

Why social distancing is a big challenge in many African countries

April 20 2020, by Prof. Isabel Günther



Aerial view of Monrovia, Liberia. Credit: UN Photo / Christopher Herwig / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Working from home, distance learning, online shopping—many African countries cannot easily adopt rich nations' measures against the coronavirus. Isabel Günther calls for international solidarity in the pandemic.

South Africans watched in horror and amazement when President Cyril

Ramaphosa announced a nationwide lockdown on 23 March. With only 274 officially confirmed COVID-19 cases at the time, many felt this measure might be too excessive. As it turned out, many African states declared lockdowns with much lower case numbers than in Europe.

African governments' rapid reaction

While African countries have acted decisively to prevent large outbreaks, the conditions of many people's everyday lives there could make a Swiss-style lockdown difficult to enforce—and, even more importantly, highly inequitable. A virus does not distinguish between poor and rich, but it is much more difficult for the poor to protect themselves.

Lockdowns are intended to "flatten the curve": to slow the spread of COVID-19, and thereby ensure that the health system is not overwhelmed at any one point in time. Given many African countries' weak medical infrastructure and capacity to handle severe COVID-19 cases, their curves need to be flattened even more aggressively.

Moreover, although Africa has a much younger population than Europe—which could limit the number of severe COVID-19 cases—millions of young Africans already suffer from HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, tuberculosis, and other respiratory infections, which might make them more vulnerable.

A privilege few can afford

A large share of Africa's urban population lives in crowded informal settlements, with small one- or two-bedroom houses. Differences across the continent are large, but on average, 45% of households share toilets with their neighbors and for 17%, their only access to water is from a

communal tap. To expect people living in these households not to leave their homes is more than impractical; it is simply unrealistic.



Behavioural measures against the virus are inestimably more difficult to implement in in poor urban neighbourhoods. PJS informal settlement, South Africa, before Easter. Credit: Thabile Tsitsa, research assistant in South Africa

Social distancing immediately jeopardizes many poor people's livelihoods. Many are street vendors or workers who rely on a daily wage to make ends meet and cannot work from home—so they lose their incomes from one day to the next. About 80% of the population work in the informal sector—without contracts of any kind, let alone unemployment insurance or the possibility of continued salary payments if work suddenly dries up (Kurzarbeit / short-time work).

Lockdowns will have devastating effects on poor people's ability to put

food on the table and to stay healthy. According to a new study by UN-WIDER, the number of people living in extreme poverty (living on less than 1.90 international dollars a day) could increase for the first time in 30 years because of the economic impacts of social distancing.

With all African schools currently closed, children's educational prospects may now also be at risk. My son's school in Zurich is able to support the continuity of his education by sending educational material via email or video. For most schools on our neighboring continent, however, limited internet access makes this impossible. In times of social distancing, the digital divide will further increase the global learning gap.

We are in this together

In most African countries, with fewer reported cases (even if underestimated), early social distancing measures seem to have restricted the spread of the virus to poor, densely populated areas. However, it is likely that the virus will eventually spread. In any case, poor people are living in conditions that already leave them disproportionately affected by the global lockdown.

As a society, it is our responsibility to show the same solidarity with people living on our neighboring continent that we currently show with our neighbors in Switzerland. The [coronavirus](#) does not stop at national borders, nor should our action to confront it. Social distancing calls for social protection measures to ensure that poor people around the world are not bearing the burden of slowing the virus.

To ease the consequences of the pandemic, we should support health systems and expand cash-transfer programs, which offer an effective way to improve people's lives, in particular when facing income loss. In the longer term, we should support African societies to build up the

preconditions needed to cope with pandemics—and to ensure decent living conditions for all.

Last, we currently pay a lot of attention to global numbers of COVID-19 cases. In the future, we might want to expand our attention to global numbers on various other infectious diseases, access to water and soap, and people living in extreme poverty.

More information: United Nations University: Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty WIDER Working Paper 2020/43: www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-04/WIDER_WP2020-43.pdf

UNESCO COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response: en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

Johns Hopkins Corona Virus Resource Center: coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) data: www.who.int/data/gho

Provided by ETH Zurich

Citation: Why social distancing is a big challenge in many African countries (2020, April 20) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-social-distancing-big-african-countries.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.