



Police officers along Tom Mboya Street, Nairobi during the Dawn to Dusk t curfew imposed in the country. Photo: [Boniface Okendo/Standard Media Group.

CORONAVIRUS MEASURES: PUSHING AFRICA INTO AN ABSOLUTE POVERTY TRAP

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At any level, the poverty line is a mark of social inclusion/exclusion. As such, the obvious casualties of shelter-at-home orders to combat the corona virus are those without enough resources to secure basic life necessities. Perhaps, the Covid-19 is a wake-up call to African governments to put in place functioning public assistance programmes to counteract poverty threats.

Certainly, the renowned Pan-Africanist, W.E. B. Du Bois did not have Coronavirus in mind when he declared that: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line”.

Uncannily, U.S. President Donald Trump, who label the 2019 novel coronavirus as the “China Virus”, seems to project the colour line as “the problem of the 21st century”. He is dead wrong.

Coronavirus is an equal opportunity global pandemic. On March 27, U.S. becomes first country to report 100,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, becoming the country with the most confirmed cases globally. And across the Atlantic, the pandemic has a new prime victim, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who tested positive for the virus on Friday March 27.

Luckily, countries are beginning to take the pandemic seriously as an existential threat to humanity, imposed curfews, lockdowns and related restrictions to check its spread. In Kenya, President Kenyatta announced a nationwide night-time curfew effective March 27.

But the stay-at-home orders are unveiling the real problem of the 21st century: the poverty line or the minimum level of income considered as adequate for survival.

Clearly, the shelter-in-place orders can contain the spread of the pandemic, but not everyone has the means to stay at home. Basic conditions are needed for those citizens below the poverty line to observe the curfews.

The poverty threshold, like poverty itself, is relative. This dictum should guide responses to COVID-19. However, in practice, breadlines vary considerably among nations, with developed countries having considerably higher levels than developing countries.

However, in October 2015 the World Bank has upgraded its daily per capita international poverty line (IPL) from \$1.25 per day to a global absolute minimum of \$1.90 (Ksh 190) a day—widely considered as better reflecting today's reality, particularly new price levels in developing countries.

Obviously, living above or below the poverty line is not a permanent or static position. Perusing through recently published autobiographies and biographies in Kenya, there has been a distinct

upward trend from “charcoal to gold” or “grass to grass” of many Kenyans in the last five decades. But the downward trends from gold to charcoal or grace to grass are under-studied.

A third of the world's impoverished people were not poor at birth, but sunk below the poverty line over the course of their life.

At any level, the poverty line is a mark of social inclusion/exclusion. As such, the obvious casualties of shelter-at-home orders to combat COVID-19 are those without enough resources to secure basic life necessities—trapped in the “absolute poverty” or “extreme poverty” bracket.

Without access to two or more of the basic needs—healthcare for serious illnesses and pregnancy; food; safe drinking water; sanitation facilities; adequate shelter; education; information; and access to vital services—these are at the dire risk of double jeopardy: Coronavirus and extreme poverty.

Based on the World Bank IPL measure, the United Nations has estimated that roughly 734 million people in the world remained in absolute poverty, the vast majority of them in Africa.

The Bank's Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report (2018), indicated that 17.6 million Kenyans (about 40% of the population) live below two dollars a day, effectively living from hand to mouth. This is the sixth-highest number of poor people in the world after India, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Madagascar in terms of extreme poverty.

As such, imposing a curfew without breadbaskets for the 40% of the population can be a lightning rod for social chaos.

Moreover, imposed in the absence of affordable universal healthcare, and therefore, medical response to COVID19, in the majority of African countries, curfews and lockdowns can morph into death traps.

The focus of interventions should be women, children and the elderly, who face the devastation of absolute poverty d more than other social categories. Informal settlements and slums in African cities are full of single mother families, which reflects the feminization of poverty.

Moreover, the Horn of Africa region can only forget to put measures in place to prevent the further spread of Coronavirus among refugees at its own peril. Governments should work with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to effectively implement measures to stem the spread of the virus among refugees and host communities.

COVID 19 is a wake-up call to African Governments to put in place functioning public assistance programs to counteract poverty threats, and the impact of COVID19 on household incomes. A model case is America's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as the Food Stamp Program that provides food-purchasing assistance for the low- and no-income people—and benefited roughly 40 million people in 2018.

Three pro-poor responses to COVID-19 are discernible. First, wealthy countries are drawing on their vast riches to contain the virus. Trump has signed a sweeping \$2 trillion coronavirus spending package into law.

Second, developing countries like Kenya have introduced a raft of measures to halt further spreading across the country while saving jobs, incomes and to shield their poor from sinking deeper into absolute poverty.

Third, COVID-19 is galvanizing humanitarian action. In Santa Cruz, California, the youth of have launched a campaign to collect food baskets to support the poor affected by stay-at-home responses to Coronavirus. Similarly, the China's business mogul, Jack Ma, through his has pledge to donate kits for testing coronavirus to each of the 54 African countries. Kenya has already received a batch of 25,000 kits from his Alibaba Foundation.

Blissfully, the world's major powers are toning down rhetoric and starting to cooperate in combating the pandemic. In an evening telephone call on March 26, President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to deepen cooperation, reiterating their commitment to work together to protect lives and livelihoods.

With the promise of cooperation, a future without COVID-19 looks brighter

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