

Lessons for SA from pandemic destroying lives and economy

Curb greed of elite, weed out graft, cut crime and share wealth for greater good of nation

COMMENT



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THE coronavirus pandemic is a period of sober analysis and deep reflection for the global community, and in particular for us in South Africa given the triple challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty.

With one of the highest Gini-coefficients in the world, there is little doubt that material conditions will worsen considerably, especially for the poor and vulnerable, when we recover from this epidemic.

The wicked Covid-19 pandemic requires a rapid response but also responsible and efficient management, analytical thinking, wide consultation and communicating a vision.

In each of these respects, President Cyril Ramaphosa's leadership has been exemplary. The support provided by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize has been complementary and commendable.

Unlike the pseudo-science prevalent during the HIV/Aids crisis in the early 2000s when fake remedies such as beetroot, garlic and industrial solvents were advocated for the treatment of the disease resulting in the loss of more than 300 000 South Africans, Mkhize has mobilised the best of our world-class health resources – at the NICD, NHLS, MRC, Caprisa and other research units including in the Medical and Health Science faculties of our universities.

In a recent Daily Maverick webinar, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the chairperson of the minister's advisory group, stressed the evidence-based rigour with which his group is tackling it. We should express sincere gratitude to our doctors, nurses, health personnel operating hospitals, ambulances etc on the front lines of duty, putting their lives at risk to keep us safe.

The least we could do as citizens is



A HEALTH worker takes a swab from a resident during door-to-door testing in an attempt to contain the coronavirus disease in Umlazi. | Reuters

to heed the lockdown instruction to stay at home, maintain social distance, wear a mask, wash hands thoroughly, shop sensibly for essential provisions and to not engage in hoarding.

In a letter on March 30, 76 of South Africa's leading economists commended the president for the measures already instituted to contain the spread of the virus, but noted the serious economic consequences of these measures.

In his televised address last week, the president responded positively to their proposals. In extending the lockdown for a further two weeks, the government has to carefully balance the number of lives lost as a direct result of Covid-19 infection against the lives lost from economic collapse.

Also, the collateral damage such as increase in domestic abuse, violence from law enforcement and the disruption of basic services.

Renowned world historian Yuval Noah Harari looked back in history and examined the mortality rates of previous epidemics. In the 14th century the Bubonic plague, known as the "Black Death", killed between 75 and 200 million people in Europe and Asia.

In 1918, a virulent strain of flu swept across Asia and an estimated 100 million people died. In 1967,

smallpox infected 15 million people and killed 2 million. Yet by 1979 the vaccination programme against the smallpox virus had completely eliminated the disease.

In serious outbreaks such as the Ebola virus, Sars and HIV (Aids) in the 21st century, far fewer people died than in previous epidemics. This can be attributed to advances in science, the institution of appropriate public health measures, drug therapy and in some cases vaccines.

In the case of the coronavirus, molecular biologists and geneticists were within weeks able to discern its genetic structure and to develop a test to detect infected subjects. Laboratories across the world are working furiously in developing a vaccine and instituting drug trials.

This is a timely reminder that we must applaud these scientific advances and express a deep sense of gratitude to the scientific community.

In sharp contrast are populist leaders denigrating the compelling scientific basis, i.e. the consequences of climate change which could, according to David Attenborough, the world-renowned environmentalist, be worse than any virus outbreak if not seriously ameliorated in the coming years. China's complete quarantine and lock-

down of Wuhan where the virus first originated and Korea's testing of large numbers of potentially infected people are salutary lessons for other countries.

At this critical juncture, the world needs leaders who will inspire, can be trusted and are able to organise a co-ordinated response.

This role, traditionally played by the US, has been abdicated by an incumbent in the White House whose slogan "make America great again" fails to comprehend the magnitude and seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic. Europe's leadership, too, with the withdrawal of Britain from the EU and the impending retirement of Angel Merkel, has been considerably weakened.

To quote Nigerian author Ben Okri: "The real tragedy would be if we come through this pandemic without changing for the better. It would be as if all those deaths, all that suffering, all the deaths to come, all the suffering to come, would mean nothing."

The effective bulwark against this kind of pandemic is a universal health-care system, adequate water supply, viable sanitation and importantly shelter, food and nutrition.

Yet we know that millions of people across the world, including in our own country, lack these basic services and a standard of living that would provide men, women and children with a robust immune system to fight viral attacks.

The overwhelming lesson of the coronavirus pandemic for all South Africans, in particular our government, is to curb the greed of the new elite, both in the public and private sectors, that has arisen since 1994, to redistribute and share our wealth and resources, root out corruption, in particular the looting of state resources, abandon fantasy projects – subsidising SOEs such as SAA – and bring crime and violence under control.

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