

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. CONTROVERSIES AND MEASURES PROPOSED TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF FUTURE PANDEMICS

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Abstract: *The Covid-19 pandemic has strongly affected the entire planet. Although artificial intelligence is more and more present in our daily activities, leaving its mark in most fields of activity (education, science, medicine), the coronavirus has managed, to some extent, to slow down or even block the natural evolution of things, forcing a change of the lifestyle and the reality in which we live. Forced isolation, imposed restrictions, activities conducted online, etc. had a negative effect especially on people who were coerced to adapt to a new situation and comply with the rules imposed in order to reduce/eliminate the devastating effect of the Covid-19 virus. The paper presents a brief summary of the evolution of influenza epidemics, especially of the coronavirus, as well as the names associated with human coronaviruses that have occurred in the last 20 years. Furthermore, the paper captures a series of controversies that arose in relation to the measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the steps necessary to combat the impact of future pandemics as efficiently as possible. The research method used focuses on documentation using, in particular, specialized literature (articles, case studies, books, etc.) from various fields but also information provided by the World Health Organization.*

Keywords: influenza epidemics, human coronaviruses, the Covid-19 pandemic, modern technologies

JEL classification: I10

1. Introduction

The cumulative impact of the pandemic on the political, economic and social life is significant. Two years ago, the whole planet was in a state of relative disarray: among nations and among aspirations, a situation that still dominates today due to the war between Russia and Ukraine. The isolations and quarantines caused by the pandemic, by reducing daily and industrial activities, had a beneficial effect on the environment and climate, by reducing pollution. But, the pandemic has also provided new opportunities for illegal activities with negative social effects, such as the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest (Robertson and Bodo, 2020) and poaching in Africa (Deliso, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic is considered by Nancy to be a product of globalization (Nancy, 2021 cited by Sfetcu, 2020:46), an idea also supported by Wallace, who believes that the dynamics and pressures of the global economy constituted the main causes of the expansion of the pandemic (Wallace, 2013). Duflo, believes that one of the challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic consists in the effort made to maintain jobs and salaries, fearing that large

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companies will opt for automation (Mars 2020 cited by Sfetcu, 2020:46). The traditional world before the technological age, was fragmented and evolved slowly, almost imperceptibly. Currently, we live in a highly integrated world, which moves at an unimaginable speed. Many authors highlight an endless array of technological advancements while drawing attention to the dangers generated by the abuse of technology. Modern technologies enable already almost total surveillance, motivated by the pandemic. A series of digital applications, which, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, were considered enemies of the human species, have become the most important work tools during the pandemic: "*the famous GAFAs group (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon) which, from a plagued cast-off, as it was considered prior to the pandemic, became overnight a blessed supporter of the possibility of working from home, of distance schooling, of online advice*" (Levy, 2020:79-80). The Covid 19 pandemic has demonstrated to the world that although we are in the age of digitization, humanity moves slowly when new challenges arise that require a response against time (Nicola, 2020:435).

2. Research Methodology

This paper aims to present the research progress on the term covid 19 pandemic by conducting a methodological review based on various empirical and review articles, books and books chapters, case studies, conference papers, conceptual papers, presenting the controversies related to social distancing and highlighting the proposed measures to reduce the impact of future pandemics.

3. Literature review

Influenza epidemics were extremely virulent in the 18th to 20th centuries. In the years 1918-1919, the Spanish flu emerged, which manifested all over the globe, registering between 50-100 million victims, i.e., around 2.5-5% of the world's population (Spinney, 2017:20). Although the 1918 pandemic did not occur in Spain, it came to be called *the Spanish flu* (ispanka, espanhola, la grippe espagnole, die Spanische Grippe) thus marking a historical error that has not been corrected since (Spinney, 2017:85). This was, probably, the largest demographic disaster of the 20th century, possibly even of all centuries (Spinney, 2017:206).

Influenza epidemics, with their multiple varieties, continue even today, the respective virus proving capable of permanent transformations and adaptations, its variable nature hindering its combating and immunization (Boia, 2020:33). The first report on bird flu was published in 1931 by Schalk and Hawn, and the viral aetiology of the disease was suggested in 1933 and definitively established in 1936 (Estola, 1970:331-332). In the 1940s, two other animal coronaviruses were isolated (McIntosh, 1974 cited by Sfetcu, N. 2020:60) and in 1964 the first human coronaviruses were also identified. The report conducted by Hartley is considered the first study that indicates the occurrence of human infections caused by coronaviruses (Estola, 1970:333). In 1965, the name HCoV was established, for the human coronavirus identified from the nasal discharge of a patient with a common cold. In 2002-2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, called SARS-CoV, emerged as a serious epidemic, involving 29 countries in North America, South America, Europe and Asia (Kahn, and McIntosh, 2005:223 -224). In the post-SARS era, two other human coronaviruses (HCoVs) emerged: HCoV - NL63 (NetherLand 63) in 2004 and HCoV - HKU1 (University of Hong Kong 1) in 2005. Since then, two more zoonotic HCOVs have emerged: the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012 and the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in December 2019 (Liu et al., 2021:429). The last human coronavirus, that of December 2019, was reported in Wuhan, China, initially named 2019-nCoV by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020a) and later renamed

SARS-CoV-2 by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses. The World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak as an urgent public health concern on January 30, 2020 and as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020b).

4. Controversies regarding the measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic

One of the most contested measures adopted globally during the COVID-19 pandemic was social distancing (later called physical distancing, to avoid the development of negative social associations). Social distancing methods have included quarantines, travel restrictions, closing schools, workplaces, stadiums, theatres or shopping centres (WHO, 2022c).

Agamben approaches the topic of social distancing as a new way of society organisation, based on falseness and contradictions. He believes that it is not normal to give up good to save the good, nor to forego freedom to protect freedom (Levy, 2020:83). Humans are social beings, that is, they need their peers to evolve and to preserve their physical and mental health. Biologically speaking, humans can only live through the cooperation between the social and economic aspects, being forced to adhere to this process in order to be able to survive.

The expression: *"Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu"*, actually means: "I am because we all are" (Stoica, 2015). *Ubuntu* is an African ethic or philosophy of life, from Sub-Saharan Africa, that focuses on loyalty and human relationships. This desire for belonging, for love and for safety has been and is highlighted in many specialised works, through the important role played by the relationships that are created among people (Sfetcu, 2020:84). Moreover, Maslow (1943) stated that: *"people have a deep need for love and social belonging, and only then for safety and physiological needs"*, (Sfetcu, 2020:85).

Žižek shows us how the media has ruthlessly exploited the topic of the pandemic, creating panic and chaos worldwide. The author believes that catastrophic situations push people towards reevaluating everything that surrounds them (everyday life, time and priorities): *"we needed havoc to be able to meditate again on the society we live in"*, (Sfetcu, 2020:76-77). Also, in 2020, Latour claims that the pandemic was the most astounding lesson delivered to humanity: *"we have actually proved that it is possible to stop, in a few weeks, all economic systems in the world"*, (Latour, 2020:1).

Bhusal (2020) states that the Covid-19 pandemic is about to change the whole society, that is everything that was considered to be the normality, prior to the pandemic, will be overshadowed by a "new normality": where teaching and learning, shopping, work or medicine will take place remotely.

Kojeve compares the panic set in during the pandemic with the "animalization of people", that is the manipulation/training of the mass through the requirement of isolation and the prohibition of movement over long distances, a situation that has induced a state of fear and anxiety among people, who somehow resigned themselves to the rules imposed on them: *"this sizzling solidarity with which they fooled us all, this insurrection of fraternity against a background of robinsonade and of limiting consumption...were just hoaxes"*. Kojève is also of the opinion that, during the two years of the pandemic, it was as if all the problems (global warming, massive deforestation, wars, etc.), which had been overwhelming the world for years, suddenly disappeared, people's only concern being exclusively related to the Covid-19 virus. As Levy (2020) mentioned, the current problems of humanity as massive migration, global warming and deforestation seemed to have disappeared and no one remembered them, no one was worried about them.

5. Limiting and mitigating future pandemic effects

The basic steps in controlling a pandemic are limiting the spread of the virus (through monitoring, containment and therapy, including vaccination) and mitigating it by various means, but these steps can also be addressed simultaneously (Threats, 2007 and Baird, 2020). Reducing the epidemic peak lowers the risk of overcrowding health services and provides time for the development of vaccines and treatments. In addition to the production of vaccines and medicines, both non-pharmaceutical measures are promoted: hand hygiene, mask wearing, self-quarantine (Stanislaw et al., 2020 cited by Sfetcu, 2020:36), as well as social distancing (Qualls et al., 2017 cited by Sfetcu 2020:36).

Albert D.M.E. Osterhaus and collaborators also present a number of measures that should be adopted during the “peace period” between pandemics, namely: supervision and diagnosis of new pathogens, development of tests for diagnosis and mechanisms for their distribution, research on how new infections cause diseases, medicine and vaccine development, communication between scientists, governments and the public. (Mackenzie, 2020:212). Mackenzie, shows us 7 important lessons to follow in order to reduce the impact of pandemics to come (Mackenzie, 2020:276-288).

Table 1: 7 important lessons to follow in order to reduce the impact of pandemics to come

LESSON 1	We need an authoritative, high-level system, which brings together countries and international agencies, in order to work together in cases of infectious diseases, so that no one hides important details regarding worrying epidemics and which should all work together from the start.
LESSON 2	Now is the time to improve monitoring and response systems, first of all by enhancing the surveillance activity for emerging infectious diseases, and second by investing in medicines, vaccines and diagnostic tests for the threats we already know exist.
LESSON 3	We need personal protective equipment (for those working in the field of health care) and the development of new remedies (antibiotics, vaccines, ventilators, etc.) as respiratory viruses will always be among our biggest threats.
LESSON 4	When scientists start to vocally argue that there is a real threat, we need to listen and determine officials to act.
LESSON 5	If new influenza pandemics occur, we must react and limit them quickly, as soon as they occur.
LESSON 6	We need to determine governments to be accountable for the promises they make and make sure that they do whatever it takes.
LESSON 7	We must understand that a much more serious pandemic could occur, and it would trigger non-linear effects in our global system, which would lead to the collapse of local or global systems.

Source: adapted by the author based on Mackenzie (2020, pp.276-288)

6. In conclusion

For national and international organisation responsible for public health, and for politic and economic decision-makers, the COVID-19 crisis represented a challenge, but also an opportunity to identify ways to mobilize resources and stimulate domestic and international cooperation. As the authorities tried to find solutions to protect the population, to identify and control outbreaks, the territory of uncertainty expanded, lack of knowledge and resources went hand in hand with misinformation and panic, politicization and rejection of science (Tandoc & Lee, 2020; Kaim et al, 2021). Public health gradually became a priority area of political and community decisions, with a massive impact on social life and individual habits, with a possible long-term impact (Mofijur et al., 2021, Oldekop et al., 2020; Shadmi et al, 2020). Many researchers have pointed out that the reality of COVID-19 has highlighted social inequities, the vulnerability of certain segments of the population, the inefficiency of international cooperation and even the selfishness of human nature. The global economic recession, accentuated budget deficits, depletion of resources, economic volatility, major shocks on the stock market, the increase in the global level of poverty and unemployment, the difficulties of global supply chains are major effects of the economy in recent years (Kaim, 2021), which have their main source in the COVID- 19 crisis.

Although we have a lot of information and effective methods to process it, it is difficult to accurately predict what will happen in the immediate future. Unfortunately, currently, social networks, a world with no time and space barriers, have become the main sources of communication. The Internet and the media hold and present a large volume of information to the general public, on a daily basis. The trend of fake news has gained momentum, becoming, in most situations, impossible to counter since a multitude of people tend to believe it. Lies and manipulation have always existed, but nowadays they are so present in everyday life that it is very difficult to see the true face of things and people. Furthermore, the variety of software available on the Internet allows falsifying and reproducing, with extreme ease and in the most credible light, all the information and images presented. The same thing happened during the Covid-19 pandemic (alarming news about the number of dead, statistical data presented daily about the number of new infections, mandatory vaccination, etc.) when the global population seemed to be divided into two camps: on the one hand, people who resigned themselves to accepting all of the imposed restrictions and, on the other hand, people who revolted trying to prove that everything that was happening was just a plan for manipulating the world's population. Now, no one can accurately say whether the methods applied during the Covid-19 pandemic were the most appropriate, or what would it have been like if... But, after the two years of the pandemic, people realized that they live in a world full of uncertainties, that their freedoms are very fragile, that rights can have a provisional meaning and that the life we live can change in any moment.

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