

Research forum held at the Japan Association for African Studies Annual Conference

On 14 May 2023, project members organized a research forum at the 60th Annual Conference of the Japan Association for African Studies.

“Exploration of Practical Wisdom and Resilience Overcoming Downside Risk: Collecting grassroots voices in Africa under COVID-19.”

The principal investigator Kazuyo Hanai, Project Assistant Professor at the University of Tokyo, gave an overview of the research project “Exploration of Practical Wisdom and Resilience Overcoming Downside Risk: Collecting grassroots voices in Africa under COVID-19.” This project aims to identify the perceptions and practical knowledge of local people in Africa struggling with COVID-19-related risks, and to make policy recommendations for government agencies and aid organizations.

After the introduction, from the seven African countries research team, Christian S. Otchia (Associate Professor at Nagoya University), Laban Kithinji Kinyua (Fellow at Sophia University), and Rangarirai Gavin Muchetu (Research fellow at Sam Moyo African Institute for Agrarian Studies) presented the result of their first year of research.

In the first presentation, Prof. Otchia analyzed the result of quantitative survey of seven African countries the real risks and people’s perception of risk associated with the COVID-19 pandemic itself and government’s containment measures. The findings show that though the risk perception of COVID-19 varied among the seven African countries, it tended to be lower than other risks, such as political and economic risks. The survey also found that respondents’ values, ideology, personality traits, as well as trust in government and medical institutions, are related to their risk perception. The context of local culture and society needs to be fully considered for effective policy making and implementation in the future.

Dr. Kinyua’s presentation based on his field research focused on the impact of COVID-19 regulations on higher education in Kenya and how the government’s attempt to switch teaching methods to online learning has changed the lives and education of students. According to his fieldwork, governmental support, students’ adaptability to new media and the entrepreneurial activities elicited by the crisis somehow mitigated the negative impacts of COVID-19. However, there are concerns that the disparity in infrastructure, the unsettled internet environment and the lack of interpersonal relationships will ultimately bounce back as uncertainty in students’ examinations, mental health, and employment, wrinkling more

significant risks to the “bottom of society”.

In the final presentation, Dr. Muchetu drew on field research in Zimbabwe to identify risks associated with COVID-19 in rural areas and changes in people’s risk perceptions and life strategies. Through research conducted in overcrowded communal areas, the newly resettled areas, and urban cities, it became clear that the impact of COVID-19 is manifesting in varying social, economic, and political challenges. Rural production and livelihoods, which are conditioned by free movement, have been frustrated by restrictions and constraints on the movement of goods and services. The lack of public services and distrust of them has turned people toward traditional beliefs and knowledge, and the fact that COVID-19 brought opportunities for change along with the crisis is instructive in considering the multiplicity of risks.

During the Q&A session, numerous questions were raised to confirm details about the local situation, such as mask-wearing rate and the function of religion. The symposium concluded with the future challenge of finding indications for facing risk as a complex system from the dynamic interaction between reality and people’s perception in Africa, as depicted by the three panelists.

The content of the forum will be published in the *Journal of African Studies*, the journal of the Japan Association for African Studies, to be issued in December 2023.

