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The threat of coronavirus in Africa flags a deeper crisis of global solidarity



In South Africa, armed forces have been marshalled to enforce social distancing on a mass scale.

Image: Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko

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Eddie Ndopu

United Nations Secretary-General's Advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations

- South Africa is ground zero for the coronavirus pandemic in Africa.
- Its townships are typical of high-density neighbourhoods across the continent where self-isolation will be extremely challenging.
- The failure to eradicate extreme poverty is a threat beyond the countries in question.

As soon as the novel coronavirus criss-crossed the planet, defying borders and rooting itself in our daily lives, public health officials started singing from the same song sheet – warning those of us with underlying health conditions to be especially careful. I was in New York to see my neurologist when the Centres for Disease Control first publicly announced that the COVID-

19 pandemic would disproportionately impact the elderly and people with serious underlying health issues.

As a young disabled man living with spinal muscular atrophy – a degenerative, motor-neuron condition that makes the immune system more susceptible to acute respiratory infections – I took heed of the call for vigilance and cut my trip short. With support from my US-based medical team, I fled New York before the dramatic surge in state-wide cases and returned home to Johannesburg on the eve that President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national disaster. At the time, South Africa had fewer than 100 confirmed cases.

That was just over two weeks ago.

As I write this on 31 March, 15 days into self-quarantine since my safe return home, our confirmed cases stand at nearly 1,500. We are now five days into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in a desperate bid to flatten the curve.

Flicking through the news channels, I just heard President Ramaphosa address the South African National Defence Force in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief. Clad in full military camouflage, his directive was clear: "You are called upon to defend the people of South Africa against this virus."

For the first time since the dark days of apartheid, South Africans are bearing witness to the marshaling of the armed forces to restrict freedom of movement as part of a dramatic intervention to enforce social distancing on a mass scale. With winter fast approaching and with the highest number of confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus in Africa, South Africa is ground zero on a continent that has been all but forgotten in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Self-isolation in the townships

While I worry about the risk of exposure to myself as a young disabled man, I worry more about the risk of exposure to a continent that is completely ill-equipped to deal with this approaching tsunami. I shudder to think what would happen if South Africa – or the continent at large – became the epicentre of the pandemic.

For public health officials around the world, density control is proving to be the most effective tool in their arsenal to slow down the rate of transmission. But in townships across South Africa where millions of people live in crammed, makeshift houses perched on top of burst sewage pipes, telling people to stay at home and hunker down seems like a callous and potentially counter-intuitive prescription from a public health standpoint. In these densely populated communities, where there's no access to running water and where a single family

must share one mobile toilet with at least 10 other families, how on earth do we expect this segment of society to diligently practice hand-washing with soap and water?

In addition to the concerns linked to containment and mitigation, I worry about the state's capacity to accord its citizens the economic safety net to weather the storm. South Africa – like the rest of the continent – is deeply indebted. In this context, the state is not in a position to craft the kind of economic rescue packages required to soften the blow from the havoc wrecked by the novel coronavirus.

Entrenched inequalities

To grapple with these challenges, we must accept that in many ways the chickens have come home to roost in terms of persistent global inequalities and the monstrous neglect of the most marginalized segments of society. Because of our continued failure to invest in the eradication of extreme poverty and in the creation of economic and social safety nets for the most vulnerable among us – actions that underpin the SDGs – we have arrived at a historical moment in which entire populations face the very real possibility of being killed because of their own vulnerability.

The novel coronavirus is certainly a crisis, but alongside this crisis, we face a deeper crisis of solidarity and international cooperation. In the context of doing everything we can to flatten the curve, the case for self-isolation is clear. But when it comes to the broader context of global health and sustainable development, countries operating in isolation from one another threatens progress and prosperity for humanity as a whole.

It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr who said that a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Now more than ever, what happens to Iran affects Italy and what happens to Spain affects the United States. What I fear might happen to Africa will most certainly affect the world.

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May this moment serve as a reminder that not only are we in this together, we are in actual fact bound by a shared trajectory. What happens over the next 21 days in South Africa might very well affect the trajectory of humanity moving forward, so we better pay attention.

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Written by

[Eddie Ndopu](#), United Nations Secretary-General's Advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations

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