

**COVID – 19 Pandemic: Pause and Think Long-term.**

Discuss the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## **1. Introduction:**

“Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.” Said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) after declaring coronavirus disease as a pandemic, at the media briefing on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020d). In late December 2019, clusters of pneumonia cases of an unidentifiable cause were detected in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province of China (World Health Organization, 2020b). The clinical features of the disease, caused by SARS-CoV-2, may range from flu-like symptoms with fever or cough or manifest as pneumonia or even acute respiratory distress syndrome in severe cases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Ji, Fan, Li, & Ramakrishna, 2020). The pandemic has caused over 1.8 million deaths worldwide ever since its eruption up until January 1, 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). Though not the first pandemic for humanity to grapple with, COVID-19 has taken us off-guard. As we find ourselves in the middle of an unprecedented situation we may be only fixated on the short-lived impacts. But if we craned our necks back, we can see that the impacts extend beyond what we currently see and experience. This essay aims to explore some of the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Long-term Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic:**

### **2.1. The Role of Telemedicine**

The pandemic has paved the path for establishing the role of telemedicine in contemporary practice. Although the use of telemedicine has become widespread during the pandemic, it had to gain acceptance slowly. Given that the rapid implementation of telemedicine during the pandemic was out of desperate need rather than voluntary choice, it wasn't well-received by some as it lacks the familiarity and merits that come with face-face consultations. This experience is double-ended as physicians are not trained to utilize telemedicine and patients themselves may have never experienced it before, raising doubts regarding its effectiveness (Sosnowski et al., 2020). All in all, it is important to acknowledge that as we are reevaluating healthcare delivery, we are learning at the same time to be more adaptable. Much like any newly implemented idea, telemedicine is far from being perfect and it has its drawbacks. However, as we attempt to navigate our way out of the pandemic, one can't expect the circumstances to always be favorable. Instead, we should try to be flexible and work with what we currently have. Although further training is warranted for physicians and more studies regarding implementing telemedicine are needed to establish its role in current and future practice, the field of telemedicine is a promising one (Sosnowski et al., 2020).

## 2.2. Direction Towards Self-sufficiency

The pandemic is directing us towards self-sufficiency by exposing the susceptibilities in the current supply chains. The shortage many countries have experienced brought into question the effectiveness of the current policies to secure supply chains in times of global emergencies (Buheji et al., 2020). This could be attributed to global supply chains that are reliant on major exporting countries like China, along with the Just-in-Time (JIT) inventory management strategy, while these policies may be effective in times of ease, they snap easily under the pressure of crisis (Gereffi, 2020). To illustrate, China has been producing half of the world's face masks before the COVID-19 pandemic (Ji et al., 2020). However, as the country is grappling to contain the pandemic it failed to meet the local demands and had to import up to 2 billion masks during the crisis (Gereffi, 2020). This pandemic has highlighted the importance of local sourcing and focused the attention of governments and authorities on developing independent supply chains to reduce vulnerabilities during times of crisis. Indeed, opportunities for improvement are often disguised in adverse situations; it is our task to deliberately focus our attention on these hidden opportunities. Figure 1 depicts how we can explore the problems we face to spot hidden opportunities that could be used to our benefit, that is becoming self-sufficient, instead of being invested in the expected results (Buheji & Ahmed, 2020; Buheji et al., 2020).

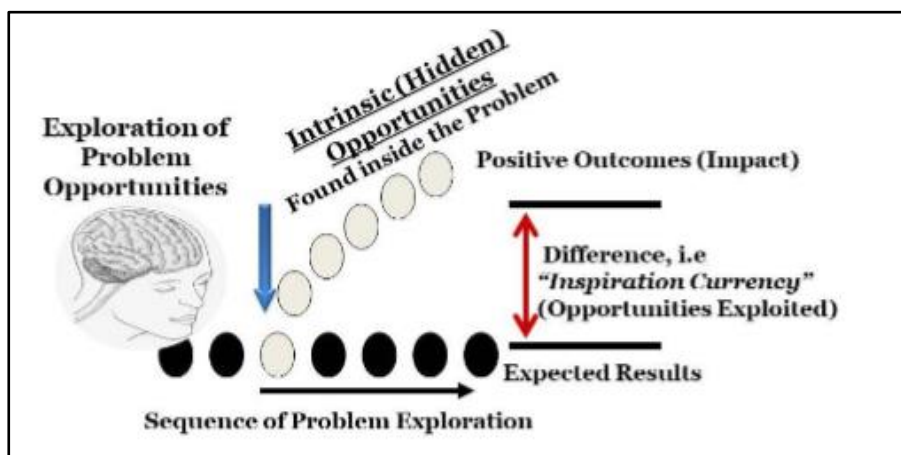


Figure 1, Exploitation of Intrinsic Hidden Opportunities During Self Sufficiency Projects.

Note. From "Optimising Pandemic Response through Self-Sufficiency – A Review Paper", by Buheji et al., 2020, *American Journal of Economics*, 10(5), P. 277-283 (<http://article.sapub.org/10.5923.j.economics.20201005.02.html>).

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### 2.3. Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) Management

The pandemic may cause a surge in deaths in patients with NCDs by virtue of sub-optimal care as healthcare services have been stunted not due to the infection itself. While containing the spread of the pandemic is, understandably, at the epicenter of governments and health ministries all over the globe, the pandemic has undermined the welfare and care of patients with NCDs (Palmer et al., 2020). A few reasons that may have contributed to disrupted care include: reassigning the staff to support COVID-19 services, reducing outpatient clinic visits, physical-distancing, and shortage of medications and healthcare services (Palmer et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020a). It should be pointed out that patients with NCDs may not be keen to visit health-care facilities for fear of contracting the illness (Modesti et al., 2020). This should bring us to the reasonable question to what extent could this delay in treatment be impactful considering the ongoing COVID-19 mayhem. Aren't we supposed to prioritize our problems and deal with the most pressing one, that is the pandemic? While this may have some truth to it, one may not be able to appreciate the magnitude of the issue if a broader image was not taken into consideration. To illustrate, the following two facts deserve special attention. First, in 2019 all NCDs together accounted for 74% of deaths globally (World Health Organization, 2020c). Secondly, the WHO has set a target to reduce deaths from NCDs in people age < 70 years by 25% by 2025 (Checkley et al., 2014). A proper diagnosis and management of NCDs are heavily dependent on timing. That is, early diagnosis, screening, monitoring, and proper management before irreversible damage ensues is a pillar of managing NCDs. One question this analysis leads us to whether this goal, considering the ongoing compromise in healthcare services, is still within reach or the pandemic has rendered it further away from us. If we consider the millions of people with NCDs worldwide, the number of NCD-related deaths, in unaffected individuals, may outnumber that of patients who were directly infected if no measures were implemented to reverse the current disruption in providing quality care (Modesti et al., 2020).

## 2.4. Environmental Impact

In our attempts to limit the spread of the virus we are generating massive amounts of waste that have a deleterious effect on the environment, and it seems that we are not being mindful of the repercussions of our actions. Let us start by considering the amount of plastic waste that goes into seas and oceans per year, which is estimated to be around 4-12 million tons (Picó & Barceló, 2019). The pandemic has caused a surge in plastic waste production, especially single-use medical and personal protective products (Klemeš, Fan, Tan, & Jiang, 2020). What is particularly interesting is that not much light has been shed on environmental problems as pointed out in a study published in 2021 (See figure 2) (Patrício Silva et al., 2021). One can deduce that perhaps issues pertinent to the environment stand on the lower rungs on the ladder of priorities. Perhaps it is because we don't see the direct impacts of our actions that they slip below the threshold of our awareness, as if they don't exist. If around 7 billion people worldwide would utilize and discard single-use masks daily, what would the outcome be over the coming months to years? That is not to say that masks are not important in mitigating the spread of the infection, rather we should pursue more sustainable options and environmental-friendly methods of using and discarding them. To conclude, it is vital to reconsider our priorities and remind ourselves that humanity will cease to exist without an environment.

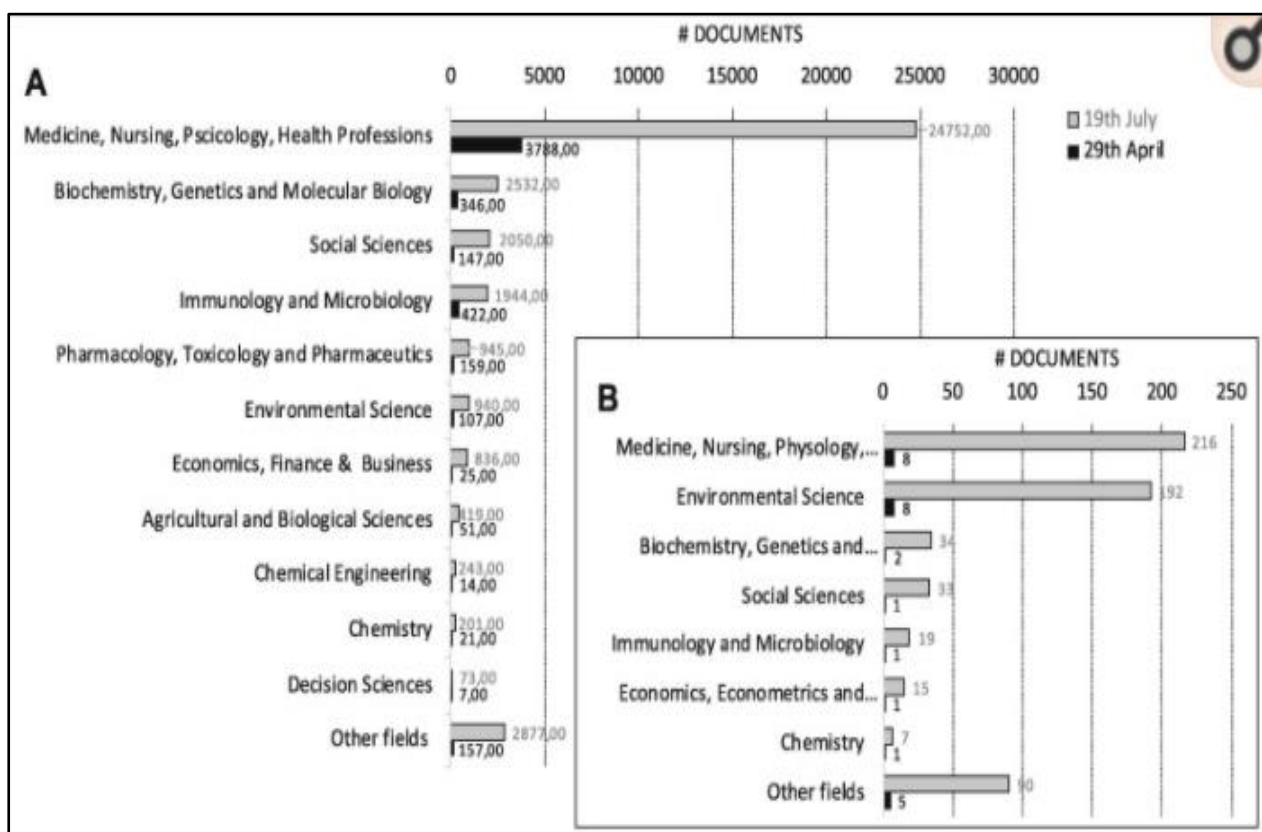


Figure 2, Number of scientific documents published in 2020 by subject area by searching for keywords COVID-19 or SARS-CoV2 (A); the number of scientific documents published in 2020 by searching the previous keywords in addition to the keyword “Plastics” or “Pollution” or “Waste” (B). Data retrieved from Scopus on 29th of April and 19th July 2020. Scientific documents include scientific article, letter, editorial, note, review, short survey, conference paper, data paper.

*Note.* From “Increased plastic pollution due to COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges and recommendations,” Patricio Silva et al, 2021, *Chemical engineering journal (Lausanne, Switzerland:1996)*,405, 126683. (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cej.2020.126683>). Copyright 2020 Elsevier B.V.

### **3. Conclusion:**

While it is true the pandemic has struck our economy, healthcare system, and environment, to name a few. It had also given us the chance to pause and reconsider our decisions and priorities. As we are currently navigating our way out of the pandemic, no one can precisely predict the trajectory it will take or speculate how we will emerge from this health crisis. Nonetheless, humanity is by no means powerless to influence the outcome, even if partially. Indeed, the first step towards a better outcome is being aware of what we choose to keep in the frame of our attention and act upon it and what we choose to keep in the background, blurred and forgotten. Let us keep in mind that what we do today dictates the tomorrow we get to realize.



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