Covid-19 pandemic poses gravest threat to world's poorest countries

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The coronavirus has begun to take hold in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands, threatening some of the most impoverished people on earth.

Many countries have introduced a combination of border closures, limitation or bans on international flights, shelter at home orders, shuttering of schools, universities and social venues and restrictions on movement for all but essential work and shopping. These measures, while necessary, are of limited value without testing suspected cases, tracking their contacts and treating the severely ill.

Crucially, even sheltering at home and self-isolation are impossible under conditions where one seventh of humanity lives in so-called informal housing—shacks, tents and shanty towns, constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood.

Most of the world's urban poor occupy squalid, overcrowded slums, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay, with limited or no access to sanitation, clean water and the basic amenities of modern urban life. The world's most notorious slums include Ciudad Neza in Mexico City, with 1.2 million people; Dharavi in Mumbai, with 1 million people—the largest slum in Asia and location for the film *Slum Dog Millionaire* —Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, the largest favela in Brazil with 200,000 people; Makoko, Lagos, with over 300,000 people, many of whose homes are built on stilts in a lagoon.

Residents live in homes that were detrimental to their health and safety even before the onset of the coronavirus. Self-isolating or quarantining is a non-starter in a single room shack that serves as bedroom, kitchen and living space, often for an extended family, with no running water and a communal toilet shared with dozens of others.

As the director of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Social Protection department, Shahra Razavi, explained, "If the COVID-19 pandemic has sent the world one message, it is that we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us."

He warned, "Those who are unable to quarantine themselves or to get treatment endanger their own lives and the lives of others, and if one country cannot contain the virus, others are bound to be infected, or even re-infected. And yet, around the world, social-protection systems are failing miserably at safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable groups."

Medical treatment, let alone the intensive care required to treat those most severely affected by the coronavirus, is simply not available in the oppressed countries. Some 40 percent of the world's population have no access to health insurance, whether public or private, or public health services. Around 800 million people spend at least 10 percent of their household budget on health care each year. The cost of medical treatment frequently plunges families into debt, with 100 million people falling into poverty because of the expense.

Many people simply cannot afford to get the treatment they need when they fall sick, under conditions where HIV/AIDS, malaria, yellow fever and tuberculosis, to name but a few, are widespread. For those who can afford treatment, even in the best placed African cities, there are only two doctors for 10,000 compared with 41 doctors per 10,000 people in Italy.

Without sick pay, the majority of workers cannot afford to take time off work to recover, jeopardising their own health and that of others. Of the 193 member states of the United Nations, less than two-thirds have social insurance schemes that provide sickness benefits. More than half the world's 7 billion population have no social protection whatsoever. Those who are ill must choose between sacrificing their own health and feeding their families.

Millions of people across the advanced countries have already been laid off or furloughed as a result of the closures of nonessential shops, cafes, restaurants and cultural and leisure facilities and the precipitous fall in

demand for travel, tourism, hospitality and related business sectors. Only 20 percent of the world's population can claim any unemployment benefits, however meagre, forcing them to take whatever work they can find in the informal economy at slave labour rates.

According to the ILO, some 2 billion people—more than 61 percent of the world's employed population—work in the informal economy. Some 86 percent of Africa's employment is informal, 68 percent in Asia and the Pacific, 69 percent in the Arab States, 40 percent in the Americas and 25 percent in Europe and Central Asia. Along with low, unstable and insecure income, such work is synonymous with long hours and appalling working conditions, including lack of workspace and frequent harassment and intimidation.

Many African workers rely on the tourism and travel industry, which accounts for more than 10 percent of global GDP and which is unlikely to recover any time soon. Demand for natural resources, which accounts for 30 percent of Africa's GDP, is falling as a global economic slump takes hold. Copper and oil are already trading at their lowest prices for years.

The 2008 global financial crisis gives a foretaste of the economic impact of COVID-19, which is expected to be far greater. Angola saw its GDP growth of 13.2 percent in 2008 fall to -0.6 percent in 2009, while Nigeria went from 6 percent to 3 percent. Sub-Saharan African countries saw their GDP growth fall from 5 percent to 2.5 percent, not enough to keep pace with the population growth.

Remittances, which in some countries account for 10 percent of GDP, have already been affected. South Asia, the Philippines and the Middle East have seen a reduction in the flow of remittances and vital foreign currency earnings they bring, as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other economies that rely heavily on migrant workers to construct their buildings, care for their sick and elderly and prepare their food, shut down parts of the economy to contain the spread of COVID-19. Returning workers will add to burgeoning unemployment rolls.

The Gulf, whose migrant workers sent home some $119 billion in 2017, is the world's largest source of remittances after the US. Foreign workers account for about a third of Saudi Arabia's 33 million population and almost 80 percent of its private sector workforce. Expatriates account for about 80 percent of the UAE's population.

Under these conditions, workers have no option but to seize whatever opportunities they can to continue working, typically without any personal protection equipment or sanitizers. Travelling to work means sitting, packed like sardines in over-crowded buses or shared service taxis, stuck in traffic jams and exposing more people to infection.

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has called on the G20 countries to provide a $150 billion aid package for Africa—Africa Global COVID-19 Emergency Financing Package. Even were this sum to be allocated, it would not begin to address the sources of the current crisis, which lie in the economic and political relationships of imperialist domination, capitalist ownership and production.

The way out of the terrible poverty and brutal exploitation facing the mass of the population in the world's poorest nations, including implementation of the measures necessary to combat Covid-19, is through a struggle against the corrupt national bourgeoisie--who live in grotesque luxury amid squalor--and the systematic imperialist exploitation over which they preside.

This demands the development of a social and political movement of the working class, fighting for state power and socialism. The allies of the workers of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands are not the leaders of the G20, but the world's working class—the only force that can overthrow of the existing social order and implement the global redistribution of wealth and internationally coordinated economic plan required to raise billions out of ever worsening social degradation.