

# **REVISITING AFRO-CENTRICISM AS NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CENTERPIECE AS NECESSITATED BY THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed lots of hidden interests amongst nation states in international relations. If nothing else, it has gone ahead to strengthen the idea that the primary duty and responsibility of every government remains first and foremost, the protection and preservation of its citizens' lives and properties at home and abroad. Nigeria over the years has chosen Afro-centricism as the centerpiece of its foreign policy and that policy thrust since 1960 has placed other African countries interests a little too high over the interests of Nigerians, who suffer lack and neglect at the expense of ensuring stability and prosperity in neighboring sister states to the detriment of the Nigerian society. As the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the closure of borders, and nation states scurry into forced- isolationism and self-quarantine, orchestrating the management of lean resources to maintain and sustain their citizenry. This research work adopted the historical narrative and analytical approach. Dissected data from mainly secondary sources to review the socio-economic progress or otherwise of Nigeria's age long Foreign policy thrust as juxtaposed with the present COVID-19 Socio-economic harsh realities being faced by Nigerians, contrary to what is obtainable in other neighboring countries at this point in time.*

**Keywords:** Afro-centricism, Isolationism, Citizenry, Re-evaluation, National interest, COVID-19, Pandemic, Nigeria's foreign policy, Constructivism.

## **Introduction**

Most successful nations of the world in the twenty first century for example, the United States of America have a well defined national interest and a pragmatically structured and purpose driven foreign policy that is economically viable and self-sustaining. The first rule of nature which is innate in all living things remains that of self-preservation, societies are fashioned to emulate those natural processes of putting their countries well being and survival first. Hence most scholars like Ajaebili (2013:9) often argue that the international political space is anarchic, in the sense that every nation must devise a way to out-smart the others, and survive. Little wonder the arms race has continued to thrive, same as the current trade war between China and the USA, and some scholars as Gunder (1990:155-250) even opined that the cold war between the USA and Russia still lingers in the air, and the gap between the first world and third worlds continues to increase" It is equally a truism that no nation is an island unto itself, but most importantly it is factual that the concept of quid pro quo rules the international economic system. Nations use what they have to get

what they want. And nation's wealth in terms of human and material resources and capacity to efficiently manage such resources determines the strength and position of such nation to compete and exercise influence in the committee of nations. For a struggling country like Nigeria to regain its rightful place in the committee of nations, the human capital (Nigerian youthful population) which is Nigeria's greatest asset must be prioritized, trained and engaged.

The ENDSARS (A protest against police brutality in Nigeria) protest that took place on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020. According to Amnesty International (2020) "The notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in Nigeria enjoyed immunity in impunity for the continued use of force and other life threatening measures to execute, punish and extract information from alleged suspects. Many victims of the SARS have made news these past years each time showing a lot of indignation on various social media platforms like twitter and face book and sometimes protests on the streets. In recent years, the Nigerian authorities made empty promises to take care of the issues and disband SARS to no avail. However, the members of SARS continued to perpetuate suffer, extort monies, rape women, torture most innocent youths, and kill without any questions from the authorities at the top. On 4 October 2020, a video went viral showing SARS officers dragging two men from a hotel and shooting one of them dastardly outside. A few days later, protests erupted across Nigerian major cities. On 11<sup>th</sup> October, SARS is disbanded. But it was the 5<sup>th</sup> time since 2015 that the Nigerian authorities pledged to reform the police and disband SARS. Protesters continued demanding more than empty promises. On 20<sup>th</sup> October, the Nigerian army violently repressed a peaceful protest at the Lekki Toll Gate, shooting at the protesters and killing at least 12 people. Since that day, the Nigerian authorities have tried to cover up the events of the Lekki Toll Gate Shooting. They froze protests leaders' bank accounts and fined news agencies who diffused videos of the shooting" This singular event that took place within the COVID-19 pandemic period exposed Nigeria's political class's lack of respect and commitment to her citizens plight and fundamental human rights. And that on its own is a slight on the national interest of the country in the eyes of the global community. From another perspective, the xenophobic attacks, and violence against Nigerians in South Africa at different times, the closure of Nigerian owned shops and maltreatment of Nigerian citizens in Ghana, and other countries of the world too numerous to mention equally is an indication that Nigeria's foreign policy deserves to be re-evaluated, two important attributes that make a country thick, solid and well respected in the committee of nations are their national interest and their foreign policy trajectories, you cannot treat these two variables in isolation.

Nigeria still benefits a lot from both Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and Remittances from foreign nationals or Nigerians in Diaspora, According to Danfulani (2014) "Nigeria is signatory to multilateral and bilateral agreements at the continental and sub-regional levels. Most of those protocols made the country a beast of burden yoking with responsibilities without direct link with prioritizing its national interest in a transitional world system that many states are struggling to find their bearings" The historiography of Nigeria's foreign policy starting from independence in 1960 when the former Prime Minister, according to Ebegbulem ( 2013) who claimed that "Following the 'political flag' independence of Nigeria from Britain on October 01, 1960, the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa pursued an Afro-centric foreign policy which made the country commit itself to laser-focus most of its policies towards the well being of the African continent first and foremost" Some other scholars have even argued that Nigeria's commitment to prioritizing the problems of other African nations commenced long before independence, Daniel (2019) agreed that "In specific terms, Nigeria's onslaught against colonialism in Africa actually began seven clear months before the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1960 independence celebrations. On March 1960,

69 blacks were brutally murdered in Sharpeville in what became known as the Sharpeville massacre with Nigeria reacting angrily to the event. Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa's prompt response changed everything about South Africa as the country mobilized immediately for the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth Organization in 1961. Nigeria began the immediate funding of the two foremost liberation groups in South Africa notably the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) in 1961 and in 1970; the country began a 5M, USD annual subvention for both groups. Nigeria was essentially the big brother, picking up all the bills and sacrificing comfort for her African brothers. In a rare demonstration of commitment and love, Nigeria spent over 61 Billion US dollars with Nigerian students skipping or forfeiting their lunch to make donations "and just in 6 months, in June 1977, the contribution known as 'Mandela tax' to the Southern African Relief Fund (SARF) reached 10.5 million US Dollars". Out of this figure, the Federal Military Government under General Olusegun Obasanjo donated 3.7 USD m with a personal donation of 3,000 USD and each cabinet member donating 1,500 USD each. All civil servants and public officers in Nigeria donated 2% of their monthly salary" The sacrifices Nigeria made over the years just to carry other African nations along actually cost the country so much opportunities that would have skyrocketed Nigeria to the level of true "Giant of Africa" in word and indeed rather than the pathetic state the country has found itself of late, for instance the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown revealed the quagmire situation that Nigeria as a nation finds itself, Nigeria's inability to adequately provide ordinary palliatives for its large population when other countries affected by the same pandemic lockdown are able to properly carter for their own citizens was a complete mockery of the so-called giant of Africa.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of Constructivism in International Relations best suits this research narrative, and that is why it was chosen to amplify the need for Nigeria's national interest and foreign policy re-evaluation, according to Theys (2018) "Constructivism's arrival in IR is often associated with the end of the Cold War, an event that the traditional theories such as realism and liberalism failed to account for. This failure can be linked to some of their core tenets, such as the conviction that states are self-interested actors who compete for power and the unequal power distribution among states which defines the balance of power between them. Constructivism accounts for this issue by arguing that the social world is of our making. Actors (usually powerful ones, like leaders and influential citizens) continually shape – and sometimes reshape – the very nature of international relations through their actions and interactions. Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed. This view refers to the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge that are also called ontology and epistemology in research language. Alexander Wendt (1995) offers an excellent example that illustrates the social construction of reality when he explains that 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean nuclear weapons. These identifications are not caused by the nuclear weapons (the material structure) but rather by the meaning given to the material structure (the ideational structure)." This theory aptly depicts the culture in Nigerian politics where leaders, as actors alone single handedly decides the fate of the entire nation with little or no inputs required as ought to be, from the Nigerian people. According to International Affairs Forum (IAF 2021) Constructivism is the theory that says learners construct knowledge rather than just passively take in information. As people experience the world and reflect upon those experiences, they build their own representations and incorporate new information into their pre-existing knowledge, Nicholas

Onuf has been credited with coining the term constructivism to describe theories that stress the socially constructed character of international relations. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, constructivism has become one of the major schools of thought within international relations” and hence the need to adopt this constructivism theory for Nigerian foreign policy revisionism with emphasis on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 approaches to challenges as witnessed in other countries like the United States of America, China and Israel. These countries were hit heavily and badly by the COVID-19 pandemic yet there was no mass exodus of their citizens out of their country because they were able offer necessary assistances and basic necessities to sustain their citizens need.

### **Nigeria's Foreign Policy Re-evaluation**

Well meaning Nigerians often ponder to ask themselves such introspective questions as what actually constitutes Nigeria's Foreign Policy. For the sake of clarity, Nigeria's Foreign policy according to Njoku and Nwafor (2012:35) “Refers to the general principles guiding Nigeria's decisions and actions in her interaction with other nations in the international system. It is a dynamic process influenced by domestic needs” In furtherance, Onyeneho (2012:192) concurred that, “The Foreign policy of any country is a product of both internal and external environmental factors, these factors contribute to give shape and direction to foreign policies” such that, in cases of sudden outbreaks of pandemics as the world is witnessing currently with COVID-19, such policy thrusts and principles will guide the nation and her people on the right path.

Nigerian foreign policy like that of other African nations begins with the identification, and articulation of national interests. And these factors include; Policy towards her immediate neighbors; General African policy and the policy of non-alignment” furthermore, a glimpse at Nigeria's National interest will also add color to this research work and its hypothesis.

According to Adeniran (1983:191) “When Statesmen and bureaucrats are expected to act in the national interest of Nigeria, what is meant is that they are called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival, actions that will improve the lot of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries” This analysis when compared to the current state of Nigerians in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic only gets to prove that our political elites and foreign policy makers failed woefully in that regard, considering the COVID-19 vaccine nationalism and diplomacy going on where developed nations like China, and the USA are strictly holding on to the vaccines to satisfy the needs of their own citizens first without considering the rest of the world.

In another perspective, Ojo and Sesay, (2002: 90) opined that “National Interest can be perverted when those in power could abuse it, and such perversion could take several forms like decisions attempting to make economic policies to enrich only themselves and their cohorts” and this is one of the dangers and unfortunate trajectory that Nigerian national interest has taken on currently, hence the so much poverty in the land which also happens to be one of the major causes of insecurity in the post Covid-19 era.

Even Okogwu, and Akpuru-Aja, (2004:54) could not agree more that, “Since 1960, the guidelines for Nigeria's Foreign Policy have not changed significantly as the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides in Chapter 2, Article 19, the foreign policy objectives: A close study of those items have shown that none of them prioritized the average Nigerian citizen needs, short of self imposition by the political elites for example, whoever becomes the President of

Nigeria just like King Louis XIV of France will declare in the medieval period, “L’etat c’ moi”(The state is i) automatically becomes the architect, formulator, and spokesman of Nigerian foreign affairs, the President’s utterances in public becomes final expressions of Nigeria’s policies, and for far too long, these has remained the nation’s predicament and the majority of poor Nigerians have remained the victims.

### **The Concept of Afro-centricism**

There is no doubt in the mind of the Nigerian founding fathers and policy makers at the time that Afro-centric foreign policy would benefit Nigeria more in the long run than currently witnessed with the COVID-19 pandemic, because most of them then were Pan-African scholars who believed that Africa is one continent united against external interferences and aggression.

Hence the believe that Nigeria being the largest black populated nation must lead in delivering Africa from the colonial authorities and other forms of racial subjugation. According Ukaogo and others (2021) “Several studies show that foreign policy has always been seen in terms of the national interest of national entity that is formulating such policy. It is the most important determinant of a country’s foreign policy expected to encapsulate the totality of the expectations in dealing with other state actors in the international system. Buoyed by its clearly conceived and unambiguous agenda to be a continental hegemon and to speak the “loudest for African concerns”

Nigeria saw colonialism and institutionalized racism ravaging the continent a ready-made avenue to justify her ambitions of continental leadership. It was to get this done that the Nigerian government articulated from inception to focus purely on African affairs in her foreign policy. The country was admitted into the UN as the 99th member in order to join forces with other progressive members to help lift this burden from the continent by untying the thumb of militant supremacist and colonial regimes. With an unclear anti-colonial agenda at the UN, Commonwealth and other international organizations, Nigeria’s admission into the global body added a prominent and forceful voice to the existing murmurs against colonialism. This was eminently captured by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria’s first Prime Minister to the effect that “Nigeria hopes to work with other African states for the progress of Africa and to assist in bringing all African territories to a state of responsible independence” Afro-centric foreign policy goes against the current reality in international relations and politics of “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies but permanent interests”

In the current world reality of COVID-19 pandemic, the former President of the United States of America, Mr Donald Trump openly preached and practiced “America First” and “Make America Great Again” and Nigeria is witness to how countries around the World jealously protect their own citizens and their welfare first before all else, the concern is that Nigerians are being slighted not only abroad but also in their own country, the only place they can comfortably call home and so little is being done to secure them and protect their interests and that seriously affects their contributions to Nation building. According to Balewa and Epelle (1964) “Many indeed have argued that Nigeria’s choice of Africa-centered policy is not driven by national interest but by an unclear consideration of the goodness and welfare of her neighbors seen more as brothers and sisters”

A critical interrogation of this policy would reveal that no core interest in favor of the people was considered at the point of formulation in 1960 and at implementation thereafter and on this strong unwavering commitment of Nigeria, Awosusi (2020) argued that “Despite Nigeria’s continual leadership roles in terms of economic, human and military commitment to the continent, it is not accorded corresponding appreciation and recognition in the continent. Instead, most Africa

states treat Nigeria with contempt and suspicion” Which calls to question the way Nigerians get humiliated and maltreated in most African countries where they go to seek for greener pastures, according to Ezeamalu (2015) “The hundreds of Nigerians convicted in foreign prisons were largely left with no legal assistance or no help from the Nigerian government to get a fair trial, the Legal Defense and Assistance Project has said. At a roundtable on ‘Moving Nigeria Towards the Abolition of the Death Penalty’ organized for the media and civil society organizations in Lagos, Thursday, the group said there are over 500 Nigerians facing the death penalty abroad. “The question is what is the Nigerian government doing with respect to the process in which they got to that stage” Chino Obiagwu, National Coordinator, LEDAP, said while presenting his paper ‘Nigerians on Death Row Abroad: Issues and Concerns.’ “What responsibility has Nigeria to its citizens facing criminal charges, especially death penalty, abroad? Nigeria is a signatory to a treaty called Vienna Convention on Consular Rights Services.” There are 16,250 Nigerians already convicted in prisons across the world, according to the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs; though Mr. Obiagwu insists the figure is close to 25,000 because the ministry’s information are from those within their consular records. “Out of the 16,250 Nigerians convicted already in foreign prisons, a total of 810 are facing the death penalty – either they are already convicted or they are facing capital offences,” said Mr. Obiagwu. “Those already convicted, there are 420 Nigerians already convicted and on death row abroad.” According to LEDAP, the number of Nigerians convicted abroad include: China, 120; Indonesia, 17; Malaysia, 132 (LEDAP says it was only able to assess two of the seven maximum security prisons in Malaysia); Saudi Arabia, 18; Canada, 650 (none of them facing death penalty); Qatar, 2; Iran, 1; and United Arab Emirates (Dubai), 5”.

In another perspective Folarin (2020) stated that, “No fewer than 70 Nigerians have been allegedly arrested and detained without trial by security operatives in Bangladesh. The Nigerian Community Association in Bangladesh, which made the disclosure in a letter, said there was a crackdown on Nigerians in the South Asian country. The letter was signed by a representative of the group, Gideon Onyeoma. Onyeoma said the indiscriminate arrest of Nigerians, including legal residents doing business in the foreign country, had caused undue hardship and pain to the victims. *It was* also learnt that those arrested were denied bail by the government, as they were paraded before journalists and their photos published despite not being convicted by a court of law”.

Another scholar, Nathaniel (2021) argued that, “At a meeting with officials of the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM), Mr Osemwingie-Ero disclosed that he learned about the plight of the innocent young Nigerians during his wrongful detention in Italy. According to the former commissioner, the young Nigerians are held in Italian maximum prisons because they do not have the resources to access an independent lawyer. He said the prosecutors in Italy were manipulating the justice system against Nigerians, adding that it became clear to him that “he was a victim of racial discrimination and manipulation of the Italian Justice System by a very corrupt prosecutor”. Narrating briefly his ordeal in Italy, Osemwingie-Ero said when he interviewed other Nigerians who were incarcerated for charges similar to those leveled against him, it was discovered that a certain ‘Green Bible’ and forged papers that were brought up as evidence against the commissioner, was the same evidence put forward against the others in custody”

These statements only lend credence to the fact that Nigeria’s foreign policies and national interest do not actually prioritize the generality of Nigeria’s citizens as it ought to be, for example, during the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected that the authorities would send planes and other means to transport Nigerians who are stuck in foreign countries like USA, which was the

epicenters of the virus for rescue missions, but it focused on the interest of the few well connected political elites, their families and cronies.

The Vienna Convention on Consular Rights Services, to which Nigeria is a signatory to, requires every state to ensure that any of its citizens who face criminal charge abroad, or any form of distress receives consular service from the Mission. The consular service will include telling the person his rights under the law of the prosecuting country. Many of them, especially those who were tried in Malaysia, Indonesia, and China were tried under languages which they were not conversant with and many of them didn't have service of interpreters.

Such ugly case scenarios have over the years become a reoccurring reality for Nigerians home and abroad and to imagine that these Nigerians are expected to contribute heavily to Nigeria's ailing economy through paying taxes at home and remittances from abroad is worrisome. The political elites saddled with the mandate and responsibilities of making laws which has the protection of rights and properties of their citizens as the primary purpose has chosen to build powerful individuals and personalities rather than powerful institutions that will last the taste of time in ensuring an egalitarian society founded under the rule of law where the supremacy of the law and equality before the law will become the principle that guides Nigerians collective corporate existence at all circumstances including during life threatening situations like the COVID-19 pandemic wherever they may find themselves both home and abroad, a typical example is witnessed when the United States of America sent in Aeroplanes to convey its citizens that wishes to go back home safely in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic which goes a long way to prove how they prioritized their citizens at all times.

### **Brain Drain**

One of the major threat and potential menace to the socio-economic survival of the Nigerian state remains the current upward trend of losing Nigeria's best brains to other nations, this ugly debacle is negatively affecting the national interest of Nigeria, from the Educational sector, the Health sector down to the Agricultural sector, Nigeria is massively losing her youngest youthful population to Europe, Asia, America and even to her other neighboring states like South Africa and Ghana because of insecurity. Brain drain entails the migration of healthy personnel in search of the better standard of living and quality of life, higher salaries, access to advanced technology and more stable political conditions in different places worldwide, in fact according to Pettinger, (2021) "The brain drain problem refers to the situation where a country loses its best workers. The brain drain means that developing countries can struggle to develop because their best-skilled labor leaves the economy. Thus it becomes hard to break the cycle of losing the best workers. Because of this 'brain drain' the developing countries lose in many ways" from another perspective the Mo Ibrahim foundation (2018) claimed that, "Brain drain, which is the emigration of skilled nationals, results in a depletion of skilled human resource in the countries of origin.

The African Union estimates that about 70,000 skilled professionals emigrate from Africa every year. Currently, Africa is the world's youngest continent, with an estimated 10 to 12 million young Africans joining the labor force each year. Yet the continent is able to create only about 3 million jobs annually. With limited economic opportunities, many young Africans are migrating to Europe and America for economic opportunities. In 2016, the IMF's World Economic Outlook reported a growing number of African migrants in OECD countries. Estimated at 7 million in 2013, the total number of African migrants in OECD countries could rise to 34 million by 2050. In 2013, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) hosted about 50.0% of the

total sub-Saharan African Diaspora” As much as this is worrisome and a challenge to the entire African continent, it has become an emergency for The African Union Migration policy framework (2018-2027) makes several recommendations on how to curb brain drain on the continent. These include generating gender-responsive economic development programs to provide gainful employment, professional development, and educational opportunities to qualified nationals in their home countries.

Ultimately, as president Obama said in his recent visit to South Africa: If we have African leaders, governments and institutions which are creating a platform for success and opportunity, then you will increasingly get more talent wanting to stay. Similarly, as President of the African Development Bank, Akinwumi Adesina remarked at the G7 Summit in 2017: The future of Africa's youth does not lie in migration to Europe; it should not be at the bottom of the Mediterranean; it lies in a prosperous Africa. in the views of Olaniran (2020) “The unintended consequence of this drain sees Nigeria spending billions of naira training its skilled manpower, only to lose its capital to other jurisdictions. It is estimated that Nigeria has spent upwards of \$2bn training doctors who have subsequently migrated. The United Nations Commission for Trade and Development estimates that each African professional lost to other countries represents a loss of \$184, 000 to Africa. However, some view the mass exodus of skilled professionals as a positive. To them, exporting our best brains is an investment in Nigeria's future. This belief, however incredulous, is not unfounded. In 2018, Nigerians received \$25.1bn from Nigerians living abroad, a figure that is triple the country's capital expenditure budget. For context, Nigeria made \$18.2bn from oil production and export.

Nigeria's labor minister claims that the country has a glut of doctors, and as such, it is natural and logical for the country to export. However, the veracity of this claim is yet to be seen, as the country's health sector currently suffers one of the lowest doctor-patient ratios in the world. Doctors are overworked several days on call without break. This situation belies the labor minister's assertion and proves that there is indeed a dearth of skilled labor in the country. The Nigeria Medical Association claims that there are 40,000 doctors in its register far below the needs of the teeming population of 196 million yet recently in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic Nigeria have witnessed several events of strike actions and downing tools by the Nigeria Medical Association over disagreements between them and the government in power, and many Medical Doctors and Nurses even made serious attempts to leave the country, many left while many others are still processing their travelling documents to abandon the Nigerian masses at this time their services are needed most.

This problem is not limited to the health sector alone. Science, technology, and education are other major sectors suffering from a dearth of qualified professionals. As the world evolves, nations must aspire to evolve with it, as nations that refuse to evolve will be left behind to perish, according to Njoku (2006: 1) “The world in its dynamic consistency has been transitory from one period in history to another” and Nigeria must follow suit.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Nigeria, it appears has been very unfortunate with leadership over the years. According to Ezekwesili (2013) “These factors range from sound policies, effective and efficient public and private investments and strong institutions, economic evidence throughout numerous researches proves that one key variable that determines how fast nations outgrows others is the speed of accumulation of human capital especially through science and technology education, no wonder countries like South Korea of fifty million people, has a GDP of \$1.12trillion; Brazil of one



hundred and ninety six million has a GDP of \$2.48trillion; Malaysia of twenty eight million people has \$278.6billion; Chile of seventeen million people has \$248.59billion; Singapore of five million people has \$318.7billion; Meanwhile with the population of about one eighty million people, Nigeria can only make boast of about a GDP of \$235.92billion; which is completely way off the mark that we could have produced if we made a better set of development choices” The big concern and question at the mind of every well meaning Nigerian remains: How did these nations become productively rich and wealthy over the last fifty years while Nigeria appears to be stagnated? How did the majority of the citizens of these nations join the upper middle class while more Nigerians retrogressed into poverty? With the inability of the government in power to provide common palliatives for the poor Nigerians during this COVID-19 pandemic, as opposed to what is witnessed in other countries, it therefore creates a sense of urgency that Nigerian policy makers must make hay while the sun shines to take heed of the lessons learnt with the COVID-19 pandemic from other developed countries that were even hit harder but weathered the challenges.

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