



Challenges faced by developing countries due to Covid-19

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic can be termed as one of the biggest challenges which confronted mankind in the present times. New waves of Covid-19 wreaked havoc in various countries. If the virus continues to spread, the consequences would be devastating. This paper delineates the major challenges faced by the developing countries in context of the pandemic. These included emergence of deadlier and more contagious variants, shortage of healthcare resources, vulnerability of densely populated areas, increasing poverty, unemployment, reverse migration, exacerbating gender inequalities and impact on education.

Keywords: covid-19, challenges, developing countries, future directions, Indian scenario

Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) can be considered as one of the deadliest pandemic in global history. It originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019, gradually spread across various countries and was declared a pandemic on 11th March, 2020 by the World Health Organisation. This disease is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS- CoV- 2). The Covid-19 pandemic has affected more than 220 countries, infected 640,601,913 people and 6,616,337 deaths around the world till 15 Nov 2022 (Worldometer, 2022). Defeating Covid pandemic has been the biggest concern of the people and the governments of various nations across the world. Although approximately half of the world's population resides in the lower income and lower middle-income countries, these accounted for only 2% of the global deaths due to Coronavirus until May 2020 (Schellekens & Sourroullie, 2020) [15]. But during the course of the following one year, the scenario has changed drastically. New waves of Covid-19 may wreak havoc in developing countries. In India, the total number of Covid cases has crossed 44,667,251 with 530,532 deaths till 15 Nov 22 (Worldometer, 2022). So there is no room for complacency. Many factors make developing countries more vulnerable and if the virus continues to spread, the consequences in developing countries would be devastating and the toll would be of a much larger magnitude than in the economically well-off nations. Therefore, it is very important to identify the major challenges faced by the developing countries so that future strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic can be planned and implemented accordingly.

This paper delineates the major challenges faced by the developing countries in context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Major challenges faced by developing countries

Severe shortage of Healthcare resources and other health related challenges

The developing nations have a severe shortage of healthcare workers and medical resources. The health budget allocation of these countries is also too less to deal with the challenges posed by the epidemic. Many developing countries have very few medical equipments required for treatment of the

Covid-19 patients and will not be able to take the pressure, if the cases surge. Since critical Covid-19 patients require hospitalization, scarcity of hospital beds and other medical equipments is another cause for worry. There are just 25 ICU beds in Malawi for its 17 million people and 55 intensive care beds for 43 million people in Uganda (Goldin, 2020) [6]. Millions of people in developing countries do not even have an uninterrupted fresh water supply and soaps for frequent hand washing to prevent the virus from spreading. The health care system in India crumbled under the pressure of increasing Covid-19 cases during the second wave. The situation was catastrophic. Delhi hospitals were facing scarcity of medical Oxygen and turning away many Covid-19 patients due to inability to provide beds and quarantine facilities. The rate at which people were getting infected and dying is really heart breaking.

Another cause of worry is that the Coronavirus mutates easily. There were 7000 variants of the SARS-CoV-2 in circulation in India in which over 24,000 mutations have been detected between Mar 2020 and February 2021 (The Economic Times, 2021). As per World Health Organisation's Chief Scientist Soumya Swaminathan, a Covid-19 variant namely B.1.617 in India is more contagious and spread exponentially. It was considered by many scientists as one of the biggest contributing factors of the rapid surge in Coronavirus cases in India in the second wave. Other developing countries also faced this challenge of the emerging new variants. Although the available vaccines are effective against most variants of the Coronavirus, it is difficult to predict their effectiveness in times to come as new variants keep emerging.

Furthermore, the rich nations (which account for less than 15% of the world's population) had bought more than 50% of the available vaccines (The Times of India, 2020). This led to shortage of vaccines in developing countries. Another challenge for the developing countries was that comorbidities like hypertension, diabetes and respiratory diseases are highly prevalent there, making them further vulnerable to the pandemic. These comorbidities in severely infected corona patients may lead to their deaths.

Increasing poverty

Coronavirus poses a major challenge to accomplishing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating poverty by 2030 (Sumner, Hoy, & Juarez, 2020)^[17]. The poor nations suffered a lot due to the economic slowdown. Many of these countries had taken measures like banning travel, closing non-essential workplaces, malls and businesses, prohibiting public gatherings and closing educational institutions to control the spread of Coronavirus. Unlike advanced economies, these countries lacked ICT infrastructure, which prevented people to work from home and brought economic activities to a standstill. This resulted in reduction in GDP, decreased revenues from tax and sale of commodities, collapse of travel and tourism sectors. Lot of underdeveloped countries depend mainly on exports for their development. This pandemic drastically reduced global demand leading to large-scale cancellation of orders for products. A case in point is Bangladesh. Due to the pandemic situation, garment exports declined by more than 80% on a year-to-year basis and 1 million garment workers were fired or furloughed at the end of March 2020 (Vos, Izurieta, & Altshule, 2007)^[24]. In this situation of financial crunch, these countries didn't have the economic wherewithal to provide the poor people with even the basic amenities leading to hunger, starvation and misery. This crisis led to an increase in overall global poverty for the first time since 1990 and is a great setback to the worldwide poverty reduction efforts in the past 30 years. Furthermore, as per research by UNU - WIDER in April 2020, half a billion people in developing countries could be pushed to poverty in future due to the impact of Covid-19 (Oxfam International, 2020)^[14].

Vulnerability of crowded areas and slums

Densely populated and crowded areas had a high risk of transmission of Coronavirus. It has been reported by the media that in crowded areas like vegetable markets and election rallies in India, people did not follow the social distancing norms, which led to a quick transmission of the disease.

As per Indian Council of Medical Research, the urban slum population faced the maximum risk of the spread of Covid 19. The biggest slums in the world namely Khayelitsha, Kibera and Dharavi are located in the developing countries with lakhs of residents in each of these slums. Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum located in Mumbai has a population of 1 million approximately (Hutt, 2016)^[9]. It reported more than 6000 Coronavirus cases till May 2021 (Ahuja, 2021)^[1]. Some important precautions in preventing the spread of Coronavirus include social distancing and washing hands frequently. With very small houses adjacent to each other and many people living together in each house, social distancing norms were practically impossible to implement. Lack of basic sanitation facilities is another problem due to which the slum dwellers couldn't wash hands frequently. Primary Health Care facilities were also not available in the slum area, making it difficult to identify the disease at an early stage.

It is not just the lack of healthcare but also their socio-economic condition which made them more vulnerable. Many slum dwellers are daily wage workers and working to earn their livelihood gained priority over sitting at home to prevent Coronavirus disease. Also, another problem in slums was that data was not available regarding the actual number of people residing there and their health status. Therefore it became a challenging task to identify the risk groups and take specific measures to combat the disease.

Problem of unemployment and reverse migration

Millions of young men and women in developing countries lost their jobs due to the pandemic situation. They not only suffered from financial crunch in the present times but their future also appeared bleak. As per Asia Pacific Employment and Social Outlook, 81 million jobs were lost in 2020 in the Asia Pacific region due to the Covid-19 crisis (APESO, 2020). The crisis particularly hit young workers and women. Developing countries had limited institutional capacity and low levels of social security coverage, making it difficult to help the workers get back to their feet. Working hours and income got reduced. As a direct consequence, millions of people were pushed into poverty. As a further consequence, there were losses in Gross Domestic Product. The developing economies were not able to give adequate fiscal response to overcome the damage to the labour market. Furthermore, migrant workers in foreign countries were also at a risk of losing their jobs and wages. Migrant remittances were the main source of remuneration for many poor households. These poor households faced a financial crisis since they did not get remittances. The future challenge is to reverse the trend of falling unemployment and get back into the growth mode.

Internal migration was another serious issue as the magnitude of internal migrants was two and a half times that of foreign migrants. In India, lakhs of migrant workers including casual labourers working on a daily basis returned to their hometowns due to unemployment, financial crunch, starvation and frustration (Sharma, 2020)^[16]. Those who were able to get some means of transport were lucky. Others walked on foot for days together and depended upon food and water offered by some generous people during their tough journey. Some of these migrant workers remained back in their hometowns. As a Result, the transport, construction and many other businesses where they were working were impacted. Furthermore, it was not easy to re-establish themselves in times of pandemic, even though it was their hometown.

Inequitable access to education

Education is imperative for any country to progress. But this pandemic hampered the smooth functioning of the education system particularly in the developing world. As per a UNICEF report in March 2021, more than 168 million children missed out on education as their schools were completely closed for almost one year due to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). A digital divide was being witnessed between the developed and developing countries due to lack of ICT infrastructure in the developing countries. Online education provided opportunity to continue learning in the elite nations but for the underprivileged ones, the pandemic had brought education to a standstill. Advanced nations like Austria, Norway and Switzerland had a reliable network connection (which is a pre-requisite for online education) and were able to continue the education of children but majority of the youth in less developed nations in Sub-Saharan Africa did not have access to secure Internet connection leading to disruption in their studies (Arora, 2020)^[3]. Thus, inequitable access to internet facilities and ICT infrastructure including computers and laptops acted as a barrier to the mental and academic growth of children in the developing countries during this crisis situation.

Exacerbating gender inequalities

In wake of lockdown in many developing countries to curb the spread of Covid-19, the existing social and gender inequalities became even more glaring. As per a UN report, there was a spike in domestic violence against women during the lockdown period (Morse & Anderson, 2020) [13]. Since marginalised illiterate women in orthodox societies were confined within the four walls of their houses during lockdown, their men folk had an opportunity to oppress them even more. Their plight was miserable as they did not have any opportunity to seek help from others due to the lockdown situation. Also, more women (compared to men) were employed in those sectors hardest hit by Covid-19 including food service, entertainment, retail stores and were laid off. Millions of women in developing countries who were employed in informal sector and other lower paying jobs also lost their jobs leading to economic insecurity and more dependence on their men. With schools and day-care centres closed due to lockdown, reduced outside help for domestic work and everyone at home, unpaid household chores were doubled, further increasing the workload of women. Additionally, working mothers had to balance the household chores and child care along with meeting deadlines of official work from home. Furthermore, millions of girls left school in various countries due to the impact of the pandemic. This not only widened the gender gap in education but also had adverse future implications for women. Lack of education will hamper their future career and increase the risk of exploitation. Thus, the pandemic has exacerbated the existing gender inequalities and further increased the challenges being faced by women in society.

Conclusion

The major challenges faced by the developing countries due to the impact of Covid-19 included shortage of healthcare resources, vulnerability of densely populated areas, increasing poverty, unemployment and reverse migration and mutation of virus. Considering the whole gamut of challenges faced by the developing countries, this pandemic may cause devastation in future also, if they do not prepare themselves and take precautionary measures.

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