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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

COVID-19 lockdown measures as a driver of hunger and undernourishment in Africa

KEYWORDS
- African continent;
- Epidemic;
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- Human rights;
- Sustainability;
- Water Security

The COVID-19 pandemic may lead to a calamity of epic scale, with millions facing starvation worldwide [1]. The UN World Food Program (WFP) has warned that the number of people experiencing malnutrition will grow by 80% by the end of the year. The pandemic is expected to translate into a rapid increase in the number of people unable to feed themselves, because of the worldwide disruption of food growth and logistics. More long-term damage is expected in the following years to come. Social tensions are expected to grow, the same as migration, and conflicts. Hunger is expected to affect many who did not experience it before [1]. The WFP project the most dramatic change in Latin America, with a 269% increment in malnourished people. Countries in Eastern and Central Asia are expected to experience an increase in malnourished people of 135%. A smaller increment of 100% is expected for Sub-Saharan Africa, where however hunger is already high. According to the WFP [1], many will die. Children will suffer from the consequences of malnutrition for many years. The progress made in fighting hunger over the past decade will be completely lost.

It is now emerging as the unprecedented global social and economic crisis sparked by the pandemic poses grave risks to the nutrition and survival especially of young children in low and even middle-income countries [2]. The pandemic is undermining nutrition, with the worst consequences expected to be borne by the younger child [3]. The situation may deteriorate sharply for the many concurrent drivers of food and water scarcity. A water and food crisis is imminent in Africa, triggered by the pandemic response [4,5], with consequences from the containment measures much worse than the direct action of the virus itself, despite the poor sanitary conditions and the precarious health system [4,5].

Fig. 1 presents: (a) population density; (b) population growth rate; (c) GDP pro-capita; (d) freshwater stress; (e) cereals production; (f) wheat production; (g) child mortality; (h) hunger index; (i) COVID-19 cumulative fatality across the world; (j) stringency index. The stringency index summarizes the severity of the lockdown measures. The freshwater stress is the freshwater withdrawal as a share of the resource. Child mortality is the share of newborns who die before reaching the age of five. The hunger index comprises four key hunger indicators, the prevalence of undernourishment; childhood wasting; childhood stunting; and child mortality.

The COVID-19 cumulative fatality per million, despite imperfect, is the most reliable measure of the severity of the outbreak. Africa has experienced so far minimal direct consequences of the outbreak, with the only exception of South Africa, and North Africa. The United States and western Europe have so far directly suffered the most from the outbreak, with countries of Latin America also experiencing more severe consequences.

The hunger index is already alarming to extremely worrying for most of Africa, where child mortality is also higher. The indirect impact of COVID-19 on mortality especially child through malnutrition is expected to be larger in Africa than everywhere else in the world.

The solution is to work at removing old and new causes of hunger, with the measures adopted to deal with the pandemic certainly the most relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly a serious issue. Most of the measures designed to limit the spread had a huge impact on society as well as the economy. From an economic perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic has been already catastrophic. The sooner the real threat to humanity by COVID-19 is recognized, and the counter-measures taken by individual countries as well as the international community are developed to progress towards a solution, rather than the advantages of some parties vs. others, hunger in the world could be reduced, rather than increased. The measure to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic must be effective and sustainable, the opposite of most of those that have been designed so far, doing more damage than benefit. The impact of COVID-19 policies on the security of food and water as well as human rights is a dramatically rising concern that needs to be addressed. While there are some doubts that the current restrictions are not effective, they are certainly not sustainable.

More than the absolute value of the gross domestic product or life expectancy, it is the time rate of change of the gross domestic product and the life expectancy that seems to correlate with the COVID-19 fatalities worldwide [6]. It is especially in countries that were experiencing economic and life expectancy stagnation or regression that COVID-19 is making more victims [6]. This issue is not alleviated by...
Figure 1. a: population density; b: population growth rate; c: GDP pro-capita; d: freshwater stress; e: cereals production; f: wheat production; g: child mortality; h: hunger index; i: COVID-19 cumulative fatality per million across the world, update December 31, 2020; j: stringency Index summarizing the severity of the lockdown measures (strictest is 100), updated December 31, 2020. Images from ourworldindata.org, CC BY.
adopting more stringent restrictions [6] as the lockdowns do not address the intrinsic reasons driving high the fatality of COVID-19. What is clear in western Europe and the United States, for now already some time, is that lockdowns do not work to stop the fatalities. On the opposite, they have made already huge damage to most of the world population.

Compliance of ethical standard statement

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Disclosure of interest

The author declares that he has no competing interest.

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