

MAY 4, 2020

The Impacts of COVID-19 and the Heroism of American and Global Frontline Workers

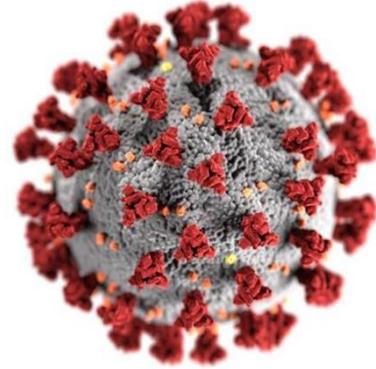
By Dr. Stephen Aikins, Associate Professor & Program Director, Public Administration

Rapid spread of the novel coronavirus and escalation of the COVID-19 disease globally have not only wreaked havoc on the global economy, but also brought to light serious inadequacies in the public health systems of many countries. Although the symptoms of this COVID-19 disease are similar to those of the influenza, public health experts state the former is more contagious and twice as deadly as the influenza. As of May 4th,

the [**dashboard of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus**](#)

[**Resource Center**](#) showed that there were 3.6 million

confirmed cases worldwide with over 251,000 deaths. Of these, the United States accounts for almost 1.2 million cases and more than 68,900 deaths, an obvious demonstration of the debilitating impacts of the virus.



Health of Economic Impact of COVID-19

It has clearly emerged that most public health systems in the world were woefully unprepared for this pandemic, given the widespread shortage of personal protection equipment and testing kits, as well as inadequate ventilators in many countries leading to the various peaks of the pandemic. In the midst of it all, the heroism of American caregivers and their global counterparts have been at the greatest heights as they risk their lives in the call to duty to save others, and humanity in general. To them, and other frontline service providers who have kept the wheels of all nations moving in the midst this pandemic, we say a big thank you. The world owes them a lot of gratitude, and their sacrifices in times of dire need ought not be forgotten. Governments around the world should seriously consider and require payments of dependency and indemnity compensation to eligible survivors of caregivers and frontline workers whose death resulted from service-related COVID-19, similar to what is done for military service members and veterans.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also goes beyond the disease, as it has become apparent that most healthcare systems are unable to contemporaneously combat the virus and deal with existing levels of non-communicable diseases, resulting in the suspension of elective surgeries and other needed treatments. Public health responses to the COVID-19 outbreak to date include partial to complete lockdowns of countries resulting in massive unemployment with devastating impacts on both the American and global economies. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has been very stressful for many people around the world, manifested by fear and anxiety about the disease, the loss of jobs, and economic impacts which in turn have led to restlessness and revolt against stay-at-home orders in the form of outward protests, which sometimes take place without regard to social distancing.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the anticipated global recession as a result of COVID-19 will be the worst faced since the 1930s, with the impact shared between advanced and less-advanced economies. In its World Economic Outlook released in April 2020, the IMF projects that the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth will contract sharply by 3% in 2020, while that of the United States will fall by 5.9% as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States alone, over 30 million people filed for unemployment in the six-week period leading to April 30th, a clear sign of a slowdown in economic activity and aggregate demand which pushes the nation's economy further down into a recession. In an attempt to deal with the economic impacts, G20 countries have pledged \$5 trillion in revival efforts, and the United States

Congress has appropriated over \$3 trillion in three separate bills to stimulate the economy and provide much needed supplies to combat the COVID-19 virus.

Based on the assumption that the pandemic will fade in the second half of 2020, and containment efforts are gradually relaxed, the IMF projects the global and U.S. economies to grow by 5.8% and 4.7% in 2021, respectively. However, the cumulative effect of COVID-19 on the global and U.S. economies is shrouded in uncertainty, according to IMF, as the economic fallout will depend on several factors, notable among which are the intensity and degree of success of containment efforts, behavioral changes including shift in spending patterns, the severity of decline in economic and financial market activities stemming from the lockdowns, and disruption in supplies. For more information on IMF projections, [visit their website here](#). Faced with the economic realities, leaders in some countries are beginning to ease restrictions on citizens with the aim of getting people back to work and minimizing the economic effects of the pandemic, amid concerns among public health professionals that the gains chalked from social distancing could be eroded, paving the way for more costly and deadly resurgence of the virus which could further debilitate the already weakened economies. This situation calls for carefully thought science and an evidence-based approach to combating the virus.



Providing a Pragmatic Response and Policy Coordination

The health crisis and excruciating mortality rates, coupled with the massive economic disruption caused by COVID-19, calls for a careful balance of the unquestionable health needs of society against economic stability to forestall irreparable damage to the advancement of mankind. This implies the need for policy makers to be surgical and pragmatic in their approach to fighting the virus by incurring

the necessary expenditure, providing adequate resources to strengthen national capacities of healthcare and public health systems, and by planning for effective and efficient return to normal economic activity while taking steps to cushion the impact of the pandemic on individuals and businesses in order to pave the way for a quick recovery once the virus is adequately contained.

Policy makers owe it to caregivers and frontline workers to scale up civic education of the public to enhance their understanding of the rationale for staying home for the entire periods stipulated in governmental guidelines. The truth is that while policies put in place to contain the spread of the virus constitute a bitter pill in terms of social and economic disruptions in national and personal lives, the necessity of this bitter pill lies in the fact that it constitutes an insurance policy toward long-term human and economic health. It is therefore incumbent upon political and civic leaders to demonstrate statesmanship by motivating the citizenry to abide by governmental guidelines in order to minimize a resurgence of the virus, save more lives, avoid another lockdown, and ensure quick economic recovery. Behavioral science experts know that effective decisions on crisis communication involve speed, honesty, credibility, empathy, and promoting useful individual actions. Most reasonable minds do agree that the current crisis calls for statesmanship over populism, leadership over politics, collectivity over individualism, and unity over division.

We salute the scientists all over the world who are working tirelessly to find workable vaccines for the disease and call on governments to partner with these scientists to create conducive environments to speed up the development of vaccines. Given that the coronavirus knows no boundaries, it is imperative that global leaders work together to not only find lasting solution to this pandemic by coordinating public health policy responses, but also to coordinate economic, fiscal, and monetary policies to ensure rapid resurrection of national and

global economies and drastically reduce unemployment. Additionally, there is the need to invest in new forms of public health to address the exposed deficiencies and seriously resolve the systemic inequities in the healthcare delivery systems that have been buttressed by disproportionate death tolls in minority and vulnerable communities. Indeed, we as a society need to demonstrate through effective and efficient investments, resource deployment, and responsible leadership that the sacrifices of our caregivers and frontline workers, and the death of those who succumbed to the cruelty of COVID-19, were not in vain. Doing so will help lay the foundation toward our preparedness for the next pandemic.

Preparing for the Next Pandemic

The horrific experience with COVID-19 makes it imperative that all nations, rich and poor, document and beef up their pandemic preparedness plans and conduct periodic simulations to determine their readiness. The substantial effects of this pandemic in terms of morbidity, mortality, and economic cost implies the need for society to be better prepared for the next pandemic soon after the COVID-19 problem is resolved. History teaches us that pandemics occur several times in a century and that, in the 20th century, three pandemics occurred in 1918-19, 1957, and 1968-69—the largest of which was the 1918-19 "Spanish flu" which was estimated to have claimed more than 20 million lives. We live in an era of technological advancement that should enable our political leaders around the globe to commit resources and challenge our scientists to take advantage of such advances to proactively simulate potential future pandemics, and engage in collaborative research to develop vaccines that can be readily scaled up for deployment to help save countless lives in the event of another pandemic, which may be less than half a century away.



An article published by World Health Organization (WHO) scientists in the *Reviews in Medical Virology* states that while the spectrum of clinical presentation of influenza infections can vary, certain features including rapid onset of fever, myalgia (muscle ache), and cough are relatively constant. Given that COVID-19 exhibits these same symptomatic features, humanity will forever be very grateful to our scientists if they can proactively develop future vaccines that can inoculate against multiple future influenza-like diseases, minimize mortality and economic disruption, and free up trillions of dollars of future pandemic related expenditures that can otherwise be used to address other pressing national and global needs. The same can be said of other families of communicable diseases. Indeed, while this may be dismissed by many as medical utopia, it can certainly be accomplished if global leaders have the political will to sponsor such an enormous scientific undertaking.

When President John F. Kennedy announced before a joint session of the U.S. Congress on May 25, 1961 the ambitious and dramatic goal of sending an American safely to the moon before the end of the decade, many were those who deemed it impossible. However, the steadfastness and ingenuity of American scientists and astronauts proved that it was doable so we as a nation did it when on July 20, 1969 the Apollo 11 crew landed on the moon. Consequently, the current generation of political leaders owe it to those who lost their lives and the global heroes of this pandemic—the caregivers and all frontline workers—who continually risk their lives, to commit the necessary resources and challenge our scientists to proactively come out with vaccines that can inoculate against future multiple influenza-like and other communicable diseases for the betterment of humanity.