



The moment to see the poor



EDITORIAL

Joachim von Braun, Stefano Zamagni, Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has illuminated inequities that have put poor people—in both low-income nations and in rich countries—at the greatest risk of suffering. Pope Francis recently pointed to that in an interview: “This is the moment to see the poor.”

Until science finds appropriate drugs and a vaccine to treat and prevent COVID-19, today's paradox is that everybody needs to cooperate with others while simultaneously self-isolating as a protective measure. Yet, whereas social distancing is quite feasible for wealthy people, poor people crowded in urban slums or refugee camps do not have that option and lack face masks and hand-washing facilities. To address the risks in large, crowded cities in developing countries, we must support prevention by testing, providing access to protective equipment, and launching a big effort to build provisional hospitals to isolate infected people.

In addition, the digital divide between the rich and poor may be costing lives. Inequitable distribution of technology and online resources means that crucial information on COVID-19, particularly early warnings and recommended early responses, are not timely, if received at all, in low-income communities. Without access to responsible, transparent, and current information, a cacophony of unproven assumptions can instead spread through poor communities. This gap in access to technology also translates into a lack of opportunities for distance learning while schools are closed, and teleworking during societal lockdown is infeasible for millions of low-income workers because of the nature of their jobs and lack of access to communications infrastructure. What COVID-19 is teaching us is that universal access to internet and communication technologies should be a human right.

Unfortunately, these inequities lead to yet others in poor communities. COVID-19 is adversely affecting national economies and is destroying small businesses and farmers. The disruptive consequences for food systems, especially, hurt poor people, who spend most of their income on food. This is increasing hunger and exacerbating the public health threat of the pandemic. The global agenda to advance the United Nations (UN) sustainability goals—particularly those related to poverty, hunger, health, decent work, and economic growth—will be undermined by COVID-19, unless the world cooperates and includes the rescue of small businesses and farmers as it seeks to avoid a global economic crisis.

COVID-19 has also exposed the fragility of interconnectedness. Increasing global economic interactions have opened the world to massive cross-border flows of goods, services, money, ideas, and people. That allowed many to move out of poverty. However, curbing the rapid spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome–coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) requires closing borders around infection hotspots. These closings must be temporary only, and they must not hinder cooperation between nations to handle the pandemic. Human resources, equipment, knowledge about treatments, and supplies, as well as nonmarket and spiritual goods, must be shared, including with poor countries. The pandemic initially inspired nations to look inward. Seeking a solution to COVID-19 through national isolation would be counterproductive. SARS-CoV-2 does not recognize borders. Rich nations need to support transnational and UN organizations in their global efforts to control spread of this contagion.

Science capacity in general, and specifically related to infectious diseases, is highly unequal around the world. This contributes to a greater risk of suffering in poor nations. Root causes and prevention of infectious diseases caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites that spread from animals to humans, for example, require cooperative research that is close to potential risk areas, including in poor nations. Now is the time for the developed world to commit to improving this. If this gap in science capacity continues to grow, the interest of rich nations will become more limited and further leave disease burden among the poor.

Other major global crises, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, demand cooperative global responses that don't leave out the poor. Once COVID-19 is under control, the world cannot return to business as usual. A thorough review of worldviews, lifestyles, and the problems of short-term economic valuation must be carried out. A more responsible, more sharing, more caring, more inclusive, and fairer society is required if we are to survive in the Anthropocene.

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