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## COVID-19 in South Africa: The prognosis with respect to preparedness and the implications of the pandemic for social work

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is a critical discussion of the negative developments which have either been occasioned or aggravated in South Africa as a consequence of the virulent spread of the global corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The author has evaluated the consequences for South African society in relation to Ubuntu theory and the utu-buntu business model. In many African countries, unique structural and cultural influences are exerted on the forms which urbanisation processes take, which are clearly discernible in both urban and rural areas in South Africa. The article has identified a diverse range of factors such as poverty, unemployment, corruption and domestic violence as decisive determinants of the size of the problem which the pandemic represents for South Africa. Accordingly, an evaluation of the degree to which South Africa is adequately prepared to manage the pandemic is imperative, as are assessments of the role of social work and the implications of the pandemic for social work practice.*

**KEY TERMS:** COVID-19 pandemic, infection, implications, preparedness, social work, South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has had unprecedented effects upon the world, particularly with respect to the health of its population and the socioeconomic and political well-being of individual countries. As it has rampaged through the world, COVID-19 has decimated economies and crippled livelihoods and incomes. Although the virus is widely believed to have originated in China, there is debate about it. One of the most disturbing attributes which research has revealed is the precision with which it appears to be adapted to infect human beings, as opposed to other species. The paper will discuss the negative developments which has been orchestrated in South Africa as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article takes the form of a scoping literature review, in order to arrive at a realistic prognosis for South Africa with respect to its preparedness for combating the pandemic and the implications of the pandemic for social work practice. The author was obliged to rely upon the literature, which was available at the time of writing, in the absence of an efficacious vaccine for the COVID-19 virus. Accordingly, he made extensive use of literature in published books, evidence-based news articles and articles in relevant journals which were devoted to the topic of COVID-19. The most significant themes which emerged from the literature provided the framework for making the assessments with respect to the objectives of this paper.

## BACKGROUND

By December 20, some 60 cases had been reported in Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, and by March 17, 81 000 cases had been recorded in mainland China, while the number for the entire world stood at 1.4 million (Bryner, 2020). The World Health Organisation declared the spread of the virus a pandemic on March 11 of 2020 and by May 20 there were almost 5 million confirmed cases throughout the world, which had resulted in more than 300 000 deaths (Mazigo, 2020). The economic havoc wrought by COVID-19 is inevitably highly likely to have particularly devastating consequences for the economies of many developing countries. It also even threatens to undo a great deal of the developmental progress which they have achieved to date. Bruckner and Mollerus (2020) point out that although some developing countries have implemented measures which are common in developing countries, such as lockdowns, prohibiting public gatherings, closing schools and universities and banning air travel, the effects of these measures may also have more severe repercussions than in developed countries. Among the factors which may be responsible for the particularly deleterious consequences of the measures for developing countries are their tendency to exacerbate existing gender and social inequalities, while extended school closures cripple the development of human capital. Devereaux, B'en'e and Hoddinott (2020) explain that the COVID-19 pandemic undermines food security both directly and indirectly, both as a consequence of the effects of lockdowns on household incomes and by inhibiting physical access to food. In addition, responses by countries to the pandemic can disrupt the production, processing and marketing of food, with the most severe consequences arising from the inability of many to afford food or to have physical access to it. Statistics released on July 19 of 2020 revealed that South Africa was in the process of joining the five countries which were most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The more than 337 000 cases which have been reported account for almost half of the known cases on the entire African continent. Although South Africa imposed one of the most rigorous lockdowns in the world, the number of cases continues to escalate. While the high number of cases in Gauteng tends to be attributed to the densely populated character of the province, which is likely to preclude effective social distancing, more than half of the deaths from the virus in South Africa have occurred in the province of the Western Cape. Experts believe that the true numbers of cases throughout the world could be considerably higher than they are reported to be in available statistics, owing to inadequate testing capabilities and difficulties in obtaining accurate data in some countries.

## THE UTU-BUNTU BUSINESS MODEL

*Utu* is a Swahili word which denotes 'humanness', while *ubuntu* is a Zulu word which expresses the same concept. As a philosophy, *utu-buntu* serves a multitude of diverse purposes in many communities in African countries (Kinyanjui, 2020). It is predicated on the principle that all human beings are interdependent. It eschews and resists the value which western culture places on individualism and its veneration of wealth and technology as solutions to human problems. According to Tutu (1999), *utu-buntu* has been described as offering a workable model for restoring social and economic justice. As a business model, *utu-buntu* posits that all economic transactions are embedded in social relations. From this perspective, the main purpose of doing business is to enable people to develop and sustain self-regulating networks in which they are able to function in an optimal manner. The predominant transactions, practices and notions pertaining to business in African markets tend to embody humanistic values such as solidarity, humanity, endurance, trust and sharing. Accordingly, within the *utu-buntu* paradigm, the main reason for the accumulation and deployment of surplus is to help families and communities to thrive. Consequently, Kinyanjui (2020) contends that "by rejecting the values of sharing, community service,

care, respect, honesty and trustworthiness”, the African elite are entrenching bad governance and corruption and, ultimately, fuelling conflict.

Citing Polanyi (1944), Kinyanjui (2020) describes the erosion of tight-knit peasant communities of the past by maintaining that “the changes that occurred in Europe and which formed the foundation of today’s global economies, entailed the displacement and dislocation of peasants and artisans by firms and corporations. This gave rise to large-scale urbanisation, the emergence of a money culture and the so-called self-regulating market which in turn generated a foot-loose labour force”. In African contexts, the integration of the principles of *ubuntu* into developmental initiatives is hampered by a general tendency either to ignore indigenous African markets or to view them as archaic and irrelevant to contemporary development planning (Ikioda, 2013, in Kinyanjui, 2020). By contrast, the humanist solidarity promoted by the *ubuntu* model creates possibilities for equitable urban development, precisely because the model has evolved with minimal formal support and very few resources. Kinyanjui (2020) emphasises that the business logic which informs African markets is expressed through attributes such as endurance, loyalty, sharing, hard work, concern for the welfare of others, resilience and generosity.

Theories such as the modernisation paradigm have been used to explain a perceived lack of developmental progress by African countries. As this orientation informs a great deal of teaching in schools in developing countries, the notion becomes entrenched that modernisation requires highly intelligent and creative members of the populations of developing countries to discard traditional values and dedicate themselves to the fostering of business elites which are capable of steering capitalist development in their respective countries. The paradigm is premised on traditional values having no positive role to play in development, but rather amounting to a set of attitudes which awaits transformation through modernisation. According to Kinyanjui (2020), Gunder Frank (1966) attributes underdevelopment in post-colonial states to their economic dependence on Europe and North America. The dependence model posits that the underdevelopment of African countries stems from centuries of exploitation by European countries, in the form of expropriating their land, mineral resources and labour forces. It also holds that development will be impossible until African countries transform their relationships with the developed world, reclaim their power in the domain of trade relations and receive reparations for the losses which they have suffered.

### Ubuntu theory

As it has been explained, *ubuntu* is an indigenous African concept which expresses an African understanding of life. *Ubuntu* theory is grounded in indigenous understandings of the concept. Despite its emphasis on solidarity with others and the identities of individual members of communities being predicated on their relationships with other members, it does not downplay the value of individual liberty and is eminently applicable to present-day South African society and other African societies. Its central tenet is that the humanity of an individual person is expressed through the attainment of *ubuntu*, which is also known as *botho*. Desmond Tutu characterises the nature of *ubuntu* by explaining that “When we want to give high praise to someone, we say *You u nobuntu*; Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*. To exhibit solidarity is for people to engage in mutual aid, to act in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit each other. Solidarity is also a matter of people’s attitudes, such as emotions and motives being positively oriented towards others, say, by sympathising with them and helping them for their sake” (Metz, 2011). It is possible to contend that the expressed values of Western liberal democracies tend to be concerned primarily with the rights of individual citizens. By contrast, the philosophy of *ubuntu* places the *Self* at its centre, in a manner in which individual *Selves* recognise others as parts of themselves. Consequently, the being of individual *Selves*, through which their humanness is expressed, cannot exist without recognising and being recognised by others (Zandberg, 2013).

Apart from the unique character of *ubuntu*, which stems from an innate morality preceding the philosophy rather than emerging from it, it also has the potential to provide solutions to social problems which Western liberal democracies are unable to resolve without negating their essential character. This assessment is underscored by Western democratic electoral procedures being premised on electorates being required to choose between the agendas of competing political elites, as opposed to the people whom they purport to represent. Consequently, *ubuntu* provides an optimal basis for meaningful social contracts, precisely because individual *Selves* recognise others in their communities and societies as being integral to themselves (Zandberg, 2013).

The Marikana massacre articulates a poignant corollary to the benign character of the *ubuntu* philosophy which has been elucidated so far: when the members of political elites cease to recognise themselves in the people who elect them, *ubuntu* disappears. Although Molefe (2019) contends that ostensible anomalies such as the *Marikana* massacre should be understood within the broad context of historical injustices which continue to be perpetrated in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in relation to the ability of foreign interests to exploit cheap black labour, a unique black voice provides compelling insights into their true causes. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1961) explains that the “historic mission” of the ruling black elites of former colonies “has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a

capitalism rampant, though camouflaged". Nowhere is this assessment more ably borne out than in the case of *Marikana*, where underpaid miners working in a British-owned platinum mine in South Africa were gunned down by law enforcement officers in the employ of the South African government.

By contrast, practising the philosophy of *ubuntu* unlocks the capacity of African cultures for individual members to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of fostering and maintaining communities in which there is a shared desire for social justice and a sense of communality (Khomba, undated). Rapatsa (2016), citing MacRae (1998:309), characterises humanitarian action as being constituted of acts which advance humanitarian agendas and human welfare. It is expressed through formulating and implementing interventions which facilitate the achieving of an acceptable level of human order, by striving to create enabling circumstances which foster the uninterrupted and continuous promotion of lives whose foundational attributes are dignity, harmony and sustainable human development. Implicit in this interpretation of humanitarianism is the recognition of the essential value of human life and dignity, which should be protected irrespective of gender, race, or tribal, religious or political affiliations. Accordingly, this expression of the humanity principle, which was originally propounded by Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is predicated upon the notion that necessary interventions should be formulated and implemented only in response to war or natural disasters.

### THE DETERMINANTS OF THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM WITH WHICH SOUTH AFRICA IS FACED

Although South Africa is still a relatively young country, which achieved a democratic dispensation and the eventual voting from power of the apartheid government in 1994, as the gross inequalities of the apartheid era continue to retard socioeconomic advancement, it is highly likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will reveal the reality of the poverty in which large swathes of its population are still mired. The post-apartheid government of South Africa has sought to implement developmental programmes and members of previously marginalised segments of South African society have received assistance in the forms of housing, social grants and black economic empowerment, but the housing has been inadequate in a number of respects, and many continue to try to subsist in dire poverty and extremely unhealthy living conditions.

A great many writers and researchers have pointed out that the living quarters for many often amount to a single room, a shack, a two-roomed dwelling or a tiny house. Relevant statistics reveal that close to 3 million people reside in informal settlements throughout the country, mainly in overcrowded dwellings. As they are also obliged to rely on community water points and sanitation facilities, it is very difficult for them to maintain adequate social distancing and adhere strictly to hygienic practices in order to combat the spread of the virus.

As most of the people who reside in shacks live in informal settlements in urban areas in order to secure employment in towns and cities, they are unable to respond to the lockdowns which the government has instituted to combat the COVID-19 pandemic by working from home, as most are not employed in the white-collar sector. The rate of unemployment has risen sharply, as a direct consequence of the lockdowns, and has reached 30 percent, as a result of mass layoffs. For many companies, it is almost impossible to survive enforced closures of the order of 120 days or more owing to lockdowns. Although the government announced the introduction of a solidarity fund, the economic carnage which has resulted is almost incalculable. It has been recorded that in the first three months of the lockdown, 350 000 more people became unemployed, taking the total number of unemployed people in the country to 7 million. The fallout of the corona virus has affected most industries extremely adversely, with the banking, agriculture and community services sectors all being hit particularly badly. According to the National Treasury of South Africa, as many as 1.8 million people could become unemployed in the formal sector as a consequence of the pandemic, which, in turn, could result in levels of unemployment rising to as high as 50 percent (Sibeko, 2020).

The sectors which have been most adversely affected and the extent and severity of the damage which the economy has suffered will require additional time to analyse and the full extent of the damage in terms of increased unemployment remains uncertain. Before the pandemic, nearly 5 million people worked in the formal sector of the South African economy. Although the loss of formal employment is often followed by entering the informal sector, as qualifications are not usually required, it is often not easy to do so in South Africa, owing to generally low levels of employment in both the formal and informal sectors (Ketchel, 2020). It is also highly unlikely that the pervasive effects of the lockdowns have not been felt in the informal sectors of the economy.

One of the most debilitating factors which undermines the ability of the South African government to meet the needs of all of the citizens of South Africa is endemic corruption. While the effects of corruption have been devastating for the morale of state employees before the pandemic, they have been catastrophic as the pandemic has taken hold. In the province of the Eastern Cape, as members of the staffs of hospitals are either ill or on strike, nurses are obliged to act as cleaners, surgeons are required to attend to their own hospital laundry and there have been alarming reports of unborn babies dying in overcrowded and understaffed maternity wards. The staffs of the hospitals were reported to be mentally and emotionally fatigued. The appalling conditions under which they have

been required to work have resulted in conflicts among staffs for vital resources, owing to severe shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), ambulances and ventilators. In some instances, shortages of bed linen and blankets resulted in patients sleeping under newspaper.

The consequences of crippling mismanagement and corruption have been laid bare by the pandemic. It has been reported that Livingstone Hospital in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape was without a chief executive officer or a management team for a year and a half after the previous team had been dismissed for alleged corruption. In addition, it has been recorded that the staff complement is a third of the size which is required for the hospital to function effectively. A lack of leadership has been blamed for conflicts among the different departments in the hospital. The hospital has a history of resources going missing and the ability of many hospitals to function effectively, particularly in the Eastern Cape, is fatally compromised by financial crises (Harding, 2020). It has also been reported that 5.7 million rand from the Unemployment Insurance Fund which was intended for 200 workers who were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown was paid to a single person. Several bank accounts have since been frozen in response to the fraudulent transaction (Isilow, 2020).

Incidences of domestic violence have also increased drastically throughout the world, seemingly as a consequence of the lockdowns which have been implemented in response to the pandemic. Women and children are inevitably at an increased risk of harm as domestic violence becomes increasingly common and widespread. It needs to be emphasised that even before COVID-19 became a global concern, levels of domestic violence were already alarming in several countries and frequently entailed severe physical assaults. In the first week of the lockdown in South Africa, Bheki Cele, the Minister of Police, announced that his ministry had received more than 87 000 complaints pertaining to gender-based offences. The sharp increase in reported cases of abuse could possibly be at least partly attributed to the tendency of lockdowns to oblige both perpetrators and their victims to remain at home and to preclude victims from seeking refuge elsewhere, apart from the influence of other attendant factors, such as stress, anxiety, fear, resentment and loss of income (Weiner, 2020).

Evidence from a number of surveys suggests that although of the order of 40 percent of men abuse their partners, few cases are reported to relevant authorities. This trend appears to be inadvertently encouraged in South Africa, in the absence of legislation which makes it mandatory for health practitioners to report incidents of abuse among adults, although they are legally compelled to do so in cases in which children are abused (Ferreira, Gordon & Davidow, 2020). As domestic violence helplines are being overwhelmed by the sharp increases in numbers of calls for help and advice, providing support to victims becomes correspondingly difficult, owing to the finite resources which are available. For some victims, the difficulties which are inherent in reporting abuse are further compounded by a lack of mobile phones, airtime, public transport to take them to shelters, police stations or to receive medical assistance, and fear of retaliation by perpetrators, owing to a lack of secure facilities which provide temporary shelter. In those instances, in which abuse is successfully reported, it is more difficult than ever during lockdowns to provide victims with safe housing in order to test them for COVID-19 and to facilitate the time-consuming process of self-isolation (Weiner, 2020).

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social work education should not entail prioritising economic considerations at the expense of instilling in students the values which are needed to safeguard the dignity of the people whom they serve, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the crucial attributes which social workers require are dedication, compassion, empathy, trustworthiness and an ability to recognise the *Other* in themselves. These attributes need to be emphasised in all relevant curricula and social work practices. The culture of individualism which tends to be championed in Western first-world countries is likely to serve only the interests of the rich, rather than those of the majority in South Africa, who remain poor, despite the rights which have been accorded to them by the post-1994 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The emphasis on humanness in *ubuntu* theory should inspire social workers to approach their work in manner which encourages innovative practices, while at the same time basing them on a uniquely African understanding of the needs of the people whom they serve. Challenging existing political interpretations of social problems is a form of advocacy on behalf of communities and empowering communities through the values of *ubuntu* has untapped potential for restoring social cohesion in South African communities.

## CONCLUSION

It is the considered conclusion of the author that the ability of South Africa to combat the pandemic is severely compromised by unacceptably high levels of endemic poverty, inequality, unemployment, corruption and domestic violence. The values of neoliberal capitalism which South Africa has adopted and the neoliberal developmental practices which they encourage make it difficult for the informal economy to thrive, as models which favour globalisation tend to overlook and underestimate the role which informal economies can play in

fostering economic growth. The author wishes to submit that the adoption of the *utu-buntu* business model and *ubuntu* theory provides an optimal basis for making a necessary investment in the informal economy, in the interests of both carving out new pathways for development and ultimately enabling the entire population of South Africa to combat social upheavals such as the COVID-19 pandemic immensely more effectively than is possible at present.

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