

Covid-19: Accelerating recovery

Introduction

Covid-19 infections and related illness and death are rightly at the forefronts of our minds. There is a clear and urgent need to reduce transmission and support the healthcare sector to keep suffering and loss of life to a minimum. This is the immediate response. In addition, we need to consider the short and medium-term responses. This requires us to assess the other ways in which Covid-19 is leading to suffering, and plan how to soften these blows and recover from them when possible. We suggest here that if we change the way in which we look for interventions, particularly for affected children and youth, we can increase the chances of accelerated recovery, even in highly resource constrained settings.

With African countries in mind, we suggest that rather than seeking to identify the best intervention for each individual problem exacerbated by Covid-19, we need to look for those which address multiple problems simultaneously – ‘accelerators’. By doing so we can improve multiple outcomes, even within exceptionally constrained national and aid budgets (Cluver et al 2019; Sherr et al, 2020).

The illness, death and pressures on the health sector are clear to see. What is obscured is the suffering of the families of those infected. The loss of loved ones, breadwinners and caregivers places an emotional and financial burden on families. Those families with limited human and financial resources to carry these burdens may well slip into a downward spiral leading to a host of negative outcomes. We know that these consequences can be severe, (Sun et al 2020) particularly for families who were already struggling, extrapolating from existing body of research on the family consequences of AIDS and Ebola related deaths (Macedo et al 2018, Sherr et al 2014).

Then there are the costs of prevention. The response to Covid-19 is unprecedented (Eaton et al 2020). From cancellations of major events through to strict lockdown orders, governments around the world, including in Africa, have taken steps to reduce the speed of transmission. Critical for the protection of life as these interventions may be, the socio-economic costs are huge. People have lost income, experienced reduced access to services, including health and education and some are suffering from being confined with abusive partners or parents. Children and youth face food shortages, school closure (Viner et al 2020), examination disruption and the long term educational losses. Again, families which do not have the resources to manage the loss of income or deal with the reduced access to services could slip into a downward spiral, with potentially long-term implications.

There is an urgent need to design and refine measures to lighten the burden on families dealing with illness and death, and those struggling with the cost of mitigation measures. We can, however, not stop with short term relief.

As measures to reduce the spread of the virus are relaxed, we will begin the process of recovery. This will be a challenging time for all countries. But for those with fragile economies and high rates of poverty, as is the case for many African, Asian and South American countries, the challenges will be particularly acute. Preliminary estimates from

The World Bank suggest that Covid-19 will push close to 50 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, with sub-Saharan Africa being hardest hit (Mahler et al 2020). While there is likely to be some bounce back economic growth, it will not restore countries to their pre-epidemic status. Currencies will be weaker, making imports more expensive, while demand for exports will be lower. Many businesses will have folded. Unemployment rates will be higher. Some goods and services will be in short supply leading to higher prices. With the economic and social burdens, come a profound human cost (Moccia et al 2020; Zhai et al 2020). The economic, social and mental health sequelae need to be considered (Xie et al 2020; Liu et al 2020; Liang et al 2020). Supporting families, including those who will have been pushed into poverty or deeper in to poverty, to recover in such a context will be difficult. The situation will be more acute if wealthy countries make cuts to international assistance. Governments will have to invest in interventions to promote recovery wisely.

Searching for accelerators

When the goal is to improve multiple outcomes, as it will be when we begin the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is best to search for interventions which improve these multiple outcomes simultaneously or at least a few at a time. As obvious as this point may seem, intervention search and selection has typically not been done in this way. The traditional approach has been to identify outcome by outcome the interventions which most efficiently improve targeted or specific outcomes. This is not problematic when you have only a few outcomes on which you are focused, or when you have sufficient budget to address each outcome separately. However, when you are seeking to improve multiple outcomes, especially with highly restrictive budget constraints, this approach is cumbersome and may well lead to inefficiencies.

Accelerators are provisions, interventions or policies which improve multiple target outcomes. The idea was proposed by UNDP as they considered how countries with limited resources could approach improving the many targets outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The approach is all the more relevant today as we need to rapidly respond to challenges on multiple fronts in the recovery from Covid-19. Searching for the best way to recover on each front will not work.

Searching for accelerators requires us to take a step back and consider the needs of people, families and communities, rather than the challenge of improving a single indicator. This step back is required as we have to identify the common causes. For example, if we seek to help students return to school, we may think of providing books and stationery; if we seek to improve access to healthcare, vouchers for travel; and food baskets to address nutrition. But if we step back we may think of cash transfers to improve all at once or employment to improve all at once and more. At times the search for accelerators requires us to consider what combination of interventions is required. Individuals, families and communities may be struggling in multiple interacting ways and only a package of interventions will lead to improvements.

It is this shift in focus we argue is critical in the coming months. We cannot afford to address the challenges we will face piecemeal – if for no other reason than the delay this will introduce and the prolonging of suffering which that implies.

Critical windows

The challenges associated with Covid-19 family illness and death, and costly mitigation measures present a high risk to children and youth in sensitive stages of their development such as early childhood and adolescence. For these children, the shock of a death in the family or the loss of income associated with a lockdown is more likely to have lifelong implications. Intervening to protect these populations is critically important, and again, accelerators may have a key role to play.

Undernutrition or toxic stress (Shonkoff 2016; Shonkoff et al 2012) in early childhood has been shown to influence neurological development and a host of related long-term outcomes, including educational attainment, income in adulthood and later life health. Similarly adolescence is a period of rapid development which is sensitive to environmental influences (Patton et al, 2016). Moreover, it is a period in which decisions which influence people's entire lives are made, such as the decision to return to school or not (Kasen et al, 1998).

These sensitive developmental windows mean that the emotional and economic shocks associated with the loss of family members or the consequences of lockdowns could have profound consequences. Ensuring that these groups are adequately protected at this time, and the recovery in their family environment is rapid, is essential.

Of particular concern for early childhood development is the consequences of illness, death and lockdowns on children's nutrition, the constraints on care associated with the physical and mental health of their caregivers and difficulty in accessing services, including education, health and protective services.

For older children and adolescents, concerns also include food insecurity and the well-being of caregivers. Their own mental health must be considered. There are also major concerns related to disruptions to education, particularly for those who are in critical phases, such as approaching final exams. Performance in exams may suffer and drop-out rates may increase. The massive increase in employment is a further concern. It is already difficult for young people to enter the labour market, this will become more difficult when they are competing with more people, many of whom will be more experienced, or when a cohort of students have not been able to complete final exams due to COVID shutdowns.

Lockdown and other related measures will have consequences for entire communities and it will be difficult to single out particular population groups. This is why the search for accelerators may again be critical. We will need interventions which help with broader recovery across the population while being particularly calibrated to the needs of children in sensitive developmental phases.

Differentiated response

The search for accelerators can push the discussion to large scale interventions which benefit many people in many different ways. Policy improvements or social protection interventions are good examples. These have great potential and should certainly be explored. However, in the recovery from Covid-19 and the interventions to prevent its spread, some highly targeted interventions may well be needed.

There will be those individuals and families, possibly even communities, which are particularly hard hit. These would likely include those who were already in a vulnerable position. Such vulnerable people may not have the capacity to benefit from general interventions. They are often constrained by other factors. For example, a child bride may not benefit from fee free schooling in her area. Nor would a disabled person from a public works employment program. Unless, in both cases, additional interventions were included to allow them to benefit.

In the recovery from Covid-19 it will be important to identify those who are hardest hit and have limited capacity to benefit. Intensive packages of interventions for these groups will be warranted, in the interests of equity, but also to avoid long term negative consequences at the individual and societal level.

Conclusion

Covid-19 and the response to it are unprecedented in modern times. As we battle to minimize the illness and death we must also acknowledge the suffering of families who lose loved ones and the widespread suffering associated with lockdowns and other prevention measures. The ramifications across the globe are huge, covering long term changes to society, social interactions, economic systems, employment, education, health care and human opportunity. Children and youth will face a new reality, a new course of life with opportunity and barriers. These will all be tinged with an evolving reaction from resilience to despair. We must look for ways to mitigate harm and promote recovery.

Here we have argued that as we search for the right path to recovery we do so in a new way. We urge for the needs of children and adolescents to receive particular focus. We take a step back and see the many ways in which people are suffering and look for common causes. Causes which if addressed will improve multiple outcomes at the same time. Taking this step back will lead us to interventions which could accelerate the recovery, and in time take us to a better place than we started.

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