



A volunteer wearing sprays disinfectant on a man, as a measure against the Covid-19 disease, in Shamma village, Egypt, on April 1, 2020. PHOTO | MOHAMED EL-SHAHED | AFP

THE WARNING THREAT OF COVID-19: URGENT ACTION NEEDED FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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The far-reaching ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is disrupting economies and public health systems, has ravage developed countries such as China, the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Singapore and Italy. Unfortunately, that dreadful moment is not too far off and threatens to disproportionately hit developing countries throwing health systems into disarray. Moving forward, the focus should be on helping countries to prepare for, respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable.

Four months after it was first identified in December 2019 in China's Hubei Province, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has become a global pandemic. Lately the situation in China showed a significant decrease in cases, but the devastation of the novel virus is spreading other countries. 204 countries have reported cases, out of 1,021,037 cases, 751,675 people are infected, 53,251 have lost their lives, and, blissfully, 213,224 have recovered.

Up to this point, the novel coronavirus pandemic is mainly ravaging developed countries such as China, the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Singapore and Italy. The United States of America has the highest tally: 245,373 cases, with 6,095 deaths, and 10,403 recoveries. Italy has recorded 115,242 cases with 13,915 deaths, and 18,278 recoveries.

These developed nations enjoy relative affluence, strong institutions and political systems, and have fairly effective medical systems by global standards. Theoretically, these wealthy nations are better equipped and have resources to enable them cope with the disease and deal with its repercussions.

Despite this, experts are warning that COVID-19 is progressively turning its fury on developing nations. Here, trickles are rapidly turning into floods. The numbers of confirmed cases have rapidly jumped from scores of affected people to hundreds, even thousands, of cases.

The first expert warning comes from two American experts, Robert Malley and Richard Malley in a recent article titled: "When the Pandemic Hits the Most Vulnerable" published in the influential *Foreign Affairs Journal* (March 31, 2020). "Developing countries are hurtling toward the Coronavirus catastrophe," the two forewarn.

If anything close to what has hit the world's affluent nations were to afflict poorer or conflict-ridden ones, the effect could be dire.

The situation can become ugly in a scenario where a poor or conflict-ridden developing nation lacks test kit, protective facemasks, gloves, and ventilators; fails to bolster the capacity of its hospitals and intensive care units or its already stretched health system lacks capacity to trace, isolate, and quarantine affected cases; or its ordinary citizens fail to separate themselves from one another; and most businesses stay open.

Unfortunately, that dreadful moment is not too far off. In many developing countries, "such a scenario is not a matter of speculation. It's a likely future, if not an imminent reality," the two authors caution.

In Africa, previously only remotely affected by the pandemic, Algeria is leading with 986 cases, 86 deaths and 61 recoveries. Egypt comes second with 865 cases, 58 deaths and 201 recoveries. In just a few days, Kenya's tally has shot from slightly over twenty confirmed cases to 122, with four (4) deaths from the virus.

The second expert warning comes from an article by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company titled: "Tackling COVID-19 in Africa" (April 2020).

The article warns of the far-reaching economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is already disrupting millions of people's livelihoods, with disproportionate impact on poor households and small and informal businesses.

Developing countries need to come into full grasp of economic impact of the novel virus. Africa's GDP growth in 2020 could be cut by three to eight percentage points. They need a framework for a concerted near-term action by governments, the private sector, and development institutions to mitigate the impact COVID-19. Governments need to consider an extensive stimulus package to reverse the economic damage of the crisis.

The third expert warning comes from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in an article "COVID-19: Looming crisis in developing

countries threatens to devastate economies and ramp up inequality” (March 30, 2020). Like the McKinsey article, UNDP’s caution centers on the social and economic impacts of the growing COVID-19 crisis, which threatens to disproportionately hit developing countries throwing health systems into disarray.

Under-resourced hospitals and fragile health systems are likely to be overwhelmed. This may be further exacerbated by a spike in cases, as up to 75 per cent of people in least developed countries lack access to soap and water.

The focus should be on helping countries to prepare for, respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable. UNDP has unveiled its COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility to offer immediate assistance to help countries strengthen their health systems, procure much-needed medical supplies, leverage digital technologies and ensuring health workers are paid.

The fourth expert warning comes the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in its recent report: Economic Impact of the COVID-19 on Africa (March 13, 2020). As a result of the pandemic, UNECA warns that Africa’s growth is expected to drop from 3.2% to 1.8% as a result of increased health spending to curtail the breathtaking speed and reach of the virus.

Specialized agencies are devising frameworks of response to forestall the hurtling of developing countries towards a Coronavirus catastrophe.

In a press release on April 2020, the World Bank Group unveiled its first operation for COVID-19 Emergency Health support that seeks to strengthen the response of developing countries to the pandemic.

“We are working to strengthen developing nations’ ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and shorten the time to economic and social recovery”, the Bank announced.

On the African continent, hope now rests on effective implementation of Africa’s new anti-COVID-19 strategy.

Working jointly with the Africa Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa-CDC) the African Union has developed a new Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak to prevent severe illness and death from COVID-19 infection in Member States and minimize social disruption and economic consequences of COVID-19 outbreaks.

The strategy provides a framework for Africa to coordinate efforts by member states, African Union agencies, World Health Organization, and other partners to ensure synergy, minimize duplication, and promote evidence-based public health practice for surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and control of COVID-19. At all costs, developing countries in Africa must avoid a scenario where response to COVID-19 goes awry.

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