The impact of Brexit on Africa in times of the Corona Crisis

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The impact of Brexit on Africa in times of the Corona Crisis

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Clarification: Corona and economy
"*It's only a Technical Recession*" [2]

Abstract: Despite the Corona crisis, London is pushing ahead with the implementation of Brexit. This will have a profound impact not only on the EU but also on Africa. The British government's vision of a reinvigorated 'Global Britain' relies heavily on a reinforced co-operation with Commonwealth Sub-Saharan Africa. Already the temporary closure of manufacturing supply chains between China and the rest of the world because of the pandemic seriously affected economic activity in GB and the EU. However, African commodity exporters such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya will likely bear the brunt of both the direct and indirect effects of this weaker demand. This will add up to the economic effects of the spread of Corona in Africa. Most likely the vulnerable and the poor in Africa's informal sector will have to suffer the most by both health hazards and the economic decline.

Keywords: Corona, Brexit, Africa, GB, EU, international trade, economic recession, poverty

JEL-Code: F13, F35, F54, F63, G15, I1, N17, N47, N67, O17, P16, Z13

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[2] Cartoon on Cyril Ramaphosa's statement that SA economic recession starting in 2019 was just a technical recession. @CyrilRamaphosa, Zapiro, @zapiro, Zapiro's cartoon @dailymaverick, (10 March 2020) https://zapiro.com/200309dm

Introduction

Although a second Corona-wave looms over the United Kingdom which threatens to aggravate the economic impact of the pandemic on the island even more, the British prime minister Boris Johnson persists to leave the EU at the end of 2020, whatever the cost.

According to the latest forecast of the Office for National Statistics (ONS, London), the monthly gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 20.4% in April 2020, the biggest fall the UK had ever seen, more than three times larger than in March and almost ten times larger than the steepest pre-COVID-19 fall. Virtually all areas of the economy were hit, with pubs, education, health and car sales giving the biggest contributions to this historic fall. Moreover, Britain’s trade with the rest of the world was also badly affected by the pandemic, with large falls in both the import and export of cars, fuels, works of art and clothing (ONS, 2020). The (potential) negative economic effects of the Brexit on the UK (Brown et al, 2019; Kohnert, 2018) would further aggravate the looming economic recession. According to Andy Haldane, the chief economist of the Bank of England, mass under- and unemployment is the result. More than 8 million self-employed and other people put on leave were concerned, i.e. almost a third of all gainfully employed people in the private sector, a level never to be seen on the labour market before. More than 1.5 million more may potentially have lost their jobs, judging by new universal credit claims. About 20% of households are afraid to face significant financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic. And it is almost certain that the hardest-hit will be the poor, the lower-paid, including young people and women (Haldane, 2020). Accordingly, 68% of British adults were worried about the effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on their life in early June (ONS, 2020). This the more so because the Government's handling of the pandemic had resulted in the meantime in the highest Covid-19 death toll in Europe (Campbell et al, 2020).

Under these conditions, one would expect that London would be keen more than ever to profit from a potential common EU bailout for the years to come, both for the economic and the health concerned aftermath of the pandemic. This the more so, because of additional negative employment effects of Brexit. However, Johnson does not seem to care. And it is open to question whether those who voted the Prime Minister in power would act now otherwise. In fact, some politicians ventured already the guess, the British government may provoke a chaotic no-deal exit from the EU to distract from its failure in the COVID 19 crisis (Mason, 2020).

Anyway, apparently, there is a connection concerning the background-argument of both the Brexit and the handling of the corona-crisis. Brexiteer arguments as well as corona-ideologists reasoning centred on fantasies about British supremacy in matters of international trade (Brexit) and its scientific and inventive genius to cope with the pandemic. Both with lots of allusions to the Second World War. However, the wartime analogy is deeply misleading because Brexit involves the breaking up of the regulatory and customs market and would open the British market not only to European producers but to those from all over the world. The mythical picture of British innovation applies also to the Brexiteer arguments that hinge on the UK’s supposed leadership in creativity and innovation (Edgerton, 2020) and the notion that the British had no need of Europeans, or that at least “they need us more than we need them” (English, 2020). On the contrary, a no-deal Brexit could wreck the UK's chance of leading Covid-19 global research. Nobel scientists, like Sir Andre Geim at Manchester University, warned that Britain will lose ‘superpower’ status if access barred to the EU’s €100bn (£85bn) research funding scheme, *Horizon Europe*, which will run from 2021 to

2027. Since the start of the current EU scheme, Horizon 2020 (which will be succeeded by Horizon Europe), the UK has received more than £1.5bn in ERC income and £776m in MSCA (Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions) grants – more than any other EU country, and a fifth of the total (Helm & McKie, 2020).

UK companies on the other hand apparently had a more realistic view and seemed to have been well aware of the looming risk. They voted already before the Corona-crisis with their money, sharp tongues would maintain, like rats deserting a sinking ship. However that may be, the Leave vote had led British firms already by March 2019 to increase the number of UK outward investment transactions in the remaining EU27 by 17%, whereas transactions in non-EU OECD countries remained unaffected. On the other hand, the number of EU27 investment projects in the UK declined only by around 9%, which suggests that the UK would be more exposed to the costs of economic disintegration than the remaining EU member states (Breinlich et al 2020). By the way, no trade unions dared to equal this behaviour as 'unpatriotic'. Apparently, international mobility of capital is always welcomed as a sign of innovative adaptation in difficult times. Whereas mobility of labour is often equalled to unfair competition, as in the case of East-European labourers who tried their luck in the UK, which after all triggered the Brexit vote.

To return to the Brexit question, it is still open to question whether Britain's pious wishes concerning the replacement of the EU internal market by extended links to its former Commonwealth markets, first and foremost to the US-market, will realise. London itself was rather cautious. It estimated in early March that enhanced bilateral trade with the US could result in rather modest prosperity, by its own gross domestic product increasing between 0.07% and 0.16%, but only after around 15 years. But still, the United States is only the second-largest British trading partner after the EU. Moreover, the British government had been up to date opposed to American wishes, like a complete opening of agriculture for American investors and access to the National Health Service NHS for US pharmaceutical manufacturers (Triebe, 2020). Whether London's ambitions concerning the opening-up of African markets will be more promising is even more doubtful because the remaining EU-27 does not lie low.

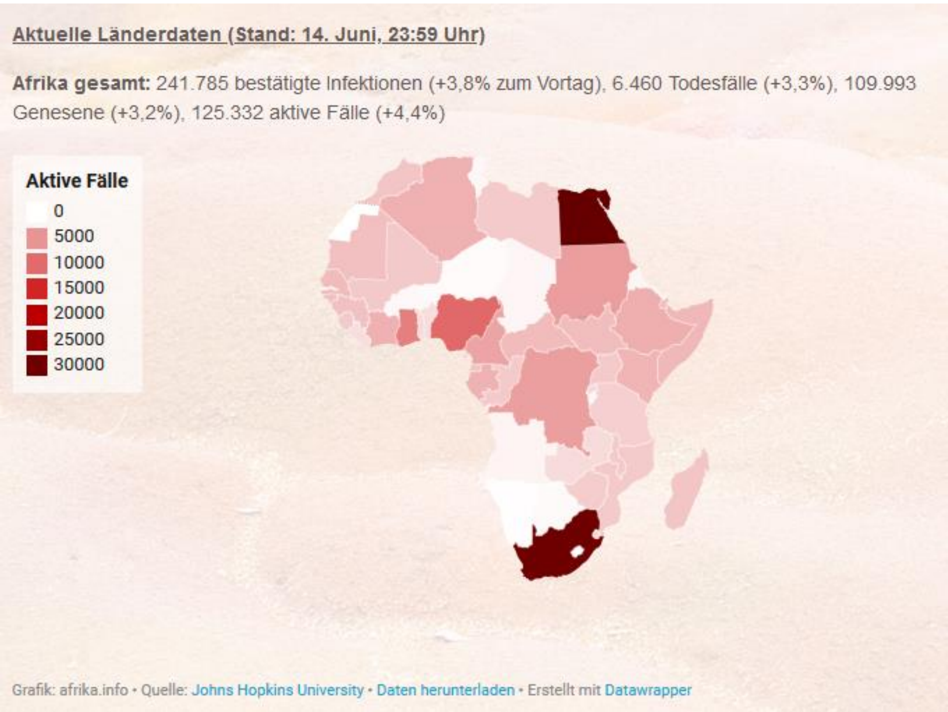
As for the EU, the European Commission and European External Action Service presented in early March a draft comprehensive cooperation strategy with Africa in preparation of the sixth EU-AU summit in October. But the Corona-crisis and its effects, not only on the EU and Africa but on the whole world, reduced these high-flying plans to shambles.

Although Europe will be severely hit by the pandemic, Africa is likely to suffer even more. According to the World Bank, the pandemic will cost the region between US $ 37 billion and $79 billion. The largest economies in the region, among them the heavy-weights of the African Commonwealth, South Africa and Nigeria, are expected to be hit the hardest by these economic effects. The collapse of oil and commodity prices, for example, will have a devastating impact on several African economies that depend on these for more than half of their exports (Laporte, 2020). To emasculate the threatening economic recession, African finance ministers called for an economic stimulus of at least US $ 100 billion to curb the impacts of coronavirus. But this will be only a drop in the bucket. Scholarly analysis showed that the average stimulus in Europe so far is 15 times higher than in poorer African countries (Laporte, 2020).

There's also rising concern about possible disruption to food supply chains because of the virus' impact on farms and food imports. Particularly concerned are those in informal jobs living hand-to-mouth. According to estimates of the African Union, nearly 20 million jobs are threatened across the entire continent. Many would rather prefer to die from Corona than from hunger (Kennedy, 2020; Bavier & Paravicini, 2020). In any case, it is clear beyond doubt that those who are to suffer most by the combined effects of the corona-pandemic and Brexit are the poor and vulnerable.

In short, it is already questionable whether the UK will be able to pull itself up by its bootstraps out of the corona-crisis after the Brexit-leave without the tried and tested cooperation with the EU. Whether Britain, on its own, will have the additional power to assist its former African colonies to cope not only with the consequences of the corona-pandemic but also with the impact of a no-deal Brexit is even more unlikely. In the following sections a more detailed analysis of the (potential) combined effects of corona and Brexit on African economies by region, as well as the articulation between Britain and African Commonwealth members, will be given, with special emphasis on the impact on the most vulnerable social strata of society.

Map 1 : Overview on the current state of affairs of Corona cases in Africa



Source: Daten & Fakten: Das Coronavirus in Afrika, Salzburg: *afrika-info*

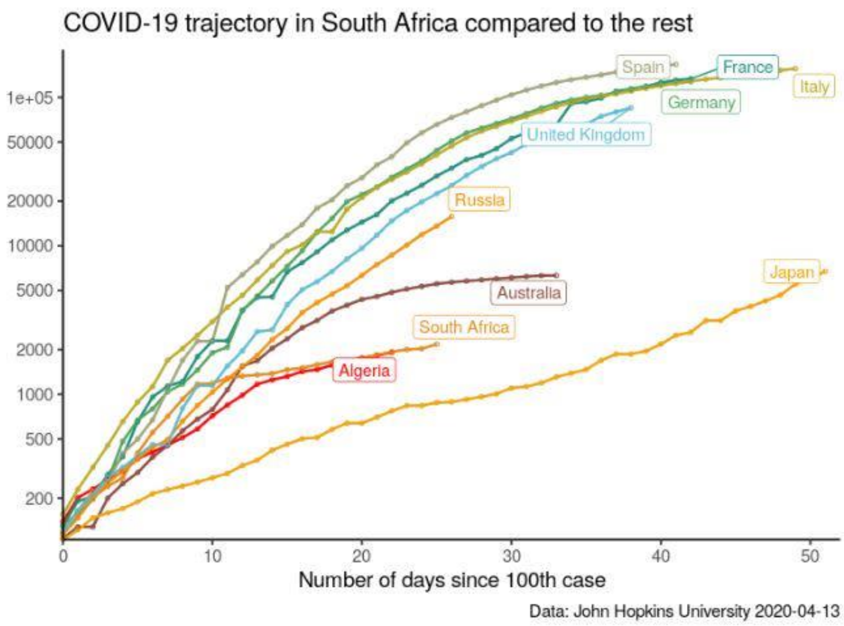
(1) South Africa, Brexit and Corona

According to available data, South Africa has been one of the hardest-hit African countries.

The Economist

Source: The Economist, London

As of 15 June 2020, the cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in South Africa was 73,533, the bulk of it came from Western Cape Province (60%), followed by Gauteng (17%) and Eastern Cape (14%). The total number of reported death was 1,568 (NDP-2020). To avoid "an enormous catastrophe", President Cyril Ramaphosa had ordered a three-week nationwide lockdown on 23 March, including border closure, the release of about 19,000 prisoners (12% of a total of 155,000 prisoners in the jails of the country) and a ban to sale alcohol, supported by the South African army, from 26 March to 16 April (Thielke, 2020).



Source: South Africa's response to Covid-19 is 'world-class' and here's why. 947.co.za.

According to *Focal Africa* [3] director Marcus Hollington, South Africa counted among the top five world-class corona-fighting countries, because of prompt lockdown as well as very strict social distancing measures to try and curb the virus, which made for the 'flattening of the (infection) curve' (Hollington, 2020).

However, most South Africans, notably the poor, mostly working in the informal sector, were more concerned about the economic impact of the pandemic than the disease itself. According to results of a Statistics-SA-survey, 93.2% of respondents (49% of them white; 36% black Africans) were very concerned or extremely concerned about the possible economic collapse of the country due to Corona (Githahu, 2020). And here again, Brexit comes in, because South Africa's economy is highly dependent both on the EU and the UK which has become the fourth largest export market of the country. In 2018 SA exports to the UK amounted to about R64-billion, mainly precious metals, motor vehicles and agricultural products. SA imports from the UK attained R43.5-billion. Nevertheless, the EU remained by far the biggest trading partner. The UK accounted for merely 18% of South African EU-exports and 10% of EU imports from South Africa (Maeko, 2020). Therefore, the government in Pretoria and its partners of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), including members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Mozambique, did their utmost to maintain normal Post-Brexit trade-relations with the EU as part of their Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) concluded already in October 2016. At that time Britain was still an EU member linked to the EPA as well, which stipulated that more than 90% of South African goods, including wines, platinum and motor vehicles, could enter into the UK completely duty-free or partially duty-free. However, because nevertheless South Africa's car exports, would still be subject to 10% tariffs, and because the global supply chain in the automotive production would be definitely disrupted in the case of a Brexit no deal, the countries automotive industry would have been completely 'writen off' according to the former trade and industry minister in Pretoria, Rob Davies (Maeko, 2020). This was confirmed among other also by VW-South Africa, whose CEO told the press in August 2019 that if components from the EU would be no longer included in the value-added calculation because of a no-deal Brexit, import duties threaten in both directions. They would make cars - depending on the type - around 1,500 to 2,000 euros more expensive (DPA(os)-2019). This would have a tremendous impact on the South African labour market, independently from the inordinately more serious economic effects of a world-wide Corona-crisis.

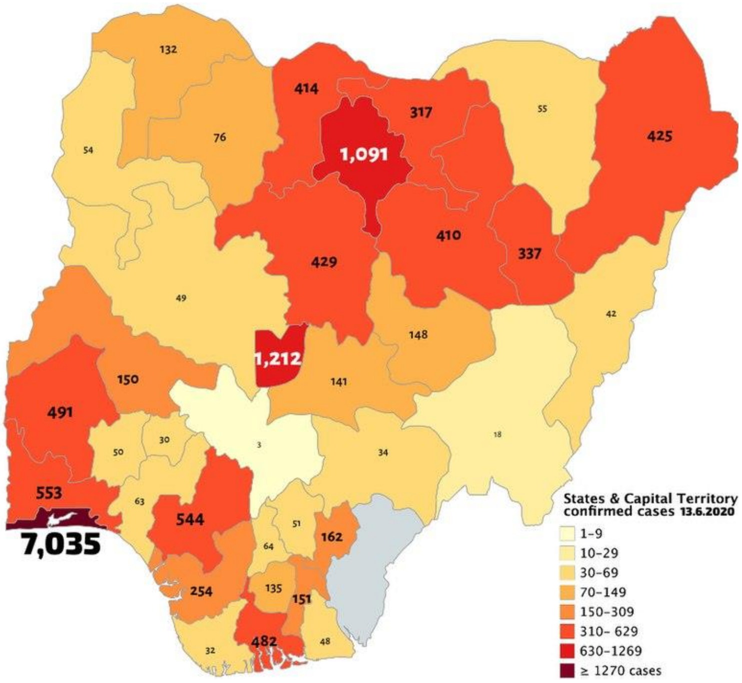
(2) Nigeria, Brexit and Corona

In Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent (about 180 million), which has the world's most people living in absolute poverty (87 million), the pandemic started relatively late and modest, with the first confirmed case in on 27 February 2020, of an Italian citizen in Lagos. Only on 9 March, a second case had been reported in Ogun State of a Nigerian who had contact with the Italian citizen. According to the latest available figures, there were four hundred and ninety new cases on 16 June 2020.

Nigerians had felt for a long time invulnerable. Until the first confirmed case of 27. February, many Nigerians saw the pandemic rather as a problem of foreigners. Past experience with Nigeria's successful fight against the Ebola virus in 2014 may have contributed to a feeling of invulnerability. Corona was dismissed by many of the Nigeria poor from Nigeria's huge

[3]Research (FAR), Information Services, Germiston, Gauteng, South Africa, founded in 2020.

informal sector as a plague of the rich and the elite - or as God's punishment for the country's decades of looting and the hoped-for salvation from the virus. The government reacted late and imposed a curfew in Lagos and the capital Abuja. Only a little over a month after the first Corona case had been reported, on 29 March, a curfew was imposed on the 20 million metropolis of Lagos and the capital Abuja. It was extended by another two weeks on Easter Monday. Citizens were only allowed to leave their homes to provide essentials, and economic activities declined. International and national air traffic were suspended and the national borders closed. Freedom of assembly, including religious gatherings, economic activity, and freedom of movement were restricted in most of the 36 states (Thum, 2020). On 1 June, the federal government relaxed the lockdown imposed on Kano State and the ban placed on religious gatherings and banking operations for a period of four weeks and also shortened the curfew from 10 pm to 4 am (en.wikipedia).



Source: COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, wikipedia

The Nigerian economy is on a downward slide. Only a year ago, Nigeria had emerged from a painful recession. Now economic activities were reduced under the Corona exit restrictions. Production, trade and consumption were falling, many of the coveted formal jobs will be lost and the dominant informal sector lacks revenue. Government revenue, which is derived from two-thirds from oil, is suffering from falling world market prices for crude oil, which is currently between US $ 25 and US $ 30 a barrel. However, the government counted in its budgeting still with US $ 57 a barrel. This could result in underfunding of the budget by almost 50%. Only a year ago, Nigeria emerged from a painful recession. The effects of the coronavirus will bring a huge downturn to the Nigerian economy in all scenarios. Besides, Nigeria faces a shortage of supply-chains for raw materials for production and other goods, as a large proportion of the goods had been stuck in Chinese ports (Thum, 2020).

However, up to now, the corona-crisis had little impact on the government Brexit strategy. Apparently, both President Buhari and a great lot of Nigerian people shared the hybris of the

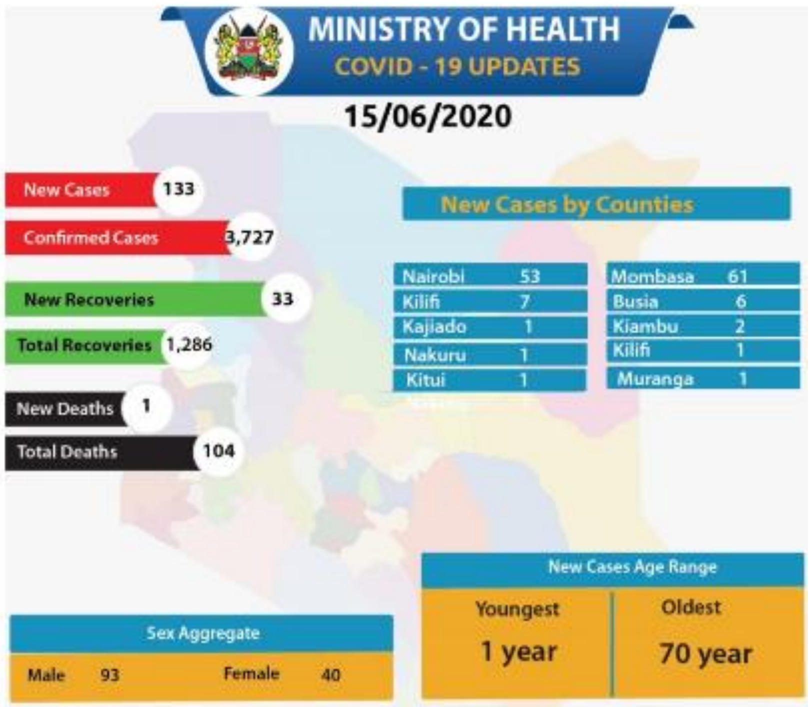
British that they are less vulnerable to the pandemic and could continue with high-flying Post-Brexit plans of a new deal with the UK. Buhari apparently shared Johnson's vision of unleashed trade within the Commonwealth and with the UK. On 20. January he maintained in an article titled "A New Case for a Commonwealth based on trade", that the long-standing bilateral relations between the two countries had been confirmed among others by the 2018 bi-lateral security pact and collaboration in anti-trafficking. A new free trade agreement would present new opportunities for both, notably, because Nigeria's economy would have a great deal to offer: Nigeria's vast natural energy and mineral resources, unbarred through the ending of customs barriers, could help supply the much-needed growth stimulus for UK-companies. Greater access to the UK would also give a stimulus to one of the world's fastest expanding consumer groups with considerable purchasing power, the Nigerian middle class. On the other hand, the greater engagement of the UK in Nigeria's economy would bring jobs to under-tapped sectors, such as agriculture and manufacturing. Millions of highly skilled, English-speaking but underemployed young Nigerians, were eager to work but hitherto without the opportunities that foreign investment could bring to create jobs and build businesses. Buhari finally suggested close cooperation would be especially promising because both countries could better align regulations on investment, certification and trade because member countries' national laws were built on the same principles of English jurisprudence. On the other hand, he cautioned that, while many Nigerians in the African Diaspora enjoy considerable benefits from living in the West, they do not always feel at the heart of the community. Therefore, visa restrictions and customs barriers should be reduced (Olaniyi, 2020). The Nigerians in the Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) even saw the Brexit as an opportunity for Nigeria to harness human capital for her development in the UK. According to them, Nigeria should key into this by sending trade delegations to Britain to bring her investments in human capital home (Taiwo-Obalonye, 2020).

However, the demand for lifting visa restrictions for Nigerians will be met with little response both by Johnson and British workers who presumably would be afraid of 'unfair competition' by the many informal low-paid Nigerians in their country and the latter's bad repute as drug dealers and criminals. Presently there are up to 300,000 Nigerians and Britons of Nigerian descent resident in Britain. Many of them were apparently already afraid of a backlash against immigrants in Britain in which Nigerians and other foreigners would be targeted after Post-Brexit times when the British have had their wish stemming the tide of immigrants to Britain (N.A., 2020).

(3) Kenya, Brexit and Corona

The corona pandemic started in Kenya on 15 March with the first cases reported in the capital city Nairobi and the coastal area Mombasa county. Although the case fatality ratio for COVID-19 had been much lower than for the SARS pandemic of 2003, the transmission of the COVID-19 virus had been significantly greater, including a significant total death toll. (COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, Wikipedia). The latest COVID-19 update (16 June 2020) revealed a total of 3,860 confirmed cases and 105 death. In April, the following distribution of the 133 positive cases reported had been as follows: in Nairobi (86 cases), Mombasa (27), Kiambu (7), Busia (5), Kilifi, Kajiado, and Migori two cases each while Machakos and Muranga, had one case each. Kenya's National Emergency Response Committee imposed social distancing requirements, closed bars and banned religious gatherings. Restaurants were to remain open only for take-away service. A daily curfew, effective from 27 March, from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. was in effect in the whole country. The same evening the curfew had been announced, police officers in Mombasa hunted commuters who had not made it home in time.

They drove men, women and children together with tear gas and truncheons, the government condoned the action (Starzmann, 2020). On 16 June, the government extended closing hours of restaurants and hotels from 5.00 p.m to 7.30 p.m daily with a stern warning that those who break the law will have their operating licences revoked (Ministry of Health, Nairobi, Kenya). In early May, the IMF approved US $ 739 million to be drawn under the Rapid Credit Facility to support the authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rising COVID-19 cases prompted the government to declare a lock-down in Nairobi's Eastleigh and Old Town region in Mombasa (Market Watch, 2020).



Source: Ministry of Health, Nairobi, Kenya

At the end of March, the Kenyan government imposed a curfew at night to contain the pandemic. Like in most African countries, the rescue packages introduced by the Nairobi government largely exclude the informal sector. More than 80 % of Kenyans work as day labourers. The curfew at night, closed bars and restaurants already mean that many no longer earn anything (DW, 2020). This implicated serious economic, social and security consequences given the large numbers of women, youth and vulnerable workers. The informal sector is the survival space for the majority of the 800,000 unemployed young job seekers who enter the Kenyan job market every year. The jobs in this sector are precarious, with limited wage and employment security, limited access to health services and social protection including weak frameworks for occupational safety and health, which makes the workers to be highly exposed and vulnerable to income loss and layoffs arising from the COVID-19 shocks (Omolo, 2020).

Apparently, the corona pandemic had up to now little impact on Kenya’s view on the Brexit issue. Many Kenyan’s saw the UK’s departure from the EU as a disguised blessing because UK investors presumably would look for strongly growing countries that could both trade

with the UK and were also unaffected by the EU's imminent restrictions for the UK (Hopkins, 2020). However, immigration from countries outside the EU such as Kenya would not be easier. After all, the anti-immigration attitude was at the root of the disaffection among many Brexit voters. The anti-immigration lobby was essentially racist. On the other hand, just then when the UK was the hardest hit by the pandemic, the British National Health Service desperately needs medical staff such as nurses for which Kenya had been a source for years. But that will be harder to realize now. London must now renegotiate at least 700 trade agreements with 27 nations, that Kenya would get priority is rather unlikely (Hopkins, 2020).
Moreover, with the Post-Brexit scenario, Kenya would run the risk of losing business with both partners, The EU and UK. Up to now, the UK was part of close to 40 trade agreements which the EU has with more than 70 countries. In 2018, Kenya's exports to the EU rose to Sh131.20 billion from Sh125.61 billion in 2019. Whereas exports to the UK increased only to Sh40.19 billion from Sh38.55 billion over the same period. Imports from the UK and EU increased to Sh31.55 billion and Sh219.60 billion respectively in 2018 (Kivuva, 2019). Hitherto, major challenges hindering the growth of Kenya's SMEs had been the limited access to finance and slow incorporation of latest technologies, as well as unawareness of international standards and quality assurance, and lack of research and innovation on new products. All this would drag the country from competing at the global market level (Kivuva, 2019). However, the Kenyan government remained confident that the Commonwealth would provide trade-related assistance and innovation to Free Trade Area through funding to make transactions faster and increase efficiencies. According to the Commonwealth secretary-general, Patricia Scotland Commonwealth countries enjoy 19% in cost advantage when measured against comparable country pairs. According to her high-flying visions, the intra-Commonwealth trade and investment are set to increase to Sh202.6 trillion ($2 trillion) by 2030. Just in comparison, in 2017, trade in goods and services was about Sh56.7 trillion (US $ 560 billion; Kivuva, 2019). In January 2020, Prime Minister Johnson hailed trade ties with Kenya, when he positioned the UK during the UK-Africa Investment Summit in London as an important investment partner to Africa after Brexit. He cited his country's US $53 million investment at the Mombasa Port in 2013 as an example of a relationship benefiting all of us. Moreover, Kenya, secured under the leadership of its President Uhuru Kenyatta, over Sh170 billion worth of investment deals during the summit in sectors such as housing and entrepreneurship. Besides, the country's first green bond was listed at the London Stock Exchange. And finally, alcohol producer Diageo promised to invest Sh21.9 billion to build environment-friendly breweries in Kenya and wider East Africa. The firm had already invested Sh14 billion in a Kisumu keg plant (Wambu, 2020). However, Kenyan observers cautioned already, that if the British economy would crash as a result of a poorly planned Brexit, a dangerous double blow would hit Kenyan exporters. There would be less to sell, and a higher tariff to pay for the privilege of belonging to the Post-Brexit Commonwealth. Therefore, Kenya would be well advised to aligning with partners worldwide (Munuhe, 2019).

Conclusion

Although Britain had been so far the hardest hit among the EU member states, and a second Corona-wave looms already over the United Kingdom which threatens to aggravate the economic impact of the pandemic on the island even more, the British prime minister Boris Johnson persists to leave the EU at the end of 2020, whatever the cost. Tthe monthly gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 20.4% in April 2020, the biggest fall the UK had ever seen, more than three times larger than in March and almost ten times larger than the steepest pre-COVID-19 fall. Under these conditions it is already questionable whether the UK will be able to pull itself up by its bootstraps out of the corona-crisis after the Brexit-leave without the tried and tested cooperation with the EU. Whether Britain, on its own, will have the additional power to assist its former African colonies to cope not only with the consequences of the corona-pandemic but also with the impact of a no-deal Brexit is even more unlikely. Under these conditions, one would expect that London would be keen more than ever to profit from a potential common EU bailout for the years to come, both for the economic and the health concerned aftermath of the pandemic. This the more so, because of additional negative employment effects of Brexit. However, Johnson does not seem to care. And it is open to question whether those who voted the Prime Minister in power would act now otherwise. In fact, some politicians ventured already the guess, the British government may provoke a chaotic no-deal exit from the EU to distract from its failure in the COVID 19 crisis (Mason, 2020). In any case, it is clear beyond doubt that those who are to suffer most by the combined effects of the corona-pandemic and Brexit are the poor and vulnerable.

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