

An invisible deadly enemy has shaken the world to its core

Covid-19 pandemic has brought out best and worst in people, leaders and organisations

COMMENT



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COVID-19 has generated unprecedented global fear and anxiety about the unknown in terms of whether one may be infected, the possibility of survival, and risk of exponential transmission.

There are also fears about the economic downturn, millions losing their jobs, and the devastating social pathologies. There is uncertainty because we are dealing with the invisible and the unknown, which even the most sophisticated military weapons cannot detect and destroy.

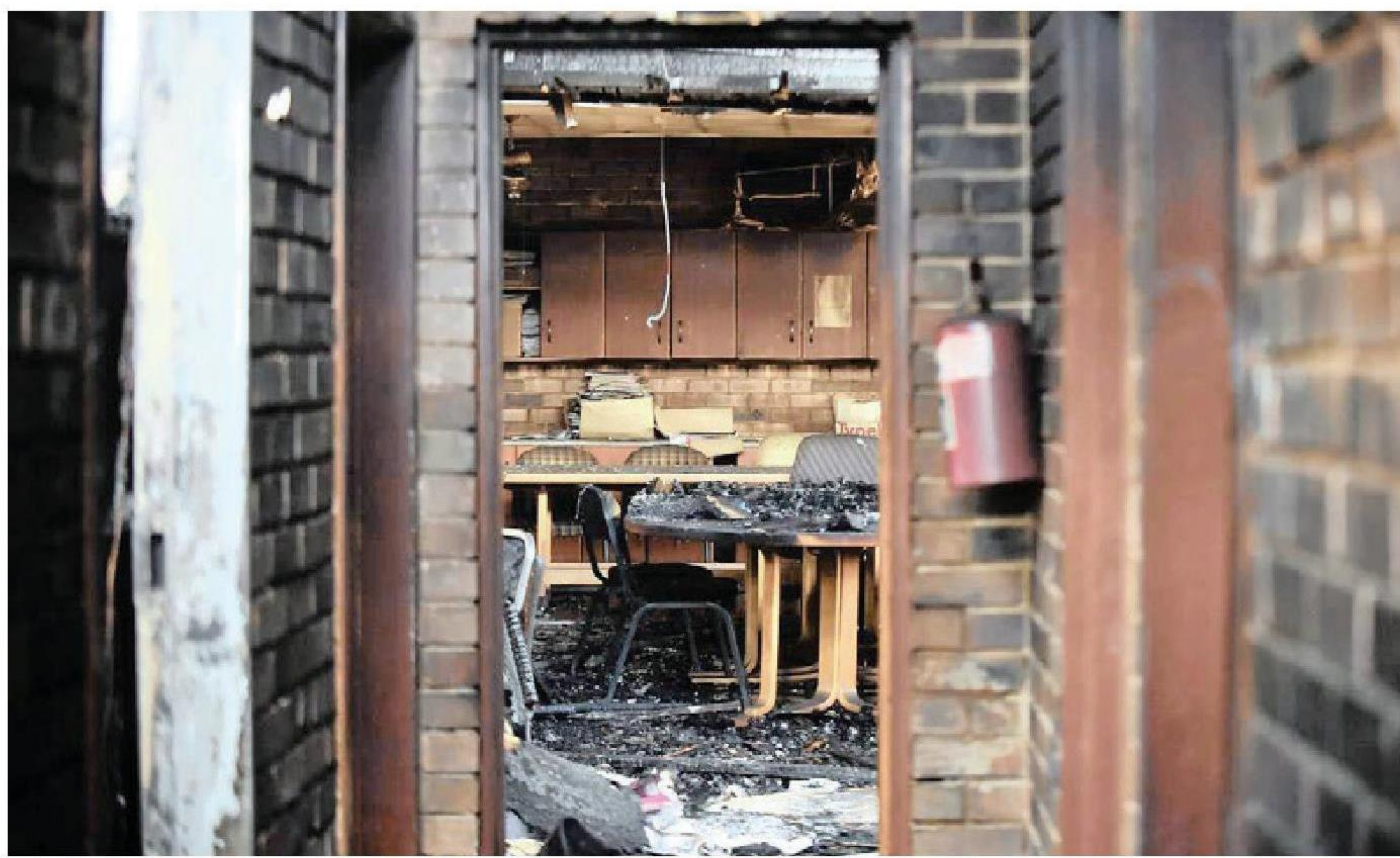
Writing in the Guardian, George Monibot contended: "We have been living in a bubble, a bubble of false comfort and denial. In the rich nations, we have begun to believe we have transcended the material world. The wealth we've accumulated – often at the expense of others – has shielded us from reality.

"Living behind screens, passing between capsules – our houses, cars, offices and shopping malls – we persuaded ourselves that contingency had retreated, that we had reached the point all civilisations seek: insulation from natural hazards. Now the membrane has ruptured, and we find ourselves naked and outraged, as the biology we appeared to have banished storms through our lives."

A crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic, brings out the best and the worst in people, leaders and organisations. On the global stage we have seen leaders initially deny that there was a threat, shock as they ran out of ventilators, coffins and grave space, and then the inevitable, an expedient search for scapegoats and the deflection of blame.

This is best encapsulated by the "parody of a president", Donald Trump. The runner-up will be Boris Johnson – who was infected and had a close call after spending a week in a hospital and the ICU (closer to home, we have ACDP leader, the Reverend Kenneth Meshoe). Thousands were not so lucky – at last count 165 238 dead and 2 404 325 infected.

Even royalty wasn't spared as Prince Charles tested positive. Covid-19 does not discriminate on the basis of race, class, religion, gender, caste, tribe, language or physical boundaries, and is causing severe human suffering, with a devastating impact on the poor. For example, India's lockdown, announced with only four hours' notice, forced "millions of jobless



SOSHANGUVE High School's administration block was also targeted by opportunistic criminals. At least 403 schools have been vandalised or looted during the lockdown. | African News Agency (ANA)

migrant labourers with little money or food to trek hundreds of kilometres to their home villages".

No doubt, thousands of these will be written about Covid-19, how the geographical epicentre shifted from Wuhan to Spain and Italy, and then to the US; and the medical, economic, social, psychological and geopolitical impacts.

There are allegations that China was less than candid about the origins and initial threat and spread of Covid-19 in Wuhan, and only reporting it to the World Health Organization on December 31. On March 11, the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, pointing to the more than 118 000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories across the world and the sustained risk of further global spread. Australia declared it a pandemic on February 27.

It is noteworthy that Eastern European countries appear to be more resilient in responding to the virus, with lower fatalities and rates of infection. This was attributed to the widespread use of the TB vaccine, known as BCG (Bacillus Calmette-Guérin), which many Western countries abandoned or made optional.

There were also lower levels of migration, and citizens were more obedient and complied with instructions to reduce transmission. In contrast, the US (764 265 infections and 40 565 dead) and UK (120 067 infections and 16 060 dead), focused on trying to save the economy.

In a developing country like South Africa, ravaged by corruption and an economic recession, President Ramaphosa decisively declared a national disaster on March 15, followed by a three-week lockdown between March 27 and April 16, which was subsequently extended to April 30.

The focus was on increasing testing, rapid contact tracing, restricting social contact, and for the first time in 25 years listening to independent scientists and researchers (in contrast

to the quackery of the Thabo Mbeki era. Under Jacob Zuma showers would have been installed nationwide).

The head of government's coronavirus advisory panel is world-renowned epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist, Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

Mercifully, there were no questions about Karim's ethnic origins – the focus was on merit and excellence. In fact, the coronavirus had effectively silenced all the acronyms, EFF, RET, ATM, DA, HUM, etc.

Ministers were forced to respond publicly daily to challenges encountered (hopefully, this will continue in the post-coronavirus period). Ramaphosa received widespread public support for the government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis.

Compare this to the pre-Covid-19 era when he was widely labelled as a lame-duck president, as the Gupta-aligned RET gang plotted his demise.

However, there are some serious weaknesses in Ramaphosa's lockdown strategies, especially in the social welfare sector. The failure of the ANC government to adequately address the needs of the poor in terms of services and facilities since 1994, (as billions allocated for this purpose were looted), limits the strategies to prevent the transmission of the virus, and brings into sharp relief the widening race-class, socio-spatial inequalities. Social distancing is impossible in overcrowded shacks.

It is insulting to provide soap to those who do not have water. Provision of water tanks does help, but is largely a case of too little, too late. According to Terry Bell, globally "poverty is the host that facilitates the crippling, stunting and killing of men, women and children".

As the Sunday Times reported, there is a looming hunger crisis including "1 million domestic workers, nearly 900 000 waste-pickers, 3.5 million elderly and 12 million children".

There are also dire predictions of

"food riots" and "looting". The much-vaunted food parcels are not reaching the target groups.

City Press reported that many ANC "local councillors – allegedly divert the aid to themselves and their supporters, and, in some instances, sell them on". The faith sector and NGOs try to fill the breach, and the government needs to partner with these organisations which are connected with the grassroots.

State-driven xenophobia continues as Small Business Development Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni announced that relief will only be provided for South African-owned enterprises during the lockdown period.

Reports of abuse of power and authority by the police and army are disconcerting, and the killing of Collins Khosa must be thoroughly investigated. South Africa is an epicentre of gender-based violence, and in the first week of lockdown, 87 000 complaints were reported to police. Unscrupulous exploiters who have escalated the price of food and essential medical items must be criminally charged and brought to book.

As South Africans were demanding that liquor outlets be opened, there was no outrage that 403 schools had been damaged/looted during the lockdown. There are disturbing allegations that ANC-aligned tenderpreneurs are involved, and will benefit from being awarded contracts to repair the schools.

The government needs to urgently introduce legislation to declare the destruction of places of learning a treasonable offence. The academic year can be salvaged, but will require a herculean effort from teachers, learners and parents.

Amid the doom and gloom enveloping the world, the Covid-19 crisis actually presents an opportunity. The global economic and industrial shutdown is providing an opportunity for planet Earth to rest and heal, with the lowest levels of pollution in decades.

According to Nigerian writer, Ben Okri: "We are deep in a new wasteland. We got here because only one kind of voice has been powerfully heard, the voice of financial success. Other voices, just as valuable, have not been heard enough. What voices are these? They are the voices that speak for nature, for the poor, for justice: voices easily ridiculed..."

Can leaders demonstrate global solidarity and chart out a new path – based on fairness, equality and social justice, and translate the mantra of the Sustainable Development Goals – Leave No One Behind – into a reality? Or will it be a return to business as usual – of the race to the bottom. The heavens are unlikely to grant planet Earth another opportunity.

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