

What a Mess we are in

Eddie Cross, Zimbabwe

30 May 2020

Did you ever think that it would be a tiny, invisible virus that would bring the world to its knees? Not a third World War, not a nuclear missile strike, not a global famine or meteor strike that knocked our planet off its axis. All that it did was to threaten our health, always a fragile part of our lives, in so doing it acted as an accelerator – accelerating the impact of bad management, poor leadership and global distortions due to our greed and careless policies.

We have been living beyond our means for decades – in the false belief that our “way of life” was a right not just an accident of history or a product of greed and ambition. There is no way that the whole world can experience the living standards that are found in many countries today – if they were applied we would quickly run out of everything. It is time to reset.

The warning signs were all there, the deserts of Africa have been growing steadily for all my life – sand occupying vast areas that were once open savannah. Our rivers are so polluted they are often just open sewers. We are burning fossil fuels unmindful that they were created over the millennia and are finite.

The thin skin of breathable atmosphere that we live in and depend on every day, is a totally fragile feature of our world, so thin it could hardly be measured by a telescope on Mars. Our forests, the very lungs of the world, are vanishing every day and being replaced by open farm land that helps feed our overcrowded planet but on an unsustainable manner. Even worse, being covered by concrete and bitumen.

Where are the visionaries of the past? The giants that put the world back together after two World Wars? The men who put Japan onto its feet after it had been smashed into the ground by military and nuclear force. The men who reached across the Atlantic and helped Europe rebuild itself. The men and women who fought for justice across the world, dismantling global slavery and creating the multilateral agencies that work today to try and create a more equal world.

I live in a country that was born out of struggle for justice, equality and freedom and walked onto the global stage in April 1980. I was there, among the tens of thousands watching as the flag of the greatest coloniser in global history came down and was replaced by our new flag, the symbol of all our hopes and ambitions. Many of the new leaders were friends and colleagues and they quickly took their places at the centres of power. The world was at their feet, we ran the first conference attended by our friends across the world, anxious to help us get back on our feet after 90 years of domination by the small white Community, mainly of European extraction, 50 years of Nationalist struggle and 15 years of war and global sanctions.

It is now 42 years since that day. During this time China has climbed out of the hole it was in in 1975 when her people were poorer than Africa. South Korea has done even better, lifting her people to high income in a very short space of time. Viet Nam has recovered from the calamity of 40 years of war and conflict. Cambodia is recovering from Pol Pot. The Asian Tiger economies are the industrial heartland of the world today with global trade having grown at a real rate of 15 per cent per annum now for over 60 years – delivering prosperity to the most remote places in the world.

Now we have this pandemic and all its associated problems – the global shut down, the collapse of markets and demand for all the things on which we depended for a living. Hundreds of millions are out of work, the GDP of the biggest economies of the world are shrinking at rates that seemed impossible just a few months ago. Businesses are re-evaluating their business models across the world. Nothing is being taken for granted. The skies have cleared and we can see the stars again. The world breathes once more. It is time to reset.

The key is leadership. It is leadership that determines success in all spheres of life – school, universities, business, national life and international relations. It is the most important part of everything we do.

I watched the Director General of the International Labour Organisation [Guy Ryder] being interviewed on television the other day. What an outstanding exposition of our global challenges. He was interviewed for half an hour and what came across was compassion and understanding and a perspective on the issues we face that I have not heard from any other person of significance.

The one thing we must face up to in Africa, our first post-Independence leadership has failed us – we are poorer than we were before independence and the institutions we created in the first flush of growth and change have failed. Our leaders have concentrated on personal accumulation – both of wealth and absolute power. In the process we have crippled our government's ability to serve our people and we have stripped our people of the very things they fought for in the struggle for freedom.

We have stripped our former masters of their assets and wealth but failed to put these assets to work and simply made our economies more dependent on external support and less productive. So today, my country imports 70 per cent of everything it consumes. Its currency is worthless and corruption is endemic and completely distorts the exercise of power in the service of the majority. After 42 years of Independence we are again one of the most isolated countries, diplomatically, in the world. How could we screw up so completely – the answer is simply, lousy leadership.

On the 17th November 2017, when we celebrated the military overthrow of the Mugabe dictatorship and gave support to the leadership taking over, in a way it was even more emotional than April the 18th in 1980. We gave our new leadership total support and legitimised what they had done using military force.

Perhaps this explains the near total disillusion that has set in across the country today. There is near total lack of confidence in our leadership. We no longer think they have the capacity or the will to do the right things. We have fallen back to the position where we are each just trying to survive. If we get the chance to flee to another country with better prospects we are taking those openings – even at great cost.

In the wider world the same thing is happening, countries are withdrawing from the global system. Companies are reorganising their supply chains and aid to the less advantaged is everywhere on the retreat. Barriers to trade and migration are going up. After many decades when the USA was the policeman to the world and a global source of aid, technology and investment, she is now in full retreat and going back to the pre-War era of self-sufficiency and isolation.

We all need to reset our leadership style – go back to basics. In the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, God gives mankind responsibility for managing this little blue ball in space while it is our home.

Later Christ lays down the fundamental laws by which mankind should live – to love and fear God and to serve our neighbours, no matter who they are. Is that so tough?

The Bible says that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom – who would steal or abuse another if they really understood that everything was being recorded never to be erased and that we would all be accountable?

If we continue to live as if only our own needs deserve attention, then we condemn not only our own communities but the world in which we live and for which there is no replacement.

Eddie Cross

30th May 2020

Eddie Cross is an industrialist, economist and former Member of Parliament for Bulawayo South, is a Zimbabwean economist and a founder member of the mainstream Movement for Democratic Change party led by Nelson Chamisa, who succeeded the late Morgan Tsvangirai. He is currently the Policy Coordinator General.

Cell: +263 772 227 144

E-mail: egcross@africaonline.co.zw

Website: www.eddiecross.africanherd.com

A Deutsche Welle interview with the ILO's Guy Ryder and further reading:

<https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-related-unemployment-hits-the-young-hardest/av-53586954>

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322> [ILO]

<https://afrikanheroes.com/2020/03/26/covid-19-has-exposed-the-fragility-of-our-economies-by-guy-ryder/> [ILO]

Books: Ike Okonta: [The Failure of Leadership in Africa's Development](#)].



The Failure of Leadership in Africa's Development examines the dominant scholarly theories about the cause of Africa's underdevelopment and argues that none of the traditionally invoked causes—an alleged black racial inferiority, the colonial and neo-colonial expropriation of Africa, purported natural defects in Africa's geography—is plausible as the explanation of the main cause of the continent's underdevelopment. Rather, the book argues that the chief cause of the continent's lag is the failure of leadership of Africa's ruling classes.

This failure of leadership, the book shows, is most evident in the historically traceable indifference of a long succession of Africa's ruling classes to the scientific and technological advances that were emerging from Europe and Asia during the most critical periods of Africa's history. It was this indifference, the book argues, that set the stage for the subsequent conquest, expropriation, and technological stagnation of Africa. The book recommends a blueprint for the continent's future development.

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781793613257/The-Failure-of-Leadership-in-Africa%27s-Development>