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Title: COVID-19 and the immune system: My Zimbabwean experience (September – December 2020)

Africa, with the least total [wealth](#) out of the major global regions, has experienced a good [COVID-19 case rate](#) which is somewhat hard due to the poor enforcement of restrictive measures that are aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. Concerns have been raised with regards to the [accuracy](#) of the case reporting and recording which has left the general assumption that a lot of COVID-19 cases are being missed. Rightfully so, this assumption can only be proven by rolling out mass testing programmes for a more accurate reflection of the infections. However, this assumption might also be not true and mass testing could produce a similar picture to the current situation, concluding that Africa is in fact doing something right.

During this period of the pandemic, I have been fortunate enough to travel to Zimbabwe and in this blog, I wish to draw on the lived experience spanning 3 months and also observational analysis of how COVID-19 has been combated by the ordinary people, consciously and without them noticing as well.

Remember that time when the pandemic took off? When all the professors from the Whatsapp University flooded the platform with their chain messages about boosting the immune system? When the general school of thought was that COVID-19 was a rich people's ailment? And for a brief moment, that COVID-19 was not a black person's illness? Yes, that time. Just how close were the professors to cracking the code? Believe it or not, I think they actually got it but the way the message was conveyed may have not been up to scratch. Looking at these messages now, I have managed to read between the lines and pick up some of the hidden codes, all related to the lifestyle of the African people and the link to the natural body's defence mechanism.

Three key elements were identified by the Whatsapp institution and I hope to support my position with them, identified as the following; immune system, rich people and black people (Africans). The [immune system](#) innately and adaptively works all the time to prevent invading microbes from attacking the body. To get the best out of this defensive mechanism, taking care of the immune system means it operates at the optimum level. This ideal operational capacity is dependent on the lifestyle, that is to suggest that healthy lifestyle practices lead to [strengthened immunity](#).

Despite the literary multitude suggesting that the [rich people](#) are linked to healthy lifestyle behaviours, [evidence](#) has also pointed out that larger percentages of the rich people have engaged in unhealthy lifestyle practices than their poor counterparts. This can be explained by the ability to obtain disposable income, of which poverty levels in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) depict that large populations in this region do not have access to disposable income. Therefore, a significant percentage of the population in Africa, [about 65%](#), engage in subsistence farming.

What this means is that a large African population indulges in an [organic](#) diet. Diet plays an important part in

building the body defence system because it improves [gut diversity](#) which prevents comorbidities, in whose presence, COVID-19 has been known to yield poor clinical outcomes. The various interactions following gut diversity is a major determinant of development and function of the [immune system](#) in homeostasis and disease functions.

From the many conversations that I engaged in whilst in Zimbabwe, I found out that a lot of the people resorted to the lemon, ginger and all sorts concoctions which they had read in the chain messages or advised by others to take in bids to prevent severe attacks from the COVID-19 virus. Admittedly, growing up in this part of the world myself, I must say this mixture has always been used to help with the common cold which is a close family member of the COVID-19 strain. Without realising it, what we were merely doing was taking care of the immune system so that it operates at the optimum level, innately and adaptively [working all the](#) time to prevent invading microbes from attacking the body.

Another crucial part of the COVID picture is the limited automation of activities in the country. A significant majority of the population is physically active as they go about in their day-to-day errands and tasks. I can confirm that on average, I used the local borehole to fill up at least 100 litres every two days. This was indeed a workout session on its own. [Research](#) has linked moderate exercise with improved circulation of cells that are needed in effective immune defence and this increased immunosurveillance is associated with significant clinical value. Further stress exertion on the body is linked to increased upper respiratory infections, hence heavy exercise bouts are not beneficial for the immune system.

Stress may also be part of the jigsaw. Contrary to the long-term consequences, 'fight or flight' episodes are known to trigger [key immune](#) cells release. With the way that the security forces enforced the lockdown restrictions, this would have constantly engaged short-term stress responses with every encounter that one has with the police or the army personnel. You can imagine going somewhere and constantly being on the lookout in case the police or the army is also out there with teargas cannisters, button sticks, handcuffs and AKs', religiously enforcing the restrictions as they are well-known to do. Admittedly, on a couple of occasions I encountered the police force using their teargas and I will not hide the fear that overwhelmed me as I made a dramatic escape in similar fashion to the other people who were within the vicinity.

In closing, I do understand the notion that mass testing is necessary, but I also think that taking care of and boosting the immune system is significantly important. However unorthodox the manner seems, Zimbabweans have been forced by the existing systems to keep their immunity mechanisms effective and with proper public health input, this can be enhanced and ensure improved responses in outbreaks to come.