

Higher Education 2020



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When Reality Hits Hard – A Memoir of Covid-19 Pandemic

In mid-March 2020 when I came back to Lusaka from Johannesburg, South Africa, at the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic¹, I underestimated the impact the pandemic would have on me, my studies, and my family. In my mind then, I thought it would easily be contained in a matter of a weeks. Most of the early cases were traced to a group of South African tourists who had returned from a holiday in Italy. I, and many others, thought that after tracing those who had contact with that group of persons, and quarantining them, the pandemic would have easily been contained. What was seen to be a travellers' disease has now become one that every person in some way is affected by, even those who have not travelled. Our harsh judgement of those who kept travelling from when the pandemic broke out in China last year, has now come home to discrimination to anyone seen sneezing in public.

But the numbers have kept rising. Despite a 21-day lockdown emergency plan announced by the Head of State in South Africa², the numbers have kept rising and the death toll is also slowly rising. From an initial one case on 5 March 2020³ to a total of 1,845

¹ Covid-19 is a disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

² <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/383927/ramaphosa-announces-21-day-coronavirus-lockdown-for-south-africa/>

³ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/health-reports-first-case-covid-19-coronavirus-5-mar-2020-0000>

cases as of 8 April 2020⁴. From zero deaths on 5 March 2020 to a total of 18 deaths as of 8 April 2020 due to the Covid-19 disease⁵. It is now clear that schools, colleges and universities will not open as soon as most of us thought they would be. It is clear our lifestyles will have to change for a longer while than we thought earlier. It is clear that economic activities would have to be at a halt for a longer period than imagined. Economies world over will shrink to unimaginable levels in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the precautions and interventions to it. It is clear that our lives will never be the same again.

Most of us are still lucky that in our families, no one that we know is infected by the virus. But not everyone can say the same. Even when not infected or not knowing someone who is infected, we are all affected by this pandemic in one way or the other. We cannot go about our daily business as usual. Of course, as students, our studies hang in the balance, not knowing what's next and whether or not we will be on course with the duration of our studies. Although most of my research is desk-based (reviewing primary and secondary articles on my topic), I initially thought I would not be as affected as those who are doing coursework-based programmes. But no! Slowly, I am realising that I am equally affected. Although I have access to the internet, when doing research or studies in general, it always helps to sit in a library and read, talk to other students, to be in contact with instructors and supervisors, and the general public. Most novel ideas and thoughts come to us as we are having a chat with others, sharing a drink with others, aboard public transport, in prayer at a church service. Our communing with others, physically, bring intuitions about the difficult topics that we research on. Even when faced with a writer's block, being in communion with others and listening to them can encourage us to write a line or two in a day. With the lockdown and restrictions that have come with the Covid-19 pandemic, all that is not possible.

My anxiety is multifaceted. Apart from worries about progress and fulfilling plans related to studies, there are worries related to holding on to work. Whether the pandemic continues to force many to work from home or not to work at all, has given rise to insecurity about sources of income and the ability to take care of oneself and one's family. If the situation continues as it is now, it is not clear whether or not my employer will begin thinking about cutting down the workforce or even putting persons on half salaries because they are seeing dwindling sources of income.

There is insecurity related to access to basic needs and services given that most companies are minimally operating, and importing procedures are becoming extremely expensive (e.g., mandatory 14-day quarantine at borders of entry/exit). Will there be food shortages, will the economy completely crumble leaving many desperate for survival? Will the cost of living rise so high that most of us will not be able to afford basic needs? Will basic health care continue to be reasonably available? Will a vaccine be developed in a reasonable time to respond to rising viral infection? Will people's rights

⁴ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-zweli-mkhize-confirms-18-deaths-and-total-1845-cases-coronavirus-covid-19-8-apr>

⁵ *ibid*

and freedoms be arbitrarily trampled on? In short, will the pandemic be contained in a reasonable period, so we can go about our usual normal lives? Will I or any of the people I care for be a statistic on the Covid-19 updates? These and many unanswered questions have brought a lot of anxiety and uncertainty in my life and those close to me.

Despite the gloomy situation, there have been unexpected silver linings with this pandemic. As they say out of every difficult situation arises an opportunity if when explored and utilised, can bring some unexpected good. For one, I have come to appreciate the value of spending time with my family. With the lockdown and restrictions in movements, one has few places to go and few things to do outside the home. Bonding with family, although 'forced', has been something I did not see happening anytime soon because of being busy with school, work, and social life out of the home. I am learning new things about each member of my family – their fears, their aspirations. It has made me feel more responsible towards them.

I have also realised that as a society we are intricately related to one another, such that what affects a person in a distant country, one I may never visit in my lifetime, affects me also. The sorrows and joys of others matter to me more than they did before the pandemic. Indeed we ought to help those who are even distant to us. And the minimal sacrifice we can make in this pandemic is staying at home, developing good personal social etiquette (physical distancing, washing hands, being discrete with our sneezes, finding ways of socialising other than being physically in touch), being sensitive to the needs of others, and accepting restrictions for some of our freedoms, to help contain the pandemic to those around us and those most distant to us.

It has made me realise that ethical theorising can be much more practical than many people thought before the pandemic. I quickly realized that some rights are *prima facie* and others are absolute. I have seen the ethical value of taking care of our environment. Not treating persons as things (mere means to our ends) but with the dignity that accords a human being comes in here especially in debates of human trials for possible treatments and vaccines. Being good to others who are infected and those affected is a given. As much as most of these values may conflict, it is balancing these values in any given situation that will help us to make the best decisions and policies.

With this pandemic, we have learnt that the things we take for granted such as telephones, internet (technological advances in communicating and doing things), virtual socialising, are paramount to living a normal happy life. We can study at home, we can work at home, we can shop from home, we can video call friends and family, we can be entertained from home, we can play games from home. With technology, most of the things we did in the previous decades that demanded extensive travel, physical presence, and a lot of physical effort, can now be done from our homes. For if all these technological advancements were not available, what sorts of lives would we even lead given the situation at hand where movements and gatherings are restricted?

My hopes are that the pandemic will be contained soon one way or the other, especially if our immune systems can manage to live with the virus in our systems. I hope that we will not sacrifice the lives and wellbeing of the weakest in our society to emerge victorious. Already the hardest hit by the virus are those most vulnerable in our society – the elderly, those with immune-deficient diseases and conditions, those with minimal access to health care services, those who lack the most basic needs of food, water and shelter. This cost is one that our society should not pay at the hands of this pandemic. We cannot sacrifice the lives and rights of some human beings for a quick solution to this pandemic and the wellbeing of the majority in society. I don't see this virus completely dying off soon, naturally. It will be around us for some time. Our hope lies in our immune systems being helped to live with it. Our hope lies in bio-technological advances coming to our aid (whilst safeguarding the autonomy and rights of everyone) to develop vaccines to help our immune system deal with the virus. This, in my view, would be the best solution to our return to normalcy. Otherwise, we just don't know what kind of lives we will live in six months or a year's time.