

VoxEU: The world's poor cannot protect themselves well from the novel coronavirus

Recommendations to limit the spread of Covid-19 call for social distancing, washing, and access to information and treatment. However, the poor are less likely to have the kind of dwellings and infrastructure to follow World Health Organisation's recommendations, [writes Caitlin Brown, Martin Ravallion, Dominique van de Walle for VoxEU.](#)



Informal sector workers are particularly vulnerable

The World Health Organization and numerous national governments have made detailed recommendations on how people can best protect themselves from the new coronavirus.¹ The prevailing recommendations have four main elements:

1. **Learning:** A fundamental requirement is to be able to receive reliable information on local disease incidence and protection measures. Compliance with this recommendation requires

access to communication tools: radio, TV, phone, the internet.

2. **Isolating:** Social distancing (including lockdown as its extreme form) to lower the reproduction rate of the virus by reducing contacts per day. This requires both a personal behavioural response and suitable home-infrastructure. A dwelling with walls, a roof, and closures is desirable. In settings with large (often extended) families, intra-household transmission becomes more important; a sufficiently low density of people in the dwelling is advantageous. And there must be certain facilities: for example, you can't isolate as effectively if you have to leave the dwelling or yard to go to the toilet.
3. **Washing:** Regular handwashing with soap and water is strongly emphasised for protection from the virus. This too requires suitable facilities within the residence.
4. **Treatment:** If key symptoms (fever, difficulty breathing) develop, seeking medical help is advised. This requires physical access to health-care facilities.

The belief that these non-pharmaceutical measures can help contain the spread of illness is consistent with the available evidence. However, virtually all of these recommendations require household environments that support the capacity to protect from the virus – what we call the 'home environment for protection'.

The home environment for protection is the result of past wealth-constrained choices, and these are unlikely to change quickly. Dwelling attributes such as size, construction, and location (determining access to treatment) cannot be easily adjusted in response to the immediate virus threat; nor is health all that people care about when allocating their resources. All of the aspects of the home environment for protection are likely to be affected by wealth, meaning that poorer households have less capacity to follow WHO recommendations. This is to be expected between countries as well as within them.

Exacerbating matters are the likely behavioural responses to the WHO recommendations. Even if following all the recommendations is feasible given the dwelling and possessions, being poor in terms of income or wealth can be expected to reduce people's capacity to survive in isolation for anything more than a short period (as discussed further in Ravallion 2020).

For informal-sector workers in countries with limited social protection, staying home is likely to entail a potentially devastating loss of income. There is evidence that people in poorer regions reduced their mobility for work and other activities less than those in wealthier regions (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020). Poverty diminishes an individual's capacity to isolate and hence protect their family from the virus.

Thus, there is both a direct wealth effect on the capacity to socially isolate and an indirect effect via the attributes of the home environment that allow individuals to follow the recommendations for protection. Social protection policies responding to the pandemic focus primarily on the direct effect, by aiming to support consumption (especially of food) of the particularly needy while in isolation (Gentilini et al. 2020).

So what do we know about the indirect effect?

A key quote from the article:

The developing world, and especially its poorest half, is ill-prepared to protect itself from this virus. The recommendations that have been implemented on a massive scale in the rich world must be considered near fiction for the world's poor. Given the virus's infection rate, the likely degree of

exposure among a large segment of the population of the developing world also points to a serious concern for the entire population.

If poor families have a low health environment for protection, then complementary policies will be needed to help protect the poor from the virus. While challenges in supporting the food system as well as cash and food transfers have been emphasised in recent policy discussions, inadequate home environment for protection cannot be ignored.

The housing stock cannot be changed rapidly. But some things can be done now. The current infrastructure for information (particularly mobile-phone coverage) holds promise for getting out public health messages and information on how to access consumption support. Policies such as distributing or subsidising sturdy face masks, soap, and improved water access could be feasible in the near term and justified by both external benefits and equity impact. Home-grown innovative adaptations to the realities of life in the developing world will be crucial.

[The full original article first appeared on VoxEU here on 27 June 2020](#)

Author

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior European Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc

Sector Strategist, Financials

Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan

Junior Economist

samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl

Senior Economist, Germany

Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne

Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst

rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani

Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)

mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill

Credit Strategist

timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek

Senior Economist, Poland

leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA

Senior High Yield Credit Strategist

oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet

Head of European Rates Strategy

antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek

Global Head of Sector Research

jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare

edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole

FX Strategist

francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen

Sector Economist

jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin

Chief Economist, CIS

dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov

Senior Credit Analyst
egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist
sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga

Senior Sector Economist, Energy
gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier

Head of Corporates Sector Strategy
nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland
charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter

Behavioural Scientist
+31(0)611172684
laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania
valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK
james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials
suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri
thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors
maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands
marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland

piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research

+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist

+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist

+31 20 563 8801

martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland

Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com