

REVIEW PAPER

Macro-micro linkages and its effect on global public health in regards to COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in a significant way, this is one of the biggest health crises that the world has ever seen, life has come to a standstill all over the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives—this is not only a health crisis but it is an economic, social and political crisis as well. Merely looking it through the lenses of health will not serve the purpose, interdisciplinary framework must be adopted to understand this crisis more substantively. The objective of this review paper is to understand how the neoliberal growth model has increased the possibility of transmission of zoonotic diseases in humans and to why lessons learnt from the SARS pandemic didn't lead towards necessary changes in institutional and community level. To answer these questions, there is a need to review the situations created by SARS in 2003. Compared to 2003, things have changed drastically, there has been huge growth seen in the global economy and the world is far more interconnected. This interconnectedness has facilitated the spread of coronavirus, but the SARS pandemic should have served as a warning. Then the WHO was highly praised for its swift reaction in preventing the spread of the virus, whereas now it has come under global scrutiny. This pandemic should be looked through macro-micro linkages to understand its high level of spread in the society. Failures at the global, institutional and the community level have culminated in creating one of the biggest crises that humanity has ever seen.

Keywords: *Interdisciplinary; substantive; transmission; zoonotic.*

THE COVID-19 SITUATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised many questions.

Researches are still focused on understanding how the virus functions. Development of several vaccines are going on in a war footing, medical infrastructure has been ramped up by several countries. It is going to take a lot of time until the focus of the research works shifts towards the origin and spread of the virus. Although several countries like Australia and USA have demanded an independent inquiry into origins of the virus—it is not the priority, the focus is on 'containment' of the virus. China has threatened Australia with 'economic consequences' if it continues to demand an independent inquiry by restricting Chinese students and travelers, a huge source of income for Australia. China is the largest trading partner of Australia, it is not in the interest of Australia to disappoint China, it is interesting to understand the reasons behind Australia taking such a risky initiative. The study and practice of foreign policy neglected public health, and it was predominately a domestic concern.¹

Most of the countries are focusing on slowing down the spread of the virus—countries like New Zealand and Japan have succeeded in doing so, but it remains to be seen if these countries will face a second wave of the virus. At the time of such a global calamity—it is difficult to focus on other aspects,

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other than saving human lives. But if questions are not asked regarding the various aspects of the spread of SARS-CoV-2, it is only a matter of time when we will have to deal with a completely different ‘strain’ of coronavirus. Technology has helped us to determine the ‘genetic sequence’ of the virus, it has helped us to determine that this virus binds perfectly with the ACE2 ‘protein’ in human cells. Different strains of the virus have already been identified, it is only a matter of time, after which a solution to this ‘problem’ will be found. Virologists are pointing out that after some years this particular virus will lose its ‘potency’, it will then exist around us like any other ‘flu virus’.

CONNECTION WITH PAST EXPERIENCES

By the natural process of ‘herd immunity’ or with the help of technology, this ‘pandemic’ will come to an end. Although it is difficult to imagine the post-COVID-19 world, it is very important to analyze the mistakes that led to the spread of this disease to every corner of the earth. Merely investing in health infrastructure and technology will not help us prevent another similar situation in the future. Humanity faced a similar situation in 2003, during the SARS pandemic, the failure to properly address the issues raised by the researchers after the pandemic has brought us to this situation. The present situation is ‘strikingly’ similar to the SARS pandemic, there is a need to look into this situation by taking necessary inputs from previous researches on SARS pandemic. After over five months of denial, growing external pressure forced Chinese leaders into action.²

It is interesting to understand how the ‘growth model’ created by institutions like IMF and WTO in a world dominated by neoliberal ideas has increased the chances of the health crisis. Merely questioning globalization will not answer the question, if it has led toward the spread of the virus, global cooperation can also help in preventing it. In 1995 the WHO adopted Resolution 48.7 that started the process of revising the regulations to bring them up to date in terms of public health policy.³

The WHO is continuously suggesting the declaration of the ‘vaccine’ as a ‘global public good’ upon its arrival, this will ensure that it becomes available to each of the nations. Global cooperation is very much essential for the betterment of “global public health”, which is in the interest of all the nations. The field of global health in international relations is rapidly maturing.⁴ Recently, USA stopped its funding to the WHO, citing its incompetence and ‘probable’ arm-twisting by China. WHO has continuously praised China during the SARS pandemic as well as COVID-19 pandemic, tactically these praises can help in extracting information, especially from a country which has tight information controls.

NEO-LIBERAL GROWTH MODEL AND COVID

China’s economic growth allowed it to ramp up its ‘public-health infrastructure’, it was able to secure basic health services to each of its citizens. With a GDP of over 15 trillion dollars, it can afford to provide the best of medical treatment to its citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that

economic power and health-infrastructure is not enough to fight a virus, experiences of countries like Italy and the USA proves this point. China was able to slow down the spread of the virus due to its harsh ‘coercion’ measures—it is only possible in a non-democratic country. Today, the concept of national security, and even the idea of national sovereignty, is being challenged by the spread of infectious disease.⁵ Italy had to adopt strict measures similar to China, and it did have an impact. So, it is seen that technology has failed us, investing in ‘health’ related technology in the future course of action will not serve many purposes. So, what should be done? How to address this kind of issues in the future? The best way to look into these questions is by revisiting the questions asked after SARS pandemic. Scholars of China’s foreign policy, are focused on China’s military capabilities and intentions and the security consequences of China’s economic rise. Non-military factors are rarely taken into account.⁶

It is a common belief that “prevention is better than cure”, therefore, it is very logical to not come into contact with zoonotic diseases, rather than focusing on technology to cure these. The countries with the best healthcare infrastructure are finding it difficult to prevent the thousands of deaths occurring daily. It is very plausible that a very different strain of coronavirus in future can wreck a similar ‘havoc’ even if a vaccine or cure is developed for the current strains of the virus. Therefore, there is a need to question the current ‘economic growth model’, relating to the development of health infrastructure.

To simplify, let’s take an example: The countries with higher levels of growth and GDP or the first world countries have far better health infrastructure than countries with lower income levels like the third world countries. It is because they can invest far more in ‘healthcare’ but the very economic growth model adopted by these countries has been responsible for creating a global health crisis.

RE-EMERGENCE OF ANTI-GLOBALIZATION DEBATE⁵

It can be argued that the virus didn’t originate in the first world countries, consensus exists that the virus originated from China. There have been many theories, the most common is that the virus originated from the ‘wet-markets’ in China. It is well known that the Chinese have the habit of killing wild-animals, those are considered a ‘delicacy’ in China. The ‘pangolin’ which is a rare species is regularly eaten in China, it is even smuggled; it is being said that the virus transmitted from bats to pangolins and then to humans. Although the virus has bat strains, the pangolin link is yet to be established. Another theory blames the virology lab in Wuhan for doing research that led to ‘development’ of highly efficient spike protein in the ‘coronavirus’, that binds effectively with human cells. Most of the virologists agree that the virus has natural origins, although the lab theory should not be denied until there is proper evidence. It is plausible to go with the natural origins of the virus if we look into the SARS pandemic. It had similar origins, the same

country was the ‘hotspot’ of the virus, the SARS pandemic resulted in globalization vs anti-globalization debate, it talked about new norms and strengthening of ‘state controls’. By late 1990, anti-globalization movements gradually gained enough strength to contest the value, policies and practices of globalism.⁷ But the world became much more globalized and interconnected than ever, the ‘retreat’ of the state continued. It is very natural that after this pandemic, there will be some drastic changes in these spheres, investment in healthcare is also going to increase. It is no use and even counterproductive to try and prevent the perils by reversing the process of globalization; the perils can only be contained by deeper globalization.⁸ The linkage of WHO-WTO might become a reality, which has been suggested by earlier researches. The world needs a robust process to adjudicate conflicts about economic/trade measures in global health emergencies.⁹ Even if all these steps are taken, it won’t be enough—there is a need to focus on macro-micro linkages through ‘interdisciplinary’ lenses. It is important to understand the bigger picture, the argument should be focused on the western countries. The model of development adopted by the western countries had a serious impact on the environment, due to heavy industrialization.

THE LINK BETWEEN ECONOMICS AND HEALTH

Concepts like ‘ecologism’ emerged in western countries, they began to rapidly de-industrialize themselves and sent their industries to third world countries like China. Availability of ‘cheap’ labour was not the only reason for de-industrialization, environmental concern was one of the core areas. The coming of many industries in China, ensured a very high growth rate for China, it became one of the biggest economies, second only to the USA, but China and the world had to pay a very heavy price for it. This was not a ‘non-zero-sum game’ or a win-win situation for all, the coming of various new industries in China increased human interaction with the wildlife. It is well known that the current model of development is detrimental to wildlife, it leads to various problems like ‘deforestation’, the most dangerous thing is that this has brought us ever closer to wildlife. Most of the western countries are threatening to call back their industries from China, Japan has provided 2.2 billion-dollar incentives to its industries to return. Other western nations are thinking to shift their industries to other third world countries like India. This should not be viewed as just an ‘economic punishment’ to China for failing to control the spread of the virus, but it has much deeper implications. China, perhaps like most countries, treats infectious disease as medical problems, requiring a medical response. This could explain why it took four and a half months after the first cases of SARS emerged in China before the Chinese authorities alerted the WHO.¹⁰ Even if these industries are shifted to other countries like India, the future might see India becoming ‘hotspot’ for future pandemics. Therefore, any decisions regarding attracting the ‘multinational companies’ to India must be taken after serious considerations about the environment. The genetic diversity

existing among zoonotic viruses in bats increases the possibility of variants crossing the species barrier and causing outbreaks of disease in human populations.¹¹ Otherwise, we might make a huge mistake in between an ongoing pandemic, that will set the stage for another global pandemic in the future. The researches should be more focused on preventing animal-human interaction, the proper emphasis should be put into ‘population control’. Reduction in population will surely decrease the burden on health infrastructure and the planet as a whole, already 1.5 ‘earth’ is required to sustain the current population. The growth of the population is a very big threat to humanity. The rapid spread of the virus has been due to the high density of human population.

IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATION

Therefore, questioning globalization and shortage of funds for health facilities might only answer a part of the problem, the analysis of this pandemic should be done on a much wider scale. The importance of global institutions and the countries at the macro-level and the interaction of the community with wildlife at micro-level should be looked at. Strengthening of health facilities is a must, it should be promoted at all levels of decision making. Further, rapid economic growth must be questioned, health and economic development should be taken together, the current model of development has resulted in numerous health hazards. The environmentalist, health professionals, economic advisors, lawyers, decision-makers, NGOs and the CSOs should all come together to plan the future course of action. The countries of the Global North must cooperate with countries of Global South because only safe and hygienic conditions for the people of these countries can ensure a world free of pandemics. The virus originated from China, but it still managed to travel to the USA, stopping all kinds of travel is not logical and will have a devastating impact on global economy and lives of the common people. Therefore, a practical solution to this problem must be found, which requires global level and community level coordination. Lessons from the SARS experience of China must be looked into. In terms of public policies on environmental protection and public healthcare, the government’s delinquency helped cause the SARS outbreak, environmental pollution also played a major part.¹²

It can be concluded that coronavirus pandemic is a result of extreme forms of development model. This type of development trickles down from the macro-level to the micro-level, affecting all sections of the society. Therefore, more emphasis should be put into determining the exact causes of global pandemics. Economic growth has huge implications for global public health, lessons from the SARS pandemic must have been incorporated in the neo-liberal growth model. Global cooperation and coordination between macro and micro-level institutes is a must to fight pandemics of the future. Society has to adopt changes to stay away from zoonotic diseases, emphasizing the need for questioning the current growth model.

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