World Bank details economic and social impact of coronavirus in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), one of the world's poorest regions, are ruthlessly imposing the burden of economic devastation created by the coronavirus pandemic onto working people, with minimal if any social support for those who are most affected.

The number of COVID-19 infections has risen rapidly since October, exacting a horrendous human toll. It has reached a total of 3.3 million cases with nearly 500,000 active cases and 83,755 deaths on the whole of the African continent—with more than half occurring in South Africa—which is roughly twice the previous peak in July and August. Infections and deaths are expected to rise further. Even these numbers vastly underestimate the scale of infection and death, due to the lack of testing facilities and systems for recording fatalities.

Death rates in 20 African countries are higher than the global average of 2.2 percent, with deaths rising by more than 30 percent in the past month in Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa.

John Nkengasong, head of the African Union's Africa Centres for Disease Control, warned that the second wave was threatening to overwhelm the continent's limited healthcare systems. Officials in Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo said their hospital capacity and oxygen supplies were running out.

The pandemic has decimated economies and livelihoods due to declining global demand and local restrictions and lockdowns.

The World Bank's *2021 Global Economic Prospects*, published this month, states, "Sub-Saharan Africa has been hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with economic activity in the region shrinking by an estimated 3.7 percent last year." In the two largest economies, Nigeria and South Africa, economic output fell even more sharply by 4.1 and 7.8 percent.

Given Sub-Saharan Africa's population increase, this is equal to a 6.1 percent decline in average per capita income—already a staggeringly low $1,585 for the whole of 2019 that was in turn a reduction of 0.25 percent from 2018. While the report predicts a moderate economic recovery in 2021, this will not be enough to stop per capita income falling.

The decline in per capita income means that average living standards will be set back to the levels of 10 years ago in a quarter of Sub-Saharan African countries, with even more severe setbacks in Nigeria and South Africa—the two largest and most industrialised economies that are home to one-quarter of the region's population. It will continue to push tens of million more people into extreme poverty in 2021, in the region that already had more than 150 million food insecure people in 2019.

The pandemic has taken a major toll on livelihoods, food security and human capital. The countries worst affected were those with large outbreaks such as South Africa, those heavily dependent upon travel and tourism—sectors that have largely come to a halt in Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Mauritius and the Seychelles—as well as commodity exporters, particularly oil, such as Angola, Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea and South Sudan.

There have been massive job losses, particularly in urban areas where most people work in the informal sector as day labourers and among female workers. The restrictions on personal mobility have severely disrupted economic activities, with the result that despite some reopening of the economy employment remains well below pre-pandemic levels. The worst affected countries are Kenya, where job losses as a percent of employment before the pandemic have reached 60 percent, Gabon 61 percent, DR Congo 42 percent, South Sudan 39 percent and Central African Republic (CAR) 33 percent.

There was a dramatic fall in income from other sources as well. Almost one in three household businesses in

Kenya, Nigeria and Ethiopia closed at the beginning of the pandemic, with revenue declining for more than 70 percent of household enterprises in Gabon, South Sudan, Malawi, Uganda, Mali, Madagascar and Zambia. Agricultural income also declined due to falling farm prices, the closure of weekly markets and limited transportation. Remittances flows plummeted by 9 percent due to the global economic recession, particularly affecting Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Zambia and Kenya.

This precipitous fall in income has led to a reduction in consumption, with about one in 10 of households in Mali and Zambia, four in 10 in Kenya and more than eight in 10 in DR Congo forced to cut back on consumption. While selling assets and drawing on savings to pay for basic needs are common strategies among better off households, the World Bank points out that they have long-lasting negative impacts on income-generating activities.

The lockdown restrictions and weather-related disasters, including floods, droughts and locust infestations, have led to a surge in food prices in Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal. The surge in food prices has increased food shortages, hunger and social inequality, often dramatically. Food insecurity tripled in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda and Malawi compared to 2019, while in Malawi, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sierra Leone, more than half of households ran out of food in the 30 days before the World Bank's survey, with urban households disproportionally affected. School closures exacerbated the problem by limiting children's access to school meals.

Major contributors to hunger have been the conflicts—often ethnic in character—and insurgencies. Efforts by people to flee the violence have led to around 3 million internally displaced people (IDP), with the greatest increase in Burkina Faso, with 419,000 IDPs and Cameroon, Mozambique, Niger and Somalia reporting more new displacements in the first half of 2020 than in the whole of 2019.

The pandemic has severely impacted access to education, with schools closed in every country surveyed and replaced with remote learning activities, such as reading textbooks and listening to educational radio programmes. The uptake of these solutions varied widely, with nine in 10 children engaged in educational activities in Burkina Faso and six in 10 in Nigeria, but only three in 10 in Mali and less than two in 10 in Malawi. In most countries, school closures disproportionately affected children living in rural or poor households with little or no access to internet.

Exchanges rates have fallen by about 5 percent across the continent, exacerbating inflation in Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal. Foreign Direct Investment flows collapsed by 30 to 40 percent last year, along with unprecedented capital outflows. Government debt rose by an average of eight percentage points to 70 percent of GDP, while Zambia was forced to default on its debts.

The African continent has been left floundering by the advanced countries in the rush to secure vaccines for their populations. While 600 million doses have been allocated to Africa by Covax, the public-private partnership set up by the World Health Organisation to pool orders for poorer countries, the continent is still waiting for their allocation to arrive and, apart from South Africa, lack the resources to source directly from Big Pharma. The African Union announced recently that it had secured 270 million doses—a drop in the ocean—for its 1.2 billion population which it hopes to begin rolling out in April, with the aim of vaccinating 60 percent of its population within two to three years.

In imposing these terrible conditions on working people, the ruling classes across the continent, as well as political commentators and the World Bank, are well aware they are sitting on a social powder keg. It is this that underpins the rapid turn to repression, authoritarianism and ethnic and religious provocations in a desperate attempt to divide the working class and prevent a unified internationalist and socialist opposition to their reactionary policies developing.