

# AMINATA TOURÉ

Senegalese politician, former Prime Minister

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I will now shift to you, Aminata and you, Serge, to give us a view of where we are in terms of outlook. Are we in a real recovery? Are there major uncertainties from what you see? What could be the political and social consequences of something which in this continent has maybe been more of a humanitarian and social issue even more than a health one in a sense?

## Aminata Touré

First of all, I think that the WHO and the United Nations owe Africa an apology and we are still waiting for it. It was announced that we would die in millions, and we did not, we are still here and very much standing. That apology has to be sent to us. There have been many theories that it was because we took a lot of chloroquine to fight malaria, so we were more resistant, etc. However, I think it was just the result of underestimating the capacities and abilities of African countries to deal with crises. Yet, if the analysis had been made more thorough, the WHO would understand that we have the greatest experience in terms of fighting pandemics.

I was Prime Minister when Ebola struck, starting in Sierra Leone, Guinea, etc., and my experience comes from fighting it. Therefore, we built on that experience so that we could take the right decisions in many countries. That was not a complete lockdown, sometimes halfway because it was not possible in Africa to do as they did in Wuhan, but I think that the right measures helped to contain and limit the damage. That also needs to be clearly acknowledged that it was not random that we were less affected, it is the result of sound decision-making with huge negative consequences. Let me give you an example from Senegal, which is the easiest. When the pandemic started, we were up to 7% economic growth, 12 months later we were below 1%. That is huge and it takes a lot of time to recover from that.

You should also know, you do know but it is good to remember, that 70% to 85% of our economies are informal, which means that they are not recorded in the books. These are normal people as you call them, prime ministers and so, who go about their daily life trying to make a living day by day. When you take measures in terms of restricting movement and limiting working time, then you are affecting a huge cohort of populations. It takes time to recover that and from what I see, we are still in the recovery phase. That is something that we also have to acknowledge, and I saw, I think two days ago, a study saying that just because of Covid we could lose some of our progress on life expectancy over the last decades.

Therefore, we need a broad understanding, as you said, linking the social impact and the economic prospects. I think it is very important in the recovery phase, which means that we will have to put our money where our mouths are, which also means that we will have to support a vital sector, the informal sector. Of course, there is a whole discussion of how to move from informal to formal and that will continue, but for the time being we have to pick them up so that people can come back to the regular standards. In many countries, including mine, a few months after Covid we witnessed unrest in many places. However, the real reason is that it was no longer bearable. People had lost their means of living and became totally poor.

At the same time, that was a great experience to build upon from a governance perspective. Of course, as I said, for the poorest and most vulnerable it was a dramatic experience, and they are still recovering. For the government in terms of budgeting, we also learned that we can count on our own friends because we demonstrated that with great resilience in the face of what we have seen. Somehow, Covid was a sort of wakeup call for dreamers like us all, which is why I am so happy that this gathering is happening. The first collateral damage from Covid was multilateralism, international cooperation was dead. As we know, it was impossible to move from one country to another, airplanes and everything got closed and of course, we have all witnessed the fight over masks, let alone the vaccines. That is also a very important question.

That is where it is important to link health and the economy. It may be a slogan, but it is also true; nobody is safe until we all are safe. We know that the UN has 194 members but if you do not take the right course of action you would end up with 194 Covid variants. We will remain in crisis for a long time if we do not take the proper measures but what we are seeing is nationalism around vaccines. There are countries that have the means to buy them but no one to buy the vaccines from because some people are now on their third dose of vaccine while others have none. As it has already been said, we are very privileged. I do not know how long we can sustain that and at the same time expect full recovery of the international economy. That is something that we really need to reflect upon and link the economic and social communities much more, maybe under the umbrella of fora like this one, the UN and others.

That is something that we really need to think about, but we also learned from a governance point of view that immediate and urgent action needs to be taken. That is how Africa is going to build its medical and pharmaceutical independence. For me, it seems to be the critical question the African Union needs to solve and make progress on. That is what we have learned because we have seen it and it was really sobering. We have been conceptualizing about globalization, the global village, etc., but we saw we were very far from that. We immediately fell into very hardcore nationalism of a sort I think we have not seen for a long time.

From an Africa point of view, I think we have to move forward in terms of having collective projects. Commerce between ourselves only represents up to 12% and in the rest of the world, in Europe, it is 60%, and I think a bit less than 60% in Asia. That means that there is space to grow but we have to go beyond the boundaries and see how we are going to put together this major project, the first being as I said, medical and pharmaceutical independence. The last thing we want to see happen is Covid becoming a permanent public

health issue, hovering around 1%, 2%, 3% forever and that is what will happen without the right course of action. We know who will suffer most, as in all pandemics it will be the most vulnerable in rural areas, most of the time women and young people.

Making the link between what happened and even the stability of the continent and the need to have internal responses to the challenges seems very important to me. That opens up the question about industrialization and that is the same. Since, we only have 12% of commerce between ourselves, we import most of the goods we consume. We realize that we have to produce simple goods and that is also an opportunity for the rest of the world to invest in Africa. In view of the pandemic and the lessons learnt from it, I do not think we can postpone any longer our industrialization prospects. I think the pharmaceutical sector might be a good sector, but also in all sectors because we also face the whole issue around procurement of simple things, such as syringes. That is the lesson that we really want to learn. It also opens up the possibility of creating jobs on a continent where 70% of the population is below the age of 35.

It is a mix. Of course, we resisted. We have been resilient because we were less affected and that is not random, it is because we demonstrated capacities in terms of taking good action. At the same time, we suffered a lot because we expected to see multilateral internationalism and we did not because it was just wiped off the table. We had to tackle it ourselves, which is a good thing. I think it reinforced our self-confidence and we have to carry that forward in terms, as I said, of our sovereignty when it comes to the medical and pharmaceutical sectors, but at the same time globally in terms of industrialization. I think it is challenging but at the same time it has opened up avenues that we have to take up courageously.

### **Lionel Zinsou**

Thank you very much, Madam Prime Minister. You addressed the complexity and dualism of the situation. I like it very much when you say that Africa has been resilient and become aware of its own strength. It was well and quickly organized in a sense and globally was underestimated. Africa performed well and the resilience is not accidental. However, you are emphasizing the situation with the informal sector, which is a major difference that may be shared with some countries in the Indian subcontinent. That is very different from the rest of the world, where 50% of our GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa is made by the informal sector, in your country it is probably 80% of employment and 90% in mine. However, even in countries that are a bit more advanced in terms of evolution, like Maghreb, it remains at 30% or 40% of employment and the number one creator of new jobs. Yet, we had no means for the government to support this informal sector efficiently and in general, the SMEs in our countries are very small firms. We did not have the same public finance resources to support households and SMEs and the corporate world in general, nothing like in the OECD countries. It is very important to emphasize that it has made everybody in Africa aware, and I think also in part of Asia, that we have to define new governance rules and develop independence, as you said, in the health and manufacturing systems. It will accelerate the trend to major change in our economies because while we can be efficient in certain extreme situations, we have structural weaknesses. What is important is that we know we can address and tackle them; that is a major change. It is not purely a question of recession and recovery; I think it is a major change for the future.