

# Need for COVID-19 humanitarian aid

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More than 2.9 million people have contracted the coronavirus and over 207,000 have died as of April 27. The vast majority of those infections and deaths have been in the United States, Europe and China.

While developing countries have so far been spared the worst of COVID-19, they often lack the resources needed to deal with the crisis and are seeing an increasing number of infections. A situation they share with many developed countries.

One of the characteristics of this crisis has been the shortage of personal protective equipment. In the United States, individuals have been encouraged to make their own face masks at home. Similarly, the United Kingdom would not have enough face masks if it required its citizens to wear them outside. Medical gowns and gloves have also been in short supply around the world.

For those who contracted COVID-19 and are hospitalized ventilators are often required. In Italy, the shortage of ventilators forced doctors to make the difficult choice about who might be responsive to treatment and which patients should be sent home without care.

Dealing with the health crisis, as South Korea has demonstrated, also requires access to an adequate supply of test kits to track and trace COVID-19's progression in society. For countries hoping to avoid the types of economic lockdowns seen in Italy, and to a lesser extent the United States; or to restart economic activity this is also a necessity.

While shortages of personal protective equipment have been a challenge for many countries, the shortage of ventilators is especially severe in some African countries. According to the International Rescue Committee, the Central African Republic has just three ventilators. South Sudan has only four ventilators, while Sierra Leone has 13.

For countries lacking in the equipment to deal with the coronavirus, this is unlikely to be just a short-term challenge. The head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the U.S. has noted that there could be a second wave of COVID-19 infections in the fall that is worse than the current outbreak.

In the absence of a vaccine or drugs that can treat COVID-19, countries will need access to tools such as test kits, face masks, medical gowns, gloves, and ventilators to deal with the crisis. The development of a vaccine or a drug that can successfully treat COVID-19 may be a year away, making preparations for the months ahead more urgent. The coronavirus may be with us for the foreseeable future.

As the crisis has eased in South Korea, it has played an increasingly important role in helping other countries manage COVID-19. In early April, South Korea hosted 400 health professionals from 13 countries to explain its containment measures. The South Korea government has also helped to arrange commercial purchases of test kits by governments and private entities, including the purchase of over 100,000 test kits by Morocco.

While commercial transactions will help to meet some of the need in developing countries, providing humanitarian assistance will also be necessary in dealing with the crisis. At the emergency ASEAN + 3 summit, President Moon Jae-in said that South Korea would respond to the fullest extent possible to the humanitarian needs of ASEAN and others. South Korea has also had discussions with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees about how it can provide assistance.

Some of this is beginning to take shape with South Korean offers of assistance to Indonesia, Iran and other countries, but more than 120 countries have sought South Korean produced test kits for purchase or donation as a result of the success Seoul has had in managing COVID-19.

With concerns over the quality of aid provided by China to European countries, South Korea may become a preferred destination for the supply of test kits and other medical supplies.

The most direct way to provide aid to countries in need is to appropriate funds for government assistance as part of a new special budget. This aid could even have a small benefit for South Korea's struggling airline industry.

Aid could be flown to its recipients by Korean Air and Asiana Airlines. While delivering aid shipments won't resolve the challenges Korean Air and Asiana face, it would be a commercial means to provide a degree of support to both airlines as they deal with the collapse of international air travel.

There is also a need to think longer-term. In 2018, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) spent \$112.5 million on healthcare. If the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted any issue, it's the need for improved healthcare. Providing additional funding for KOICA to build healthcare capacity in developing countries will be a critical task in lessening the impact of future health crises.

South Korea's success in managing COVID-19 has opened up new commercial opportunities, but the crisis is also creating humanitarian needs. South Korea can play an important role in that space as well.



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