

Africa has a COVID-19 time bomb to defuse

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Africa's healthcare systems will be overwhelmed when coronavirus cases escalate.

Africa has little hope of support when countries like the US cannot supply its healthcare workers with personal protective equipment.

In Liberia, the first case of COVID-19 came from someone who brought the disease from Switzerland. This traveller's household cook was the next in Liberia to test positive for the infection.

This is not the way it is supposed to work. According to the stereotypes, it is the working class in the slums of a non-industrialized country – in this story, that would be the cook – who transfers the infection to the traveller, who then brings the contagion to the industrialized nation. But we do not live in stereotypical times.

Think back to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa a few years back. Seven out of the 28,646 suspected cases escaped the African continent in three and a half years and yet the industrialized world was in a full-scale panic.

Today, it is the industrialized world that is exporting an infectious disease to the global south. While not as deadly as Ebola, COVID-19 is far more contagious.

Africa, with its long underfunded healthcare systems, is a time bomb just waiting to explode. The first few dozens of COVID-19 infections were detected in March, but the virus probably arrived weeks or months before.



Coronavirus is a looming threat to Africa's population of more than 1.2 billion.

In Africa, deaths from COVID-19 might far exceed what the world is witnessing right now unless major steps are taken. But we have little hope for substantial financial support when countries like the US cannot afford to properly supply its healthcare workers with personal protective equipment (PPE).

In hearing stories of workers trying to make their own visors and re-using surgical masks, I think back to the Ebola outbreak when we in Liberia were compelled to do the same. The lack of PPE had a catastrophic effect: 192 health workers died in Liberia from Ebola and related causes.

And yet, with a virus this dangerous, the international commu-

nity should invest in all countries needing help, from the US to Liberia to anywhere else, because to do otherwise would allow this infection to continue its virulent march around the world.

Sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affected by communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. Non-communicable diseases such as heart attacks and cancer are on the rise, coupled with frequent outbreaks of diseases such as Ebola, measles, meningitis, and monkeypox. Health systems are severely challenged: they have unreliable stocks of essential medicines; little to no electricity; high medical fees for patients; and poor access to

The Ebola epidemic that raged through West Africa was an existential threat to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. A challenge to governments around the world, it severely threatened international public health systems in ways they have never been challenged before.

health facilities. We have some of the worst child and maternal morbidity and mortality rates on

Gifted children need help if they are to cl

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Appreciating a painting by Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci is a delightful experience. Born in 1452, Leonardo epitomized the spirit of the Renaissance and his interests encompassed the realms of art, architecture, sculpture, invention, mathematics, engineering, astronomy, botany, and science. As a young man, Leonardo showed a keen interest in the arts and his father, having recognized his talent, decided to apprentice him to one of Florence's most established painters and sculptors of the day, Andrea del Verrocchio. His six-year apprenticeship ensured that the young protege acquired a vast range of technical skills, as well as the artistic skills of drawing, painting, sculpting and modeling. Leonardo went on to become one of the most influential and inspiring artists in history. In 2017, Christie's sold one of his paintings for \$450.3 million – by far the highest price paid for any artwork at an auction.

A gifted individual is a gift to civilization and we have a responsibility to nurture their unique talents. The National Association for Gifted Children in the US defines gifted individuals as “those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an

exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10 percent or rarer) in one or more domains.” Gifted children have an exceptional ability to learn information quickly, solve complex problems, use advanced vocabulary and communication skills, sustain detailed memories, and see the various connections and perspectives between different issues.

Research conducted on gifted children shows stark differences in their development in comparison to their peers. Gifted students develop, both cognitively and emotionally, at a much faster pace than their peers. This means that they are more sensitive to their surroundings, perceptive of situations, and experience more emotional intensity. They are also intrinsically motivated to succeed, showing interest if learning activities and lessons are individualized and related to their passions. They are highly curious, often preferring to question and ponder ideas, rather than memorize and answer questions. Gifted children also tend to be introverted and find studying in groups distracting.

That is why gifted students benefit tremendously from specially tailored education programs that aim to accelerate and enrich their learning, enabling them to realize

their potential. Many longitudinal studies demonstrate the positive effects of these education programs on gifted children's lives. Research by James Reed Campbell and Herbert J. Walberg on a control group of 345 students who participated in talent development programs showed that 52 percent went on to earn doctoral degrees. Another study on 2,409 gifted adolescents tracked their accomplishments over a 25-year period and found that, among the sample, individuals had registered 817 patents, published 93 books, one had been awarded the Fields Medal in mathematics and another had won the John Bates Clark Medal for the most outstanding economist under 40.

These findings have huge implications for educators and parents. Schools need to offer customized learning experiences that cater to gifted students. First and foremost, schools need to put into place identification procedures to discover gifted students. Secondly, every school needs to have an expert in gifted education in order to provide the necessary programs and services to this group. Furthermore, teachers need to be trained in educating gifted students; from understanding their development to designing lessons in a way that nurtures their talents.



Above, a poster for the exhibition 'Leonardo da Vinci' is seen in front of The Louvre Museum in Paris on October 24, 2019. (AFP)

Educational acceleration also allows students to complete the

traditional curriculum at a faster rate. This includes grade-skip-

ping, early entrance to kindergarten, school or university, and