

# The pandemic is giving Australians a small taste of how the rest of the world lives

by Luke McKenzie

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Empty shelves in a supermarket in Victoria, Australia

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While many in Australia have faced significant cost due to the global pandemic, most of us have experienced just a small taste of some of the challenges and hardships that a majority of the rest of the world regularly face. The **inability to buy all you want at the shops**, often-changing government restrictions and **fears of an overrun health system** are not uncommon for individuals in low- and middle-income countries. Yet, many of us in high-income countries are experiencing them for the first time.

Although there is significant variation in the lived experience of individuals **within countries**, the social and economic opportunities of most Australians are significantly different from most of the rest of the world. The Australian way of life is an anomaly. For example, **the median Australian adult's wealth is the highest of any country and nearly 40 times larger than the global median**. To acknowledge this fact, there is a growing push to discard the label "the developing world" for that of the "**the Majority World**". Here I describe how the new or heightened challenges we are experiencing due to the pandemic have been commonplace for much of the rest of the world. I focus on issues relating to the economy and health.

Large-scale unemployment and high job insecurity increasingly describe Australia's pandemic-troubled labour force in 2020. But it is even more characteristic of many poor countries. Australia's unemployment rate for September was 6.9 per cent. There are plenty of countries that had pre-pandemic unemployment rates **greater than 20 per cent** and **two-thirds of the global workforce is in the insecure informal economy**.

There were widespread empty shelves at Australian grocery stores. **Some excluded from our safety nets have gone hungry and needed to rely on free food**. Globally, this is **not a new phenomenon**. Around **9 per cent of the world's population was undernourished last year**. For some in Australia, the response to this and the deprivation of entertainment options outside the home was to begin **making more**

**food from scratch**. In these strange times, we voluntarily adopted an unwanted challenge faced by many in the Majority World.

In a similar vein, for the foreseeable future, we won't be able to engage in overseas travel and for much of the year our ability to go on holiday domestically has been constrained. When in lockdown we cannot go to our favourite restaurants, retail shops or entertainment venues. These are luxuries that many never consume.

In Australia, people are **struggling** as there is increased uncertainty about the future and we feel a lack of control. A lack of power and control is a **defining attribute of the poverty** experienced by many in the Majority World. Further, state and federal governments have been changing various rules and regulations with short notice, with some **heavy-handed examples**. However, citizens in poor nations with little government accountability are **often subject to such processes**. Consider that even in India, the world's largest democracy, Prime Minister Modi announced that **86 per cent of India's currency would no longer be valid less than four hours before it came into effect**.

Finally, while we have only feared the possibility of an overrun, underequipped and inaccessible health care system, such constraints are the **norm** in many low-income countries. These nations also **contain** many communicable **diseases** that have been eliminated or are otherwise **not present in richer countries**.

But there is a further catch. Many of these hardships for Australians were, or will only be, temporary. Among other initiatives, the Australian government prudently responded with **massive expenditures** to minimise the pandemic's impact on **domestic violence, mental health** and job loss.

The weak starting point of those in the Majority World has **compounded** the **severity** of the crisis' impact on the **most vulnerable**. Many poor countries' governments lack social safety nets and have been **constrained in their ability to respond**.

Does this mean we should not lament, speak out against, or address the COVID-caused hardships we face in Australia? No, it does not. However, I have found putting our challenges through this lens helpful. It makes me fret them less and gives me confidence that we will get by. The rest of the world has persisted in the face of worse.

Additionally, by understanding our situation as global outliers, it builds the case for us, as a nation and individuals, to support those who had **little and now have even less**. Our high levels of personal wealth, well-funded social safety net and the government's ability to borrow cheaply provide buffers **other nations do not** have. Our capacity to respond and dampen the situation is its own luxury. We should

extend this to others.

Earlier this year, young people in Lae, Papua New Guinea, raised over \$60,000 for bushfire-affected communities in Australia. We should be inspired by this example and donate generously to organisations addressing existing and new concerns for the Majority World. Many charities have been struggling to raise revenue this year. Given the even greater need, now is not the time for us to stop giving to such causes.

Our government has already promised to distribute a vaccine to the Pacific and Southeast Asia, temporarily increased the aid budget and suspended PNG's debt repayments, but more can be done.

In this time of global privation, we have cut our aid to countries outside the Pacific. We can be more generous to these nations. Further, we should provide concessional financing or debt relief to the governments of tourism-dependent Pacific nations needing to support their citizens and we should consider direct mechanisms to assist struggling households in the Pacific. Such actions will allow us to decrease the drastic difference between the lives of Australians and others around the world.

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*This post is part of the #COVID-19 and international development series.*

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/the-pandemic-is-giving-australians-a-small-taste-of-how-the-rest-of-the-world-lives-20201117/>