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Shooting the messenger

South Africa shared the discovery of Omicron in good faith. The EU should rethink its travel bans and focus on solidarity to fight the pandemic

The usual clichés about Africa as the continent of catastrophes and poverty surfaced straight away in European media at large and the German media, in particular, reporting on the new Omicron variant: 'The virus from Africa is among us', ran the headline in the *Rheinpfalz* on Sunday. The *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* put a photo of a corrugated iron hut on its front page – instead of, for example, a photo of the ultra-modern research laboratory that discovered the variant. And *Spiegel Online* reported on scenes of flight at Johannesburg Airport: 'Because of the new virus variant, people are trying to grab flights to their home countries'.

No, the big rush was not due to the variant. It was because of the travel restrictions immediately imposed by many countries. The usefulness of these measures for fighting the pandemic is controversial, with the WHO expressing scepticism. And anyway, the new variant has already been detected in eleven countries. One thing, however, is certain: the consequences of the restrictions are severe – for the people affected and for the economy. South Africa's tourism industry is about to enter its peak season and is now facing a disaster. In the first 48 hours after the announcement alone, tourism associations bemoaned cancellations worth 55 million euros.

A noble act and a bitter punishment

Although these consequences were foreseeable, South Africa did warn the rest of the world immediately after the variant was discovered. And it did so even before conclusive findings were available about its origin, which may not even be in South Africa, as well as about the progression of the disease and vaccine efficacy. What would we have been spared worldwide if, since the discovery of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, all countries had acted with the solidarity and transparency that South Africa has shown?

The country, already having been ravaged by HIV and other epidemics, has invested in world-class epidemiology over the past few decades.

Instead, the country is once again being isolated and stigmatised. South Africa is being 'punished for its advanced genomic sequencing', says the South African Foreign Ministry. It is no coincidence that it is already the second variant to be discovered in South Africa. The country, already having been ravaged by HIV and other epidemics, has invested in world-class epidemiology over the past few decades. 'Excellent science should be applauded and not punished', complains the government.

What makes the travel restrictions particularly difficult to understand from a South African point of view right now is the fact that the Covid catastrophe is currently raging in countries like Germany more than in South Africa. In recent weeks, the weekly incidence in South Africa was consistently below 10 cases per 100.000 inhabitants. Only in the last few days have the numbers increased again sharply. This happened only in a few places, mainly in the Gauteng region around Johannesburg and Pretoria. The weekly incidence there jumped to 67.2 on Saturday – which is, however, still far below the current German level.

A plea for global solidarity

In his televised address on 28 November, a visibly peeved President Cyril Ramaphosa said that he was 'deeply disappointed' about the travel restrictions, which are 'unjustified' and 'unfairly discriminate' against South Africa. According to him they contradict recent G20 agreements and are not covered by any scientific evidence. He called on the countries that have imposed restrictions to reverse their decision immediately – and at the same time to finally ensure globally fair distribution of vaccines.

South Africa, a G20 country, now has sufficient access to vaccines, but is struggling with distribution logistics as well as widespread vaccination scepticism in the country. Only slightly more than one third of the population has been fully vaccinated. The government wants to counter the long awaited and now approaching fourth wave with an intensified vaccination campaign. Ramaphosa once again made an urgent appeal to the population in his address. Even mandatory vaccination is now being considered. In view of the deep social and economic crisis, with unemployment standing at 35 per cent, the country can hardly afford tougher lockdown rules.

For the rest of the African continent, however, where the vaccination

rate is around 10 per cent, access to vaccine remains a massive problem. To meet the WHO target of having 70 per cent of the world's population vaccinated by the middle of next year, vaccines would finally have to be distributed more equitably. In the G20 countries, vaccines are in danger of expiring, while contributions to the COVAX global vaccination program fell well short of commitments and demand. South Africa is receiving European support to build up its own production capacities. However the country's motion of a temporary Covid patent waiver at the World Trade Organization to further boost global production was shot down by the US and the EU, among others.

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All of this – reinforced by the bitter experience of the Beta wave – explains South Africa's sharp reaction. While the EU countries and the United Kingdom had quickly introduced travel restrictions at the time, they took a very long time to lift them – until the Beta variant had already long been the dominant strain worldwide. This time around, Europe should thoroughly and continuously review the proportionality of the restrictions. Above all, Brussels and Berlin should keep one thing in mind: as long as the virus can continue to rage in entire regions of the world, hardly impeded by vaccinations, mutations are inevitable. Ultimately, we will not overcome the pandemic with travel restrictions, but only with global solidarity.



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