly about my perspective on how the West could become a greater risk to the rest of the world. That does not mean I dismiss everything that the West and modernity in general have contributed to the world. However, I realise my perspective on evading western panic might be a distasteful view for the majority of the people I reach with my work, as most are from western countries. One way I am exploring how to communicate about difficult topics like these is by collaborating with artists and musicians from around the world. So, I am pleased to premiere the music video for [my song "Something's Needling Me"](#) at the 'Existing Otherwise' exhibition.

See the presentation of this essay: <https://youtu.be/BRywmvx9DNE>

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- [i] <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2022/01/06/29754>
- [ii] [Analysis of Medium and Long-term Impacts of a COVID-19 Lockdown in Malawi - \(npc.mw\)](#)
- [iii] [Understanding COVID-19 in Africa - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [iv] <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0074093>
- [v] <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2022/01/28/1072591923/africa-may-have-reached-the-pandemics-holy-grail>
- [vi] <https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.20.0080>
- [vii] <https://unherd.com/thepost/please-stay-out-of-africa-tony-blair/>
- [viii] <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-11170-4>
- [ix] <https://www.uneca.org/?q=stories/extreme-poverty-rises-in-west-africa-due-to-covid-19-pandemic>
- [x] <https://unherd.com/2022/01/the-left-wing-case-against-vaccine-mandates/>
- [xi] [The normality of risk: African and European responses to Covid-19 \(coronatimes.net\)](#)