

Policy Brief

Measures to Mitigate Pandemic Restrictions

Summary

Policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the global South were dominated by movement restrictions and lockdowns imposed in the global North, and not always relevant to the countries or geographical areas where they were imposed. Countries must be free to decide how to manage a global crisis, so their governments can take decisions that are in the best interests of their citizens, with specific reference to the poorest people, whose lives are already challenging. Many countries' political and public finance systems could not support mitigating measures to compensate the effects of the lockdowns and restrictions. Such measures rarely made up for the job losses, income reduction and erosion of social capital caused by closing economies. They also rarely reached some of the groups most affected – including those in the urban informal economy, poor migrants and poor women.

Key messages

- The dominant policy response to the pandemic was **not suited to many societies in the global South**: context-specific responses are critical to achieving a better balance between public health and socioeconomic considerations.
- **Restrictions need to be as limited as possible** in any given context, and measures taken to balance public health with social and economic progress. Where restrictions on movement or the closure of borders, markets or schools are necessary, a stronger portfolio of mitigating measures than emerged in the Covid-19 pandemic is needed to prevent significant impoverishment and destitution. Generally, such restrictions should be minimised. For example, decisions about school closures could be made locally, depending on circumstances.

- Mitigating measures decision makers should **review for their appropriateness and feasibility in any context include:** expanded and deepened social protection; furlough payments; ambitious household debt management measures; exemptions and support for agriculture and food security; a more positive approach to urban and rural informal non-farm economies; development of tried and tested alternatives to school, with an emphasis on person-to-person teaching where access to digital systems is limited; and professional development and support for teachers.
- All of this requires **sound macroeconomic management and a strong fiscal position** – a critical policy priority.
- Longer-term **pandemic preparedness should focus on significantly increased health investment** – in community-based and primary care, but also hospital capacity – which would result in less panic, and greater security and agency in managing a pandemic.
- Decision makers in a crisis with many different effects need to come from a **variety of sectors**, so that social and economic considerations can be balanced with public health concerns.
- Decision makers need a **good understanding of the effects of policies** on poor and vulnerable citizens.
- Wherever possible, decisions on implementing measures central governments recommend should be **decentralised to the most local level**, where there is capacity to make those decisions, and to take local people's situations and interests into account.

The case for additional mitigating measures

The concern to protect lives generally dominated policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, while livelihoods and resilience were secondary or barely addressed. While protecting lives was clearly extremely important, where lives were in danger, risks differed significantly across populations, and were not adequately assessed in specific contexts. The measures taken were often not proportionate to the level of risk that was actually present, which was significantly lower for populations in poorer countries than richer ones because of the poorer countries' more youthful demographic structures, and the outdoor character of economic and social life.

In any case, the lives vs livelihoods trade-off is artificial, as losing lives has a massive impact on household wellbeing, and poverty resulting from livelihood losses can feed into ill health and loss of life (especially for infants and children). In relatively poor countries, with young populations that might have been less severely

affected by the virus, as became noticeable relatively early in the pandemic, it made sense to focus on livelihoods as much as lives. This brief focuses in particular on the trade-off between imposing restrictions as the leading response to a pandemic, and making social and economic progress.

To achieve a better balance between these objectives, mitigating measures¹ need significant strengthening, especially but not only in low-income countries (LICs). The experiences of countries such as Cambodia or Bangladesh indicate that this balance can be achieved. Key factors are fiscal space including borrowing capacity, political commitment to protect the welfare of vulnerable citizens, and an ability to assess and reassess risks in the round, as well as to implement mitigating measures. These factors varied significantly, as did investment in and rates of vaccination, which significantly increased how quickly restrictions could be

¹ In this report, 'mitigating measures' refer to those which relieved the negative effects of restrictions introduced to manage the spread of Covid-19. 'Restrictions' refer to workplace, market, school, border and public space closures and movement restrictions, which were (variably) imposed across the world in response to the pandemic. 'Stringency' of restrictions is a measure of how strictly these restrictions were imposed.

lifted from 2021 onwards. More generally, the pandemic revealed a big divide opening up between LICs and other countries on a number of indicators, across a range of mitigating measures.

Excess mortality during the pandemic was related to the range of mitigating measures in LICs (measures introduced to mitigate the effects of restrictions) – surprisingly, not to the stringency of the restrictions introduced to manage the spread of the virus in low-

“Context-specific responses should balance public health and socioeconomic progress.”

and middle-income countries (LMICs) more generally. A crosscountry analysis suggests the need to promote non-standard approaches to and innovation in pandemic management in LMICs to take account of different socioeconomic contexts, and virus dynamics and effects.

Policy recommendations

Policy responses to promote recovery from pandemic-driven poverty

A significant hike in **long-term investment in health services** is definitely needed to put countries in a better position, to help with recovery and withstand future pandemics. Where such investments had already been made, as in Nicaragua, governments were in a better position to manage the pandemic and also make decisions that would minimise socioeconomic damage from imposing restrictions.

National decision-making in the pandemic was best when joined up across several sectors and disciplines – ‘who is in the room’ making decisions makes a difference. Many decisions in the management of and recovery from a pandemic are best taken at local level – if there is capacity to do so – as a number of countries discovered as the pandemic continued over time. This helped to minimise the disruptions that restrictions caused. Local-level decision-making has been at the frontier of good practice in humanitarian work in recent years – such lessons need to be applied to pandemic management, too.

Social protection (especially in the form of social cash transfers) was the main global response to mitigate the effects of restrictions. But many measures were short-lived and did not continue through the pandemic, despite continued recourse to lockdowns and other restrictions. Where they were of longer duration and built on previous strong social protection systems, effects could be positive and services were appreciated. Much stronger national social protection systems (social assistance) are still required in most LMICs, which can then be adapted and expanded in crisis situations if this is to be an effective policy response.

“Restrictions need to be as limited as possible.”

Other economic policies could also be significant in preventing impoverishment: household debt management measures or special measures for returning migrants, for example. However, in most settings these measures were absent, late or weak. Many governments provided financial support and tax relief to formal businesses. However, measures directly targeting informal economies where most poor and vulnerable people work were badly needed but neglected, with the exception of some measures supporting smallholder farming and financial services.

“Good crisis decision making is joined up and decentralised.”

A **new deal** for the informal economy is therefore needed, following the pandemic. As women are frequently in informal employment or self-employment, this would particularly benefit them, helping to compensate the very negative effects they experienced from lockdowns, movement restrictions and school closures.

Financial services were not as responsive as they could have been during the pandemic. Mobile money was extremely useful and could be more widely extended in future. Some financial institutions postponed repayments, but continued charging interest, thus making loans more expensive. There could be significant learning from the US where interest was also frozen. A review of financial services, including microfinance, is urgently needed following the pandemic to redress the damage done and to avoid future household over-indebtedness prior to future emergencies. Additional regulation may be required.

Macroeconomic management really matters – where the macroeconomy had been well managed, there was a possibility of a balanced policy response, with additional public support to health services and social protection, without recourse to heavy borrowing. For example, as a result of its prudent fiscal management, Cambodia, which had recently become a middle-income country, was able to provide furlough payments, additional social protection coverage and depth, and other public expenditures.

School closures were (over)long and imposed early in the pandemic, with massive learning losses resulting, especially for children in poor and rural households. The learning losses are likely to lead to greater future poverty than the present poverty created by the pandemic. There was significant variation in the length of school closures. The extremely long closures widespread in parts of Latin America and South Asia are puzzling, in some cases persisting long after economies reopened. This is perhaps explained by the absence of a strong lobby for school students compared to enterprise- and worker-based lobbies and protests; but also by governments’ concerns with their legitimacy in the eyes of the population, which might not have been enhanced by prematurely reopening schools, despite the increasingly well-evidenced learning losses.

Alternative models allowed parents to choose whether to send children to school, or local authorities to decide when schools should close or open depending on infection rates. These models could be adopted more widely in a future pandemic – depending, of course, on virus dynamics and the extent to which children are infected or are carriers – to minimise learning losses and learning poverty. They would be easier to adopt where investment in spare capacity in the health services prior to the pandemic had been adequate such that there was no panic about avoiding overwhelming the health services.

School feeding programmes can help with child nutrition, as well as providing motivation to attend school, but were also widely lost during the pandemic. LICs need especially significant investment in school feeding programmes.

“The informal economy needs a New Deal.”

Policy responses to the pandemic could be better where they take account of the **multiple crises** that affect people in the bottom half of the distribution, in particular. These include notable energy and food price rises during or in the wake of the pandemic, and other crises caused by drought, flooding or conflict. Joined-up responses are easiest to implement where crisis response decisions are taken in a joined-up way.

Integrating pandemic or conflict management into disaster risk management (DRM) and the mandates of DRM agencies has advanced in recent years. Much more rapid advances are also needed in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, as well as social protection systems, to reduce the negative effects of multiple, layered crises (polycrisis) on poor and vulnerable people.

Further reading

Bizoza, A. *et al.* (2023) Chronic Poverty Report: Pandemic Poverty [weblink]

Green, T and Fazi, T (2023) The Covid Consensus: The Global Assault on Democracy and the Poor—A Critique from the Left. Hurst

Grant, C. *et al.* (2023) People’s Agenda for Pandemic Preparedness, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/CC.2023.004

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