

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GLOBAL CITIZENS AND THE PATH TO A NEW NORMALCY

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Abstract

It has been almost 9 months since WHO declared Coronavirus as a global health emergency. Amidst this pandemic a lot of questions arise, answers to which lie with the citizens of the global economy. Who are the worst affected? What are the challenges faced by them? How are we coping with the lifestyle changes? Are we on the path to attaining a new normalcy?

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It's been about 9 months since Coronavirus was declared a global health emergency by the WHO. The year began with news of the first death in China by an illness caused by the virus. In the following weeks, people globally started becoming aware of the developed symptoms of the viruses which lead to reporting confirmed cases even outside of China. Home to more than 11 million people, the Chinese city of Wuhan was closed down. With over 9000 people affected by the virus worldwide, travel restrictions were imposed by the USA for foreign nationals with a travel history to China in the first month of 2020.

With the onset of February, the W.H.O. proposed an official name for the disease caused by the virus: Covid-19- an acronym that stands for coronavirus disease 2019. This is the time when the world began to familiarize themselves with terminologies like quarantine and social distancing. Europe faced its initial major outbreak with a splurge in the number of cases in Italy following which officials locked down some towns and events with large gatherings were cancelled. By the end of February, we had a second focal point in Iran. Officials in Latin America began tracking down people with travel history of any of the affected countries.

With the beginning of March, US officials approved widespread testing and as the number of deaths globally touched 3000, President Trump declared a national emergency. Several countries in Latin America imposed restrictions. Steps such as countrywide lockdowns, closing down of borders and nationwide quarantine were taken to slow the spread of the virus. On the 19th of March, China had reported zero local infections which didn't mean that the epidemic had ended. Officials then confirmed new cases among people who arrived in China from elsewhere. The Summer Olympics in Tokyo were postponed for a year. Such cancellation of any Games had happened only thrice in history in 1916, 1940 and 1944 and all due to war.

On March 24th, India announced a three-week lockdown for its 1.3 billion citizens. With about 500 reported cases in the country, authorities halted all domestic flights and imposed other travel restrictions for future. As we changed the calendar month from March to April, countries issuing stay-at-home directives had become commonplace.

With such guidelines on staying indoors, one thing that improved substantially for the initial few months in the pandemic were the pollution levels. Due to lower transport emissions, decrease in the industrial waste, and shutting down of corporate houses, all kinds of pollution levels went

down.

By April 2, the pandemic had sickened more than one million people in 171 countries across six continents, killing at least 51,000 people. Amidst this, millions of people lost their jobs. A dramatic increase in the coronavirus cases was witnessed in Russia. The surge in cases pushed Moscow's health care system to its limit prior to its expected peak.

The pandemic tested the health care system of every country. Due to the fact that we still don't have a vaccine for the virus, a major setback that the health sector faced was accommodating increasing number of patients each day with a limited number of medical staff and treating the symptoms while the researchers around the world were still busy discovering new things about this unknown virus.

From the economic point of view, the IMF who had earlier predicted a 3.3% growth in the global economy for 2020 warned that the global economy was headed for its worst downturn since the Great Depression with a forecast of 3% contraction.

By the end of April, the global death toll surpassed 200,000 according to data collected by The New York Times. The actual toll would be higher by some degree at any given point of time simply because not everyone is tested for the virus. Several airlines announced fresh guidelines for passengers amid the travel restrictions imposed by different countries.

On May 13th, Dr. Mike Ryan, the head of the W. H. O.'s health emergencies program, said the virus may become "just another endemic virus in our communities and this virus may never go away." This statement came just around the same time when two of the world's largest economies (Japan and Germany) entered a phase of recession. Europe's largest economy (Germany) suffered its worst contraction since the 2008 global financial crisis.

India, after its most severe lockdowns moved to ease restrictions. This desperate need to open up the economy came amidst the setbacks faced by all kinds of businesses. This period marked a rapid increase in infections leading to outbreaks in the entire country. The hospitals throughout the nation were overwhelmed. Cases were now not just restricted to some countries but also became commonplace in low and middle-income countries of the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and South Asia where the infection rates were low previously.

While a sharp rise in cases in Africa could be explained by an increase in testing, more than half of the 54 countries on the continent were experiencing community transmissions. Ten countries were driving the rise in numbers and accounted for nearly 80 percent of all cases. South Africa had a quarter of the total cases as of June. Seventy-seven nations had seen a growth in new cases in the month of June, while only 43 saw declines.

Lockdowns worldwide adversely affected a number of industries like travel and aviation. In an attempt to raise tourism revenue, some nations resorted to certain travel relaxations. Leaders of the European Union on July 21 also agreed to an \$857 billion stimulus in order to benefit nations that were badly hit by the pandemic.

On July 17, India reached a million coronavirus cases which lead to sporadic lockdowns in different states. The states and cities re-imposed the partial and total lockdowns as the country climbed up to the 3rd rank globally in the number of infections behind United

States and Brazil. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimated that by the end of next year, India would have the worst outbreak in the world.

The aforementioned timeline gives us a brief idea of how the novel coronavirus impacted the global world both economically and socially. Through this article, we are going to look at the ways in which the pandemic affected the mental well-being of a cross sectional population of the Indian subcontinent. Due to the precautionary measures worldwide, a lot of changes were witnessed. These changes affected people not just financially but emotionally too. Closing down

of borders, entertainment resorts, restaurants, public places and most importantly restricted movement made it extremely difficult for people to cope with these lifestyle changes. In order to abide by the official guidelines for prevention from contracting the virus, people tried to get used to being indoors, not being part of large social gatherings, not eating out, distance learning and working from home or in the worst cases, dealing with temporary unemployment.

The new realities of the lockdown phases and the times post that gave us an insight of how life would look for the time to come. In difficult times like these, people saw it in both pessimistic as well as optimistic light. The contrasting viewpoints made people believe that the new normal would be something that they would have to live with for a really long time to come. Another notion made people feel that staying at home was their one big opportunity to spend time with their loved ones which was not possible otherwise with a hectic work schedule. This time at home, people went ahead and executed numerous plans which were otherwise not paid heed to. People used this time to work on converting opportunities and also work on their personal growth.

The downside to such conversion was idle time taking a toll on their mental health. Many were left stranded away from their homes due to immediate lockdown of the economies. Many had toxic environments at home for whom going out was a way of escaping the baneful realities, now were stuck under the same roof due to the risk of contracting the illness from outside. Such situations made people feel lonely, disturbed and depressed. The isolation was complemented by the new reports each day which definitely weren't about anything getting better. In order to stay updated, people invited anxiety by feeding their minds with new information and case counts.

The only way for people to deal with physical distancing is being socially connected. However, this norm of physical distancing didn't mean uniting socially for everyone. Being socially connected was a challenge for a number of categories of people. Two of these categories being the elderly as well as the one with lack of resources. For the former category of people, a variety of reasons for not being socially connected can be stated. The issue of an improper eyesight, the lack of understanding of social media, or at times sheer ignorance are few of the prime reasons for such a disconnect. The biggest challenge in their case was also the ignorance to the seriousness of the pandemic for this situation is something that wasn't anticipated and something that no one had experienced ever before. For those living with their younger generations, it was still easier to cope, but for the ones living alone or in a pair, life was completely different.

The latter category consists of people with the lack of a smartphone, the access to internet, or the finances to pay for the two. For many of these people, this wasn't even on their list of inconveniences. For them, dealing with the financial instability due to their employment situation was high up on their priority list. For a person who had thoughtfully saved money each day from his wage to ensure that they were able to pay the fees for their ward's schooling, the consequence of unemployment posed a huge challenge for them as the schools would keep functioning through distance learning and the fees had to be paid irrespective of whether they had a job in hand or not. Such worries pushed them into a multitude of problems. One such concern was: could they take the harsh decision of making their child drop out of school when they had planned a better life for them by educating them in the first place. If not, how would they arrange for the finances when the job sector for most industries was adversely affected. Even if they did manage to afford their education, would they still be able to support their child in the new way of learning. In order to enable them to be part of the new education system, will they be able to facilitate them with the resources for distance learning. And this is just the tip of the iceberg of concerns that troubled a major chunk of the population.

Due to a number of hardships, mental health is something that people totally ignored. People who were stressed due to a number of factors couldn't take care of their behavioural health

mainly due to the lack of awareness of self. Everyone globally was so panicked about the virus by maximising their exposure to daily newsfeed that no one really talked about tackling the new normal scenario in the initial months which particularly hit people of various age groups, economic status and health conditions differently.

Another section of people to whom the pandemic affected in a variety of ways were the children. At an age where adolescents go to the park and play outdoor games, make friends, and be carefree, they were restrained in the house walls and behind a screen in order to learn. Distance learning and online teaching in general is a very beneficial mode of overcoming the geographical barriers and reach anywhere with access but due to the pandemic this is what everyone was pushed to as the only resort. For teenagers this increased screen time is something that could be quite harmful for them in the future.

With each and every person being affected by the pandemic in some or the other way, it becomes imperative for us, global citizens to find ways to keep ourselves productive and design a framework for a new normalcy.

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