

# COVID-19 lockdowns could lead to social unrest, according to new research

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An academic from Queen Mary University of London has published a research paper which explores the impact of lockdowns in response to COVID-19 in Africa.

Written by Dr. Roxana Gutiérrez-Romero and published as part of Queen Mary's Center for Globalization Research (CGR) working paper

series, the findings are drawn from data incorporating 24 countries. The results show that the probability of riots, violence against civilians, food-related conflicts, and food looting has increased since lockdowns.

The analysis used georeferenced data for 24 African countries with monthly local prices and real-time [conflict](#) data reported in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) from January 2015 until early May 2020.

According to the study, although the recently implemented social distancing measures and lockdowns might curb the spread of the coronavirus, an issue of major concern is the potential risks of social unrest given the sudden loss of jobs and livelihoods.

## **Stricter lockdowns increase chances of riots**

The research showed no evidence that early social distancing measures, such as banning some international flights, fuelled conflicts. However, the more strict local lockdowns have increased the chances of riots, violence against civilians and food-related conflicts in the African countries analyzed.

According to the study, increases in food prices are a key driver in the violence against civilians particularly in areas with more cultivated land where rebel groups typically seek resource appropriation from civilians, whenever there is a major shock to food supply.

The research also showed that African countries which have provided a higher number of welfare and labor anti-poverty policies, are less likely to experience riots, violence against civilians and food-related conflicts.

Earlier studies have found that providing aid can in fact increase and extend conflicts as [rebel groups](#) might sabotage these programs to

prevent weakening their ability to recruit future members from the community.

Dr. Roxana Gutiérrez-Romero, Reader in Quantitative Methods and Policy at Queen Mary said: "The literature has offered quite mixed findings on whether aid and anti-poverty projects can reduce the probability of reducing conflict. These results suggest that conditional-cash-transfers can be successful in reducing conflicts. Countries with a broader net of COVID-19 economic support, with more initiatives, are reducing the most the probability of experiencing conflicts and associated fatalities."

## Support required in the long term

From the analyzed African countries with COVID-19 welfare and labor policies, around 70 percent have implemented cash-transfers and 30 percent provided relief in paying utility bills. Only a small minority have implemented labor initiatives.

"As the lockdowns start to ease, the support available to [vulnerable people](#) needs to continue, and should also include support for the large informal labor market. This should be a key priority especially considering nearly 277 million people in Africa, one in every five, were already suffering from severe food insecurity right before the pandemic," added Dr. Gutiérrez-Romero.

**More information:** Roxana Gutiérrez-Romero, Conflict in Africa during COVID-19: social distancing, food vulnerability and welfare response. arXiv:2006.10696 [econ.EM]. [arxiv.org/abs/2006.10696](https://arxiv.org/abs/2006.10696)

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

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