



## Episode #2: Coronavirus and poverty

*Welcome to Poverty Unpacked, a podcast series in which we discuss the insights of poverty. in conversation with others. We explore how poverty affects the mind, relationships, emotions and society as a whole, and what can be done to change it.*

*In this episode, we will be discussing the impact of the coronavirus or Covid-19 on people living in poverty or vulnerable conditions. At the time of recording, we are finding ourselves in a global health crisis. Coronavirus is now affecting almost all countries in the world. Almost 1.5 million cases have been reported worldwide, and more than 83,000 people have died. With so many lives affected in one way or the other, we hear statements such as how the virus doesn't discriminate, and how we are all in this together. But is this really true? Is it really the case that everyone is equal in the face of a pandemic like COVID-19?*

*I will be talking with representatives from NGOs and researchers from Bangladesh, Kenya, Paraguay and the UK to understand how the virus has different implications for people living in poverty or in precarious conditions in different parts of the world. We will hear from Jiniya Afroze, Programme Director for the child labour action research innovation in South and Southeast Asia programme in Bangladesh and working primarily in slum areas in the capital Dhaka. From Winnie Sambu, a PhD researcher from Kenya and working on issues of Food Security and Nutrition at the University of Cape Town. Marie Claire Burt and Juan Carlos Pane Solis, PhD researchers from Paraguay and undertaking research and anti-poverty programming at the Institute of Development studies. And from Diana Skelton, member of the National coordination team at the ATD Fourth World in the UK. In separate Skype conversations, I asked everyone about the measures in their respective countries.*

**MB/ JCP:** Paraguay acted very early on on social isolation in lockdown measures. For example, lockdown started March 11, after only three confirmed cases. Today, the government informed that up to now there are 113 cases in fight there. One of the measures is that there's a complete quarantine for everyone except for critical and essential workers, which is the same as in the UK, for example.

Yeah, and the government has also imposed other lockdown measures such as closing down the airports for the next few weeks, including schools and workplace closures as well as social gathering places. And the police and military are actually out on the streets to prevent people from going out and social distancing is strongly suggested everywhere. However, the challenge is that the country has not been able to regulate the movement of people as easily as it wanted to. And also, we believe that one of the reasons why the government acted so early is that the public health system is very weak, and it really does not have the capacity to handle a great number of people infected with coronavirus.

**JA:** So Bangladesh is in the middle of three weeks of nationwide lockdown. From March 26 onwards the government asked people to stay at home except when buying emergency essentials. Flights have been cancelled, intercity transports have stopped. Solely emergency services are in operations. Also armed

forces have been deployed to support the administration in ensuring that people maintain social distance, and for taking precautionary measures regarding the coronavirus.

**KR: So Bangladesh and Paraguay are two countries that have strong lockdown measures in place that are also being enforced by police and military. Now Kenya and the UK don't have such strong policies in place, at least not at the time of recording, but do also have far reaching restrictions on movements, the ability to gather and to go out to work. Now, it is undoubtedly hard for anyone to adhere to these measures. Having to stay at home and not being able to live life as we are used to. But it certainly is more difficult for some than it is for others. Being able to isolate oneself from others when living in informal settlements or so-called slum areas, for example, is nearly impossible.**

**WS:** They key results from the Kenya integration household survey, which is a survey that collects data on socio economic characteristics of households in Kenya found that a majority, which is more than half of the population, of the households in urban areas of Kenya live in one room houses. And if we say an average of three to four persons per household, then practising social distancing in such a case is particularly challenging. But in addition to that, in most of these urban informal areas, access to water sanitation facilities are often shared. So if you think about it and concepts of telling people to social distance or in a context of where people share these facilities, then it becomes quite challenging for people. People living in these areas also have to travel far in order to access water and sanitation facilities. There's generally overcrowding in the informal areas of Kenya.

**JA:** It differs in the privileged section and people who are living in poverty. For example, the notion of home and social distancing is very different to the people who are living in urban slums in Bangladesh. Nearly one third of the population is living below the national poverty line. And more than 2 million people in the capital city of Dhaka, either live in slums or any other temporary shelter, right. So social distancing is a privilege for many. But it's impossible for people living in the slums, where they have to live in very tight, close proximity. So in the slums, each family of six to eight live in one small room, where the rooms are crammed like matchboxes, where they have to share kitchen and toilet with maybe at least hundred families.

**KR: Although there are no informal settlements like in Kenya or Bangladesh in the UK, many people in the UK do not have a stable home, and for those the measures that have been put in place also present difficulties.**

**DS:** It is very challenging. There are still some people who are homeless and on the street. Sometimes people who are actively trying to find a place to take shelter and can't get through. It's just a big challenge. People who were maybe undocumented and living in very difficult situations. There's also a certain number of people who had a lot of trouble just getting reliable information because particularly in the early days, what was being recommended seemed to be changing every day and very inconsistent. And people who have less access than others to reliable journalism have often struggled to sort of sort through different things that were sometimes rumours sometimes contradictory.

**KR: So what does all this mean for people's ability to earn a living? How do people, especially those that are already struggling to make ends meet, cope with not being able to go out and work?**

**MB/ JCP:** So, economically, it is very difficult for most of the people because in Paraguay. 70% of its population is considered to be in a vulnerable situation, and this situation force them to live day by day. So they don't have a stable wages or employment. Although the government is implementing some measures to contain their economic downturn, the government is very inefficient in reaching most of the people in a short period of time. So they the poor, have to look for, for work, meaning that they have to go outside and be exposed to the virus.

**JA:** People living in the slum they need to go out every day to work so that they can bring food for their family. So in the initial few days of the declaration of lockdown, it was difficult for people to understand that how can they stay inside their home and not go out because they need to go out to do some work so that they can bring money home, unlike many of us who are extremely privileged. They don't have monthly secured incomes and they can't stock up groceries. They must go out to feed their families. Right. So staying at home and social distancing is physically and economically impossible for these people. Most of the people in the slum areas are involved in informal economy. So with the decisions of the lockdown supply chains have shut down, many became jobless over the night. Many of them don't have any money to buy the essentials. Many can't afford to pay their rent. A number of people are saying that we may or may not die if we have Coronavirus, but we will surely die out of hunger if we don't work.

**KR: The challenges that people face in earning an income is not just a local or international problem. Countries that employ large numbers of people in export-oriented industries have also been hit by drops in international demands for goods. In Bangladesh garment factories, which employ many people have already seen a large reduction in orders from European and other countries. Kenya faces similar issues.**

**WS:** So I mean the other point that I forgot to raise thinking about it now is also what the effects of the lockdowns in Europe will have on, well all the lockdowns internationally globally, will have on the Kenyan population. Particularly say for example, the people who are working in the horticultural sector, supplying fresh fruits, vegetables and even flowers to the EU forms a very significant part of the economy of some of the country's towns. And there's concern about what happens to the informal workers working in in the flower fields and the horticulture sector. So I mean, there's a question in the long term, there's definitely a concern around increasing unemployment rates for people not just those working within the country, but those working to supply their labour within the country for production of goods within the country but also for production goods that are destined for foreign markets, particularly the EU.

**KR: Families with children seem to be in a particularly difficult situation. With schools having been closed in all four countries, children are now at home and need to be looked after, or receive homeschooling. Winnie explains that in Kenya, this poses challenges for caregivers and for children.**

**WS:** Now talking about households that now have kids at home because all learning facilities have been closed, including daycares, daycare centres. This means additional work, particularly for women who have to take care of children who are usually the main caregivers, but also at the same time have to go out and earn money and then there's a question of then what do the parents. What can they do with their children at home? Who takes care of the children they have to go to the market for example, to sell their goods? They can take the children to the market, but then that beats the logic of social distancing and trying to stay at home as much as possible. So there are all these challenges that combine that make it particularly difficult for people living in poor households. In terms of learning, some of the private schools we've seen increased e-learning but for children who are attending private education. So once again, children who are from poor households who are the ones who attend public, primary and secondary institutions, are at loss here because while the children from private school can have access to smartphones, digital platforms, they can have access to internet that can facilitate this e-learning. Children from poor households or for the vast majority of the country's households cannot do this.

**KR:** In all countries, governments and other partners are responding to the crisis, not just from a health perspective, but also by helping to provide an economic buffer to help with the loss of income. But many of this is still fragmented, support is too slow or too difficult to access and is not actually supporting the poorest and most vulnerable.

**JA:** In Bangladesh, there is very loosely threaded social protection system. People do not have any guarantee in accessing social services. There is no health insurance ensured for people. That when they are asked to stay at home, then we need to make sure that people who are living in poverty are getting their food and emergency supplies. So, a number of people, individuals, NGOs, corporates and other organisations are coming forward and they're providing support in whatever way they can. So some are providing food and shelter. Some are trying to help out the medical, health and other supplies. So people are taking steps in their own way. And government has also declared that they will provide social protection services to people who are suffering the most. But I believe there has to be a coordinated response to address the needs of this new world.

**MB/ JCP:** So the government has been trying to implement measures to help especially informal workers and people living in poverty. But unfortunately, they just haven't been moving fast enough. And as we know, these people live on their daily wages. So every day that goes by, or you know, critical days for people to get food on the table for their families. And there's been challenges with corruption clientelism to be able to access these government resources. And this is causing a lot of anxiety and stress in people and, you know, the government seems to be moving as fast as it can. But there really is a delay in the government offering these subsidies.

**WS:** Kenya initially announced a couple of measures in terms of increasing disposable income of people to try and mitigate the effects of these new measures like the curfew. Some of these measures that have been put in place include high tax relief for people who have very low income, so below 24,000 Kenya shillings, which is approximately \$200 or so. So 100% tax relief for people who earn very low incomes and there's been a reduction in the tax rate as well, from about 30% to 25%. The government also announced that the value added tax would be reduced by two percentage points from 16% to 14%. And so these are some of the tax related measures that have been put in place. But apart from the VAT I

mean, the vast majority of people in the informal sector for example, they do not have a regular income and they live paycheck to paycheck, hand to mouth. So they go out, they make some money. They go back home and they buy food and they pay for water and grains and so forth. So they don't have a reliable or a more formal remuneration on a monthly basis like those people who work in the formal sector. So there's a bit of a challenge for that because while all these tax measures have been introduced, it doesn't guarantee income, particularly for the poorest households especially and also for those who are working in the informal sector.

**KR: In the context of the UK, Diana points out that the high dependency on online service provision puts those with limited access to technology, either because they don't have a smartphone or they don't have access to internet at home at a real disadvantage. In a time of great reliance on technology, we can see a real digital divide.**

**DS:** In terms of economic perspective or any of its programmes of government benefits need to be made easier to access and there needs to be recourse for people who don't have access to things online. You know, many libraries have closed and that was where many people went to access information to interact with the job centre and prove that they were searching for a job. That's a big challenge. The digital divide, it's just enormous and it's bad in terms of income, in terms of access to information. It's also bad in terms of people's mental health and their emotional connection because now that physical isolation is so important. People who can do so online are using many, many digital resources for their wellbeing to connect with loved ones and that's just not accessible for many people in poverty.

**KR: So clearly, we learn from these examples that the virus does not affect everybody equally, and that there are real obstacles for those who are most vulnerable to the pandemic's economic consequences to get adequate and timely support. This seems to be the case in all four countries that we've heard from. Nevertheless, there are also snippets of silver linings. Everybody spoke the way in which people are coming together to support one another, and the power of doing so. And there might also be positive change in the long run, with this pandemic, highlighting the importance of focusing on people and a sustainable use of our resources.**

**JA:** I would like to say that I mean, people in Bangladesh are naturally extremely resilient. And people have a very strong I mean we have a very strong human capital, and people have the ability and spirit of volunteerism as well. So if we can mobilise people in general, and I mean, make the most use of our human resources, we can actually make a very good plan and be able to response well in this crisis.

**DS:** I think that both NGOs and private citizens, the mutual aid COVID-19 groups are a wonderful thing. They can be more challenging to access for people who are not online since a lot of them function as WhatsApp groups. But I know there are some groups that have specifically put pieces of paper under doors and put up notices to try and make people aware of what exists. There are mutual aid groups that have tried to create very strict protocols that would protect, for example, somebody who has AIDS, so to really take into account the safest possible way of interacting with vulnerable people and supporting them.

**MB/ JCP:** This health and social and economic crisis is in some way leading some call for a new moral economy that put people in its welfare at its centre. So hopefully, what we will get as a country at the end of this pandemic is a group of leaders that recognise that people are the most important in our country.

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Poverty Unpacked. If you liked what you heard, please follow us on Twitter and visit the website on [poverty-unpacked.org](http://poverty-unpacked.org). We hope you'll join us again next time.*