

Corona

must bring change of policy thinking now!!!

Let us start this article with some truth. One does not like or believe in the hegemony of the big three ratings agencies (Standard & Poor's, Moody's and Fitch Group), particularly for developing states like South Africa. However, it would be folly to pretend that they do not have an influence over how international investors and markets view our small state. As if this ratings downgrade by Moody's and others over the last two years, was not enough, we now have to confront an enemy not of our or the government's making, COVID-19. Yet, this article contends that there are some silver linings to this black swan event that is the Corona virus. This is particularly true in the area of spatial and informal development planning.

Why black swan event/theory?

The theory of a black swan event has its origins in the writings of Roman poet Juvenal's phrase '*rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno/a rare bird in the lands and very much like a black swan*', describing an event that is as rare as sighting a black swan'. However, the term in modern times has come to be popularised by scholar and risk analyst Nassim Taleb in his 2007 book, *The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable*. Taleb explains the logic of his theory by outlining its three characteristics: "First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable."

It is against this backdrop that we have to understand the COVID-19 disaster, namely it is a black swan event combining sociological, health and economic factors all in one go. So, in addressing it, the South African government and many others are going to experiment with a myriad

of actions to try to remedy what is a fluid situation, and we might not be happy with all the actions.

I am thankfully not a medical doctor or scientist (lacking the courage for such) but a Public Policy practitioner/theorist and want to engage from this perspective. As such I want to engage in what is called Adaptability Public Policy, which is to say in a given crisis or black swan event, we can draw some lessons for future policy development.

In this regard, I think this COVID-19 has highlighted numerous policy and institutional problems that this state and government should have long ago addressed and now need to answer for, POST US and THEM moving away from the current black swan crisis.

Spatial and informal development planning

Spatial considerations

To begin with, the COVID-19 disaster, beyond being a medical/scientific pandemic, needs to be seen as a harbinger of the fact that South African townships and rural areas, where the majority of African and black people live, have been let down by poor policy planning post-1994.

Evidence for this contention is seen in the correct call for social distancing being pushed aside/ignored, not because people do not understand the dangers of this virus, but rather because their choice is now inherently an economic one. For instance, "If I stay in my informal dwelling WHO will make sure my family eats? Even if one has a small business it is informal, so CAN I afford to give up my space in a highly competitive field, where face-to-face interaction is the business?"

Now this article is not encouraging the breaking of laws to move us past this crisis, rather it is asking this question: when systems and institutions have let a select demographic (townships and rural areas)

down, should we be surprised when people pick bread over social distancing?

COVID-19 therefore needs to be seen as a sanitiser for the poor policy thinking that has gone into the problems associated with the existence of township and rural citizens.

It cannot be that 114 years removed from the publication of Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*, the African majority and black population living in townships and rural areas are "*hewers of wood and drawers of water to men/industry who have the power*". While much television material has been dedicated to conversations about townships and township living during this time, it is important to reflect on the concerns raised by the African Development Bank's *Southern Africa Economic Outlook 2019* publication about the extreme poverty that exists in rural South Africa, especially for black/African women.

It would sadden if not infuriate one to believe that post this Corona black swan, South Africa and its citizens who have the ability to influence politicians and government will forget the plight of rural South Africa and go back to their usual business-as-normal conversations. I say this because one is not raising the plight of rural South Africa as a moral consideration only. Rather, the argument is that rural South Africa is an untapped political-economy reservoir for our fight to graduate from the ratings downgrade. This article contends that if some of the urgency and measures put forth and achieved during this testing time can be carried forward post-COVID-19, rural areas could finally be used as an economic solution this state needs.

For instance, using 2017 data from the Directorate Statistics and Economic Analysis, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: "*The value of agricultural production in South Africa increased by 4,7% and was estimated at R281*

Corona must bring change of policy thinking now!!! continued

370 million in 2017/18, while its contribution to the GDP was estimated to be R90 458 million at nominal prices in 2017". Without dabbling too much in what it currently looks like, it is quite evident that the agricultural sector and therefore rural South Africa still has much to contribute to South Africa. While it is important to bolster our other sectors, none of these sectors have the potential to turn the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and North West provinces from being seen simply as labour supply areas.

If spatial equity, which I define spatial equity as *having the ability to freely choose to live in a township or rural area of South Africa while having the requisite public schooling, healthcare and related amenities without being disadvantaged by not being in Sandton, Cape Town or Pretoria*. If spatial equity is real, it must be seen in townships like Evaton, Langa, KwaMashu, Motherwell, Seshego and rural regions like Welkom, Ulundi, Mthatha, Mahikeng, Alice and the like. To ask people to correctly observe social distancing and avoid rural regions in fear of spreading the virus to these areas is correct. The bigger question to ask, though, is this: why post-1994 are these aforementioned areas the most susceptible to black swans like this?

I contend it is because spatial considerations only occur when disasters come to the fore, so until we (government first, followed by scholars and urban citizens) start to participate and pressure for the establishment of economic development agencies and institutions in these regions, we will be derailed by other black swans which have the potential to minimise already marginalised citizens. So, where should discussions such as these start beyond you and I reading this article? I would argue it starts with policy practitioners and society calling for a revision of what we mean by apartheid spatial planning.

Development planning

Apartheid spatial planning is a concept that always flows rather liberally from the mouths of government and opposition politicians, yet one of the remnants of this concept still to be properly addressed is an operationally integrated public transport system. It is commendable and welcome to hear politicians appeal to taxi owners and drivers about the need to adhere to a given time of operation and to not continue the business-as-usual approach of filling taxis to the brim with passengers.

But again one asks: post-Corona, will this new-found vigour to engage with what is a private industry addressing a failure of the public sector to envision and operate an integrated public transport system last? I will leave you the reader to answer this question.

What one will dwell on is how the absence of an efficient public transport system in times such as these leads to further marginalisation, highlighting the need go back to the drawing board and reimagine a public transport system that is a public good. The real distances between towns, rural villages and cities are a construct of British and Afrikaner racial planners. Yet, the lack of a South African public transport system that circumvents this is the failure of the present powers that be. Therefore, this black swan event should force policy and political planners back to the drawing board to reconsider how and what type of public transport system we should have. My contention is that the Corona virus has already highlighted to us some of the much-needed facets to a public transport system.

Firstly, it needs to be mass based. That is to say, it must be an automobile (bus and train) that must be large enough to allow for the spacing between commuters. As the Corona virus has shown us, this is not about being luxurious but health conscious. Secondly, it needs to operate in line with the economy. This will mean we have a bus and

train system which is integrated and works from 03:00/04:00 until 23:00. This alignment with working hours of the "township/rural economy" will also have the unintended consequence of improving the safety of vulnerable commuters like old people, women and children who are currently not the safest of commuters. Thirdly, there is need for a mass transport system that starts at the door/street corner of the commuters to take them to a central hub that connects workers to their preferred routes for work or personal issues.

One could say more about how a mass-based integrated public transport system could eventually save commuters on transport fees, which are currently way too high. However, enough research exists focusing on the high cost of the current transport phenomena.

Concluding thoughts

In closing, if COVID-19 has taught us anything in the context of policy, it is that ALL SOLUTIONS need to be activated to curb crises, and make no mistake, our current spatial and development planning ethos and practice is in crisis. If COVID -19 is to leave behind a legacy, let it be that it finally spurred the government to act in such a manner as we see now for all other crises facing South Africa. Where task teams are given the full ambit of political will to undertake, at times, controversial and challenging decisions and secondly, let it impress upon the state the need to clearly communicate problems and decisions as has been the case.

This black swan will leave us, because we know we have amazing healthcare professionals and a general public that knows we have bigger crises to overcome, but care must be taken; in an ever-changing world, more black swans are coming and we should ensure our system from rural, township and city South Africa is better prepared than now. ☀