

## **Potential Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic on Unemployment in Ethiopia: Desk Review Analysis**

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### ***Abstract***

*This is a desk-review research conducted on the title, “Potential implications of COVID-19 Pandemic on Unemployment in Ethiopia: Desk Review Analysis”. The researchers reviewed literatures and other relevant materials on the topic. The issue of unemployment in general and with respect to the pandemic in subject under study has been reviewed. Based on the reviewed materials, the researchers have provided suggestions and lessons as to what our country should do to mitigate the unemployment problem of the pandemic. The following lessons were drawn, vis.a.vis, inclusion of the informal economy into the formal sector as the pandemic hits the informal sector the most; countries should strongly work towards minimizing income inequality in their countries as “we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us” and “poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere”. That is to say, governments should work towards bringing social justice for their citizens.*

*Key words: COVID-19, unemployment, informal sector, lock down, Stay at home, African Economy, Ethiopian Economy.*

## **1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This is a very tough time for every country in the world. The world's socio-economic structure is being devastated by the pandemic known as COVID-19. The pandemic has changed all the relationships between countries. Almost all nations have been in a state of lock down in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

Starting from March 2020, when the first case was reported, Ethiopia is also facing the challenges from the pandemic. Schools and universities have been shut down and students are staying at home, the state of emergency has been declared, social distancing and all other measures are being taken by the citizens to control the spread of the pandemic in our country.

The problem in our country, this time with regard to the pandemic, up until mid-May 2020 the pandemic did not spread as expected. That means, it has been sluggish for almost two months. Two weeks was the time it required other Asian as well as European countries to hit the largest cases and also deaths. Because of this delay in spread in our country, people started relaxing and already ignored the precautionary measures they used to take. Currently, the pandemic has affected almost 2000 Ethiopians and killed 27 (June 07, 2020).

Thus, we wanted to study the possible implications of the pandemic on the economy in general and unemployment in particular. We just tried to review different articles done recently on the subject matter. It is a desk review analysis. We didn't want to simply sit and watch the agony while we could do something. Thus, it is with this in mind that we wrote this research. The rest of the study is organized in such a way that, we discuss the problem of the pandemic in general and on unemployment in particular, and then objectives of the study, and then we give some review of related literature, and then methodology of the study, and then results and discussion, and then we give conclusion and ways forward.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

According to CEPHEUS (2020), the pandemic will spare, in its limited spread scenario, the two largest sectors in terms of production and employment, *vis. a. vis.*, agricultural and construction sectors. Even then, other sectors like the hospitality industry, exporters, certain manufacturers, and banks will face significant shocks because of the pandemic. Government can take policy measures to mitigate these shocks but this requires considerable fiscal and monetary resources of the country.

Measures taken by governments to mitigate the spread of this coronavirus disease include country level lock down and stay at home orders for the citizens. There are businesses which as a result are shut down because they cannot cover the costs and as a result they are forced to fire their workers. Some businesses operate at their minimum capacity where workers work in shift keeping their physical distancing. The education sector, private as well as government, is totally closed starting from Kindergarten up to University. All these will add up to the problem of unemployment. According to UNICEF Ethiopia (2020), it is expected that there will be a drop in employment by 48 per cent because of the reduction in production caused by COVID-19

pandemic. The problem of unemployment will be aggravated when it comes to the informal sector. There are many informal sectors in Ethiopia who get their daily income from their sales each day. People are not moving means they are not selling anything and they are not earning any income. The same is true for daily laborers. These are workers who earn their living from whatsoever they do every day. They cannot survive the hunger from the stay at home even if they survive the coronavirus.

What makes the expected damage from COVID-19 in the Horn of Africa to be severe are the underlying societal features including high rates of poverty, prevalent food insecurity and absence of any effective social safety nets; such as targeted income support, unemployment insurance or disaster preparedness and prevention.

It is not easy to predict the scale of the damage on these fragile Horn of African nations' health and economic status, because it depends on the spread and duration of the crisis, and more significantly on the effectiveness measures taken to control the virus. The major signals of this expected damage, however, are the contractions in economic activities and hence reductions in employment that result from the measures of social distancing and mobility restrictions taken by these countries. (Ali Isa, 2020).

The pandemic will hit the informal sector more than the formal one. This is a sector in which people sell food and other goods and services and for the most part live a hand to mouth daily life. People in this sector are already in poverty. A survey in Kampala, for example, indicated that 93 percent of them are operating below the poverty line. The other problem is that this sector takes the larger share of employment. The International Labor organization (ILO) estimates that this sector takes 66 per cent of the whole employment in Africa. These people sustain their businesses and lives based on daily customer flow and face-to-face interaction. That is why lockdowns, stay at home and social distancing measures of containing the spread of the virus effectively cuts all revenue generating activities of these people. Besides this, the rising food prices which happened as a result of panic buying and the disruption of food supply chains via border and transport closures have further impacted the urban dwellers. Larger formal firms will not escape the problem of COVID-19 either. The initial impact on them came when exports of china fell in the beginning of this year. All these will affect production and sales and it will in turn affect the increasing number of unemployed by the major lay-offs from these big firms. (Astrid & Mathew, 2020).

According to other sources, urban employment will be severely hit by the pandemic. This is because of the fact that manufacturing and services (urban based sectors of the economy) currently account for 64 per cent of the GDP in Africa and these are easy targets of the pandemic. Particularly, around 250 million Africans in informal urban employment (not including North Africa) will be at risk. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which employ about 80 per cent in Africa, will also be hit by COVID-19 related effects. Moreover, consumption and expenditure in the urban areas of Africa on food, manufactured goods, utilities, transport, energy and services will probably face a sharp decline due to COVID related lockdowns and restrictions (newbusinessethiopia, 2020). The objective of this study is therefore

to assess the potential implications of COVID-19 pandemic on unemployment in Ethiopia and to give policy recommendations to mitigate the problem.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

All age groups can be affected by the disease but old age groups are mostly affected. Children are exceptionally spared from the claws of COVID 19. Only very few deaths occurred in this age group out of the total in the world until now. COVID 19 affects the elderly and those suffering from other health problems such as diabetes, blood pressure, and tuber close (TB), HIV AIDS, heart disease, and others. The chance of getting the virus also depends on the way of life that people follow. People who come in contact with many people for business or pleasure will have the higher chance of getting the virus and also spread it to others.

The first case of the COVID 19 was known in the Wuhan City of China in December 2019. It then spread to the rest of the world. China has registered many of the first cases and deaths. It is almost under control in China by this time. Europe was vastly devastated by the corona virus disease mostly hit countries being Italy and Spain. The United States of America is currently facing huge disaster as a result of this disease. In this country, there are many cases and deaths right up to this time.

According to John Elflein (2020), by the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, the disease has spread all over the six continents of the world in about 210 nations. The initial impact of the disease was on China but by this time the United States, Brazile, Russia, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France have the most cases in the world. There are more than 4.1 million cases in the world, currently, with more than 1.3 million of these located in the USA. (John E., 2020). The reactions to the disease varies from nation to nation with most of them taking such measures as closing schools, cancelling public events, closing borders, and encouraging people to work from home.

African countries are also suffering from the problem of coronavirus disease. Even though the number of cases and deaths is not as large as European countries and the USA, the expected fear is that it has killed the business operations of the countries. According to COVID-19 WHO AFRICAN REGION External Situation Report 10, the disease outbreak continued to evolve in the WHO African Region starting from 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 when it was first reported in Algeria. It has spread to more than 30 nations in less than a month affecting currently all member states except Lesotho. According to this report as of May 05, 2020 a total of 32 953 confirmed cases with 1 193 deaths with case fatality ratio of 3.6 % have been reported across the 46 affected countries in the region. (COVID-19 WHO African Region External Situation Report 10, 6 May 2020).

The underlying problem with Africa is that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the continent at the time when the region is experiencing modest economic growth. The continent's economic growth was stable at 3.4% in 2019 and was rising to 3.9% in 2020 and expected to be 4.1% in 2021. This is not sufficient enough to tackle the underlying structural challenges of insistent current account and fiscal deficits and debt susceptibility. A very optimistic growth estimate of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2020) says that the economic growth could slow down to 1.8%. This optimism emanated from the fact that the full impact of

the pandemic is still not clear. Besides, extreme poverty is still a serious problem in the continent with 35% of the population still extremely poor. Moreover, inequalities with respect to economic and social opportunities for its people are the major problems of the continent. These inequalities are harsher for the women and the young and among them those with disabilities and those living with HIV. The African Economic Outlook (AEO, 2020) puts the problem of the continent as two: (i) to raise the growth path and (ii) to increase the efficiency of growth in generating employment. Thus, there is this fear amongst African leaders today that they lose this energy while they fight COVID 19 pandemic (ILO, 2020).

In Ethiopia, as of May 13, 2020, there were five deaths and the numbers of cases are 263 with 108 recovered people (MoH, 2020). As it is true for all other African countries, the fear at individual citizen level and the measures taken at government level had hit the economy so hard.

To limit transmissions of COVID-19, most African countries have introduced broad measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These measures range from barring entry into the country's first for travelers from high-risk countries, then to all countries, closing of borders (to people, but not essential goods), cancellation of crowd gatherings, encouraging social distancing to complete time-bound lockdowns. Most recent confinement measures include closure of schools, universities, restaurants, and shops and cancellation of public and private events. In many countries, urban market places are closed, people are locked down at home, the transport system has stopped and many people are not able to operate their income generation activities or to buy their basic consumption goods (ILO, 2020).

## **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researchers reviewed various articles published on line on the economic impact of COVID-19 on the world at large and in Africa and more specifically on Ethiopia. More specific critical review analysis of the unemployment implications of the Pandemic have been made by the researchers. Thus, this is a desk review analysis of the economic implications of the corona virus outbreak on the economic and social wellbeing of the world at large and Ethiopians and Africans in particular.

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In their "Economic and welfare effects of COVID-19 and response in Ethiopia: initial insights" (Degye et. al., 2020) aimed at providing preliminary insights on the potential effects of the pandemic on economic growth and welfare in Ethiopia. They used a holistic and integrated approach to assess the economy wide impacts of the pandemic. They found out that the economic growth will slow down and poverty will be exacerbated due to the pandemic. The impact on the gross domestic could be as big as a reduction by 2.2 to 9.9 percent, which in fact depends on the containment efforts and its duration. With three months pandemic duration (a mild scenario), economic growth could be reduced by greater than two percentage points from the base because of reduction in labor employed either temporarily or permanently. This reduction in economic growth could even multiply the economic cost of the disease when the

containment of the disease delays. In the longer durations of the pandemic, Degye et. al. (2020) expected that the pandemic could have a significant reduction in economic growth and welfare deterioration because of the pandemics impact on supply and demand shocks from fall in business activities.

The Ethiopian government has taken two measures with regard to the COVID 19. The first is the stay at home order beginning from the first case reported. Towns were locked down, there was no transportation especially after University students were sent to their homes, all businesses were stopped with exception of Banks and health services providers, and those people coming from abroad are still quarantined for two weeks. This measure has stayed for almost three weeks. Even though the lack of work from staying at home is a minus, the control of the spread of the virus by staying at home was a plus for the country.

Ethiopian authorities first confirmed the presence of COVID-19 in the country on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. For some time after its first confirmed case and infections steadily increasing each day, the Ethiopian Airlines continued flying wherever possible including Chinese and European destinations resisting policies in East Africa. The Federal as well as the Regional Governments took measures like suspending large gatherings and inter-city public transport before they introduced a comprehensive lockdown to control the spread of the virus. The reason for the delay of the comprehensive lockdown was the associated fear of about one million job losses as a result (ICC, 2020).

There were economic measures taken in the country with regard to the pandemic. The federal government reserved funds for the pandemic related activities and also gave credit facility from the National Bank of the country. Tax exemptions are introduced on a temporary basis and some rent forgiveness is appreciated. More specifically, a five months state of emergency has been declared as of April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020. During this state of emergency period, no rent increase and no tenant eviction, no firing of workers is allowed. Such extravagant consumptions will be limited because of the fact that bars and nightclubs are closed due to the pandemic. Moreover, factories and businesses are encouraged to function by fulfilling all the required preventive measures. (Alemayehu & Bart, 2020).

This last statement and other loose mobility restrictions will give the economy some relief in terms of employment even though it may be against containing the pandemic if things become worse than this. This second measure which came almost three weeks after the first case reported immediately before Ethiopian Easter celebration has paradoxically relaxed the first measure, specially locking down towns and cities. The fact that transport is allowed to move between towns at their half capacity made people travel away from their homes. Different companies were also required to re-open and run their businesses by taking all the necessary safety measures. As a result of this second measure, and the divinely low number of cases and deaths in the country, people have almost forgotten the existence of this dangerous world pandemic.

Washing hands, physical distancing, staying at home etc. are rarely practiced currently. By the first strict lockdown measures or the second state of emergency (partial lock down) measures, the most impacted are the informal sectors and daily laborers. They couldn't go out and even if

they did, there are no people to buy their services or products and there are no jobs for the daily laborers. Thus, they became unemployed. The state of emergency for the coming five months announced just one week before the Ethiopian Easter.

People earn their income from being employed either in the formal sector or in the informal sector. Majority of the employment in Africa is in the informal sector. According to ILO (2020), the informal sector includes all economic activities and economic units that are- in law or practice- not totally covered or insufficiently covered by the rules and regulations of the country. The employment in this sector in Africa, as per ILO (2018) as cited in ILO (2020), accounts for 85.5 per cent of the total employment. Thus, it is the main source of employment. It is the sector in which the majority of the working men and women sustain themselves.

According to ILO (2020), the fear of the governments in Africa in combating COVID-19 arises from this fact. In other words, recent growth of the economy is based on growth in sales of commodities, services, and manufacturing and including mining and agriculture that operate in the informal sector. The share of the informal economy varies within the region based on the differences in socio-economic development. Accordingly, the informal economy is 67.3 per cent in Northern Africa while it is 89.2 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2020). This is true for Ethiopia, which is one of the sub-Saharan African countries. Thus, the informal economy is 89.2 per cent in Ethiopia and it is directly affected by the measures taken to mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

Thus, since jobs are stopped to control the spread of this coronavirus, people become unemployed and their income and thus livelihood will be affected. According to ILO (2020), African governments' concern over the informal economy arises from the underlying truth that the informal economy and those taking part in it are exposed to extreme poverty, hunger and disease, since they don't have the necessary social protection coverage and support mechanisms if they become unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these are waste recyclers, street vendors, transport workers, construction workers, domestic workers and many more including small peasants in rural or peri-urban areas that were producing for the urban market. Migrant workers, whether national or international, are also vulnerable since they may become homeless under lockdown. When the schools, colleges and universities are shut down, it not only brings major loss of investment in skills, but also puts many learners in the informal economy at a disadvantage since they may not be able to benefit from distance and e-learning for lack of connectivity. Therefore, measures that are taken to slow the spread of the virus have a direct cost for more than 75 percent of the population in Africa whose livelihood is dependent on the informal economy. This makes total quarantine impossible in the African countries (ILO, 2020).

The ILO (2020) lists the major ways the COVID-19 affects or is expected to affect the informal economy in African countries, these are:- Lockdown will make the low income and vulnerable groups deprived of income; Lock down will increase the prices of basic goods since it will be difficult to access informal economy markets. This affects the poor urban consumers. The loss of income with no alternatives will lead to urban-rural migration, which will spread the COVID-19 in rural areas. There will be an incentive for informal trading and flows of basic goods between

rural and urban areas, which can contribute to spreading the virus. Majority of the informal economy workers are women and girls which will worsen the gender stereotypes.

The livelihood of the people depends on their income. They are not earning any income means; their livelihood of those dependents will be affected. According to sources, it is expected that around 30 million people could face food consumption gaps based on the estimated food poverty index. The poor and the destitute in the urban areas as well as the homeless and those in the informal sector of the economy are expected to be highly affected. In some cases, the rural community will not be spared either. It will affect those households who rely on market purchase. This is because of the fact that COVID-19 prevention measures will make movements of commercial goods delayed leading to localized food insecurity due to shortages of food items or increased prices (UN Situation Report Ethiopia, 2020).

These all added together will affect their reason for existence. As a result, if these measures continue for so long, people will start taking criminal measures either on themselves or on other citizens. These will include suicide, theft, robbery, conflict with the government to open the economy, etc.

***Actions taken to mitigate COVID-19's and their implications on unemployment in Ethiopia:***

According to Degye et al. (2020), the Novel Coronavirus, or COVID-19, pandemic is a big problem for the world that needs coordinated efforts from governments, individuals, businesses, and various stakeholders.

Governments are getting monetary support from different sources to combat the negative impact of this coronavirus. The first is aid from rich countries and international institutions. Huge amount of money has been flowing to developing countries for this reason. The second is the 30% of one month contribution from the government employees of the workers in Ethiopia. Some amount of money will be obtained from this also. The third is different fundraising programs. Lots of money has been collected in this category as well.

Thus, the government should allocate some percentage of this collected money to support those people who became unemployed. The unemployed people should be screened carefully. For this, the kebele administration can help a lot. Since we have scarce resources we have to make priorities in this difficult time based on the following comparison. Comparatively, the urban areas are more affected than the rural, the informal sector employees are more affected than the formal, elderly people are more affected than the youth, large family sized households are affected more than small family sized households, etc. Thus, different humanitarian supports should be channeled appropriately.

We should also be prepared and act before things get worse in the areas of urban economic recovery taking such measures as boosting the finances and capacities of local authorities as frontline actors; short term bail-outs and exemptions for SMEs to boost productivity and increase employment capacity; while planning for labor intensive public work programs there should also be social protection for those in informal urban employment. (newbusinessethiopia, 2020). In his tweet on his twitter page, our Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed expressed that the government

should mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19 on the economy, by taking critical measures to protect employment and income, by scaling up safety net programs to the most vulnerable, by maintaining the supply chain of key commodities and by supporting the productive sectors of the economy via all means possible (Araya, 2020).

At their virtual meeting hosted by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in March 2020, the Ministers of Finance of African nations made the following suggestion for financing African response: securing a \$100 billion for African Health and safety net fund. This will be used for rescuing the most vulnerable, including feeding for out of school children and unemployment support.

According to ECA (2020), the year 2020 has been designated by the African Union as the year of silencing the guns. Governments of African nations should work more seriously now than ever to reduce the unemployment impact of COVID-19. This is because of the fact that mass unemployment and disenfranchisement of their youth will work as fertile breeding ground for civil unrest in the continent.

There should also be a systematic selective sector wise intervention. It is the tourism and air transport sectors that will be mostly affected by the pandemic in Africa. These sectors directly employ 6.2 million jobs (air transport) and indirectly by giving employment and additional spending to many other industries. These sectors were recently booming in terms of levels of growth and connecting Africa to the rest of the world. It is therefore required to take serious actions to avoid any lasting impacts on transportation infrastructure and the associated mass unemployment (Economic Commission for Africa, 2020).

There should also be attention on the food security impact of the pandemic. Government should be prepared to cover the immediate food needs of vulnerable populations. These include more accessible safety net programs among others. Food distribution should be designed in such a way that it combines both public and private mechanisms. We should make use of national grain reserves or public procurements, the productive safety net programs, setting up food distribution centers, encourage and support local civil societies to take part in the distribution of food assistance (Alemayehu and Bart, 2020).

Communal life is still practiced in developing countries like Ethiopia. People have this shared way of life. When they are happy and when they are sad, they stand together. This is what we call social capital in economics. Thus, this is another means of surviving during this difficult time. The rich support the poor, the still employed (formal sectors) support the unemployed (the informal sector and those who are living on remittances), the young and strong support the old and the weak, the rural people support the urban people, etc.

This support should continue and it should not be a one-time only move. If we want to control the spread of the virus, most or all people must stay at home until this time passes. As a result, this people-to-people support should continue in an organized and timely manner.

What unemployed citizens should do depends on other factors. We believe that the support from the government and other people will only continue for some time. People should make themselves prepared for some kind of work from home activities. We have to be innovative and come up with COVID 19 friendly businesses. As the virus transmits at contacts with people in less than two meters, we can produce and distribute some important items for the people in need. This should be supported with some form of e-payment like CBE birr payment, or transfer of money from one account to the other, etc.

Doing all these survival techniques at government and people levels may not be enough to pass this difficult time. We have to behave in such a manner that we consume less and save more. We don't know for how long this difficulty continues. That is why we have to be prepared at all levels for the worst. Otherwise we will end up losing so many things economically and socially so that it will take so many years to come back to even where we are today.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD**

Countries can be open as big as you want but they should be alert. Being alert can include vaccinations that should be taken before entering countries. Vaccination for corona should be among the list once obtained. Our health scientists should stay alert of what is going on in hidden laboratories of other countries.

We have to look for sustainable income generating jobs for our citizens. This requires technology in some cases. The education sector, for instance, can be designed in such a way that we teach online in case face to face classroom based teaching is hit hard like this time. We should be innovative and prepared in all sectors to survive the other difficult times to come!

According to ILO (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental principles of social justice, one of which is *poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere*. This implies that we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us. This is to mean, those who are unable to quarantine themselves or to get treatment endanger their own lives and the lives of others, and if one country cannot contain the virus, others are bound to be infected, or even re-infected. This makes inclusion of the informal economy sector in national responses to COVID-19 not only a matter of protection of the citizens in the countries concerned but a necessity for all countries in this world.

One very important lesson from coronavirus pandemic is that being clean is the necessity of life. We have noticed that even other diseases or the sickness from them decreased when we washed our hands and kept our distances from each other for corona. These lessons should continue for the rest of our lives. We have to wash our hands now and then, no touching of the faces, no hand-shaking, keeping social distance, etc. It seems funny but it is the only solution up to now!! And by protecting ourselves from diseases in this way, we can become healthier and more productive economically.

The lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic has made business non-functioning. This has disrupted the value chain of the economic system. As a result, resources have been idled. The unemployment problem of developing countries such as Ethiopia, unemployment problem has

been aggravated. Both the formal and non-formal sector unemployment is increasing. Especially the non-formal sector, due to its untamed nature, severely affected, and thus cooperative action is crucial to overcome the consequences of the crisis. The initiative by our government is encouraging in this respect. Civil servants and other citizens have been contributing to alleviate the suffering of the pandemic affected citizens. The meal sharing project of the Prime minister, the assistance from abroad from governments and Ethiopian origin migrants may help to tackle the problem in the short run. The relaxation of some of the orders of the state of emergency has helped, even though the consequences are not known now. The government of Ethiopia needs to give attention to the most affected section of the society, such as elderly, informal sector workers, women and children.

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