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## **Covid-19 in Morocco: The Economic and Social Implications of the Pandemic and the Government Responses**

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## Abstract

The novel coronavirus, which broke out in Morocco at the beginning of March 2020, is a disease of pandemic proportions. Its first outbreak was identified in late 2019 in a Chinese city called Wuhan before it spreads like wildfire to the rest of the world. Regarding the cause of the disease, it is a new strain of coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). As soon as the first case of coronavirus appeared in China, the Moroccan government, as is the case with the governments of most countries, took a set of preventive measures to protect the health and safety of its citizens. Although these measures spared Morocco the worst scenario, especially in the number of infections and deaths, they had serious economic and social repercussions on Moroccans. In this paper, we explore Morocco's experience of Covid-19 and the government's measures to contain its spread. Then, we highlight the economic and social impacts of these measures and the steps taken to mitigate them.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; measures; Morocco ; outbreak; economic and social conditions

## Introduction

The emergence of several cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in the city of Wuhan (China) wrought fear and terror all over the world. The whole world moved swiftly to besiege the pandemic and prevent its spread. As in all countries, and Morocco is not an exception, a set of measures and decisions aimed at combating the spread of this pandemic and mitigating its impacts on citizens were adopted. Hence, aware of the limited available sources in the health sector, the Moroccan government, under the wise guidance of his Majesty the King, developed a clear and effective strategy to face the challenges of the crisis caused by COVID-19. After sealing off the borders, preventing gatherings and closing schools and universities, the government declared a state of health emergency on 02 March 2020. These preventive measures, however, had serious consequences on various economic sectors, which

contributed to the increase in the unemployment rate and the decline in people's purchasing power. Therefore, faced with this deteriorating situation, the government decided to provide financial support to all those who suffered from its decisions aimed at combating the pandemic. What measures and procedures did the Moroccan government take to protect the health and safety of its citizens? How did these measures affect their social and economic conditions? And how did the government act to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on both people and businesses?

## Coronaviruses: an overview

Coronaviruses are sorts of infections that usually affect the respiratory system of mammals, including humans. They are connected with the common cold, pneumonia, and severe respiratory syndrome (SARS) and can also affect the gastrointestinal tract (Syed, 2020, p. 8). Prior to the year 2003, human

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CoVs were not thought of as a dangerous infection. The strains in circulation were giving rise to minor side effects in immunologically competent people. Regularly, the infected suffers from a runny nose, cough, sore throat, headache, and fever which may persist for many days. In the worst-case scenario, the infection could cause a lower respiratory sickness like pneumonia and bronchitis, mainly for those having a weakened immune system (Alanagreh et al., 2020).

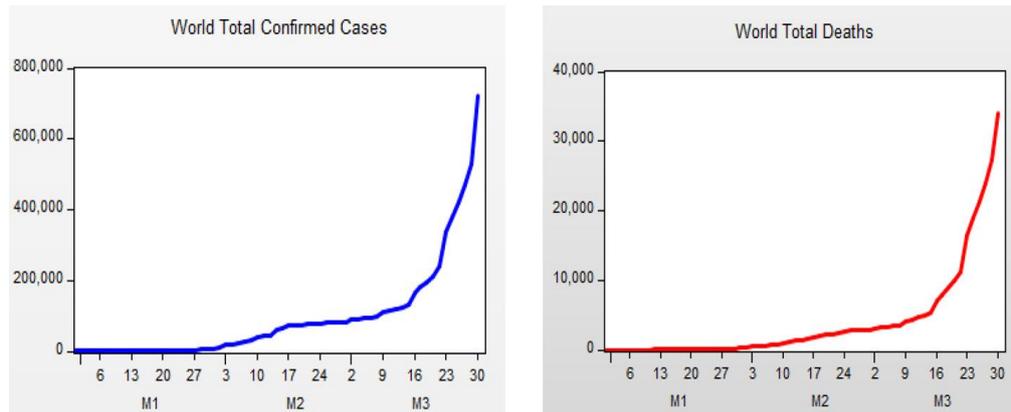
However, in November 2002 the first outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) caused by the SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV) emerged in Guangdong, China. The SARS-Cov, which had been transmitted from animals to humans, soon became a global pandemic due to its rapid spread among humans. For instance, during a family visit to Hong Kong, a medical professor from Foshan in Guangdong province passed on the virus to 2 of his relatives, 4 health care employees and 12 neighbouring inhabitants. Soon the virus was transmitted to many other countries, such as Canada, Singapore and Vietnam, resulting in 8422 patients and 919 deaths. Between November 16, 2002 and June 3, 2003, 5328 were infected and 349 lost their lives in China alone (Yang et al., 2020, p. 3).

Since September 2012, a new infectious virus causing a severe respiratory sickness, called the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), has been spreading in the Arabian Peninsula. MERS-CoV is a SARS-like infection displaying with flu-like symptoms (Garout et al., 2018, p. 87). As for the source of the virus, evidence demonstrates that MERS-CoV has been transmitted to humans from dromedary camels. The strains of the virus isolated from the lung and nasal swab samples from those camels are

identical to those found in human patients (Zhu et al., 2019, p. 358). MERS-CoV, which first emerged in Saudi Arabia, spread to other countries in the Middle East, such as Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Tunisia, and Jordan. The infection also spread to the United States, Southeast Asia and many North African and European countries. In September 2018, the World Health Organization declared that MERS-CoV infection had been detected in 27 countries, with 2260 infected people and 803 deaths (Al Mutair & Ambani, 2020).

In December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown origin appeared in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China. After a few weeks, a novel corona-virus was recognized as the cause of these pneumonia cases (Di Gennaro et al., 2020, p. 1). Preliminary investigations indicated that most patients had worked in or visited a famous seafood market that exhibited live animals for sale (Hu et al., 2020). Although the market was quickly closed for disinfection, the novel corona-virus became rapidly so widespread that it caused an unprecedented epidemic in the whole of China. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic due to its quick spread across the globe (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). On 30 March 2020, the World's confirmed cases of COVID-19 climbed to 723 732 patients and 34000 deaths (see Figure 1), and the pace of new infections was accelerating (Worldometers, 2020). Although the elderly were more vulnerable to infection, the novel coronavirus attacked people of all ages. Most patients start noticing symptoms within 2 to 14 days after catching the virus. These symptoms include dry cough, fatigue, fever, conjunctivitis headache, dyspnea, myalgia, sore throat, nausea, rhinorrhea, vomiting and diarrhea (Ozdemir, 2020, p. 243).

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Source: Data obtained from Worldometers (2020)

Figure1: World total COVID-19 patients and deaths (January 1, 2020 to March 30, 2020)

### COVID-19 outbreak in Morocco

In a press release issued on 2 March 2020, the Ministry of Health declared the first COVID 19 confirmed case in Morocco. The infected person was a Moroccan citizen residing in Italy. The patient exhibited mild symptoms, such as breathing difficulties, cough, cephalalgia and stomach-ache. He was isolated and subjected to medical supervision in Moulay Youssef Hospital in Casablanca (Ministry of Health of Morocco, 2020). Morocco’s Minister of Health held a press conference on 3 March 2020 to keep the public informed about the new case. During his talk to the

press, the Minister affirmed that the 39-year-old patient had contacted 104 people during his flight. He added, his contacts in Morocco are all from Casablanca and El Jadida. However, some of them went to other cities, such as Ouarzazate. All these people were traced and closely monitored (Kasraoui, 2020). Day after day, more and more positive cases were confirmed. On 31 October 2020, the Ministry of Health announced that the total number of people contaminated with the novel coronavirus reached 219084, including 181275 people recovered and 3695 deceased, while 3107566 cases were excluded because they had negative test results (see Figure 2).

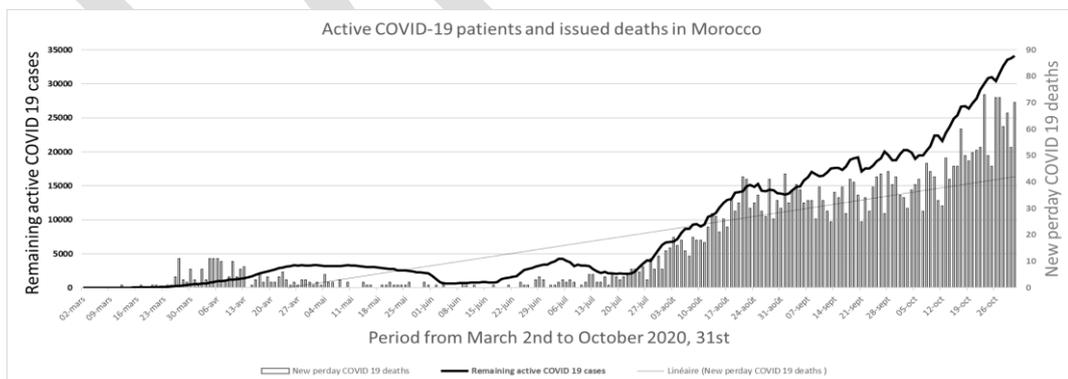


Figure2: Active COVID-19 patients and issued deaths in Morocco between March and October 2020 (Bennis, 2020)

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## Methodology

This study aims to explore the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in Morocco and its socio-economic implications for Moroccan citizens. The data used in this paper are those published daily by different governmental ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, which daily reports the number of positive cases, deaths and recoveries, the Ministry of Finance, which informs the citizens of the ravaging effects of the pandemic on the Moroccan economy and the Ministry of Interior, which publishes documents aiming to ensure that the protective measures recommended by the health officials are applied. Other sources of secondary data, such as websites and journal articles are also used for purposes of building a solid foundation for our research study.

## Morocco's measures to besiege the outbreak of COVID-19

Immediately after sounding the alarm by the World Health Organization about Covid-19 outbreak, Morocco took a set of proactive measures to prevent the novel coronavirus from reaching its territory. This anticipatory response crystallized in the formulation of a National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 in January 2020, when the virus was still not yet in Morocco. This plan aimed to regulate and standardize the interventions of the health sector and other sectors at the national level (the Moroccan Ministry of Health, 2020).

As soon as the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was identified in Casablanca, the government took several drastic measures. The first of these was the issuance of a press release by the Ministry of Interior on 4 March 2020 which prevented the organization of all types of International events in Morocco (the Moroccan Ministry of Interior, 2020). As a consequence, the 15th International Agricultural Exhibition, scheduled to take place in Meknes from April 14 to

19 as well as the International Grans Montana Forum, scheduled to take place in Dakhla from March 18 to 21 were cancelled (Kasraoui, 2020).

After the increase of cases among the people coming to Morocco from abroad, the government decided on 13 March to suspend all air flights and maritime links to and from the countries most affected by the pandemic (Layelmam, 2020). On 15 March 11 new cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in one day, all of them returned from outside Morocco's borders. Because of this dramatic increase, Morocco's air, marine and land borders were temporarily closed (The Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Abroad, 2002). To these closure border measures was added the shutdown of all educational institutions starting from March 16 and for an indefinite period. In-person instruction was replaced by distance education as some electronic platforms and Moroccan television channels started to broadcast lessons in the same week (Sebbani et al., 2020).

On 19 March 2020, the Moroccan government officially announced a state of health emergency, to come into force on 20 March 2020 at 6:00 pm local time, and to remain effective until 20 April 2020 with the possibility to prolong it until Moroccans' fragile state of health improves (Hekking, 2020). The state of health emergency was accompanied by a general confinement of the population. Hence, people were not allowed to leave their homes except in cases of paramount necessity: to go to buy food, medicine, or to go to a health center; to go out for family reasons or to provide assistance for people in difficulty; to go to the workplace. In such cases, people were authorized to leave their houses provided they get permission from local state officials. After two weeks of confinement, 5000 people were prosecuted for violating the state of health emergency (Adimi, 2020).

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On 7 April, the Moroccan government made the wearing of face masks mandatory for those allowed to go outside during the pandemic. Anyone who refuses to comply with this preventive measure may expose themselves to imprisonment for up to three months and a fine of up to 1300 Dirhams. And to provide these masks in sufficient quantities, the government mobilized a group of national manufacturers to produce protective masks for the national market, and an appropriate price was set for public sale at 80 centimes per unit with the support of the special fund that was established to manage the Covid-19 pandemic (Kasraoui, 2020).

As part of its response to the coronavirus outbreak, the Ministry of Health also reinforced its capacity of medical diagnostic testing to identify patients with COVID-19. For this reason, the national laboratory COVID-19 networking was created. This laboratory was strengthened by more than thirty public and private laboratories which had the potential to analyse SARS-CoV-2 samples in a safe environment. This enabled Morocco to increase the number of tests, which moved from 300 maximum tests per day in March to 9000 in May, then, 16000 in June to more than 20000 since the end of July (Bennis, 2020). Besides, to support its health services, Morocco managed to build a field hospital in April in Casablanca to receive patients with COVID-19. The hospital, whose construction cost \$450,000, has the capacity of some 700 beds. A similar hospital with a capacity of 200 in Nouaceur was built by Morocco's Royal Armed Forces in Nouaceur, near Casablanca. The two hospitals were equipped with the necessary medical supplies and equipment for the management of COVID-19 patients (Kasraoui, 2020).

These measures were accompanied by awareness-raising and precautionary campaigns to sensitize citizens about the dangers of COVID-19 and stress the need of collective commitment and compliance with preventive measures to prevent its spread. Public broadcasting services and all forms

of existing media in Morocco engaged seriously in these unprecedented campaigns. They were also frequently used by health officials to provide guidance and advice on the preventive measures that should be followed. These measures involve coughing away from others, physical distancing, mask wearing and regular washing of hands. Besides, Moroccan officials and security services roamed the streets and alleys to sensitize people on the risks of this deadly disease and urge them to stay at home and adhere to quarantine measures.

### **The economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 crisis in Morocco**

There is no doubt that the closure of borders, the national health emergency and the other restrictive measures which the Moroccan government had taken to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic led to serious economic and social consequences in Morocco. In a letter addressed to the European Union delegation on March 26, the Moroccan government expected that many sectors, such as tourism, cars and textile industries, would be heavily affected in 2020. The letter pointed out that the European Union contributes to more than 58% of Moroccan exports, 59% of foreign direct investments, and 70% of the Moroccan tourism industry. Therefore, restrictions on travel from and to the European Union would have serious repercussions on Morocco's economic and social development (Chtatou, 2020).

In early April 2020, 57% of all businesses suspended either permanently or temporarily their activities, which gave rise to a loss of more than 700,000 jobs, almost 20% of overall jobs, without including the finance and agriculture sectors. (The High Commission for Planning (HCP), 2020) The negative impact of the pandemic on the Moroccan economy might lead to the worst recession in Morocco since the mid-1990s. A baseline scenario shows that the Moroccan GDP declined by 4 percent in 2020, which goes against the projections of The High Commission for Planning, which had

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predicted, before the pandemic outbreak, the growth of GDP by 3.6 percent (World Bank, 2020).

One of the sectors hardest hit is the tourism industry, which plays a fundamental role in Morocco's economic and social development thanks to its ability to contribute to the inflow of foreign currency and the creation of new jobs. In contrast to the 12.93 million tourists who visited Morocco in 2019, the number dropped significantly to 100000 tourists in March 2020 (Nazaruk, 2020). This decrease in the number of tourists visiting Morocco led to a steady decrease in income. According to the Directorate of Studies and Financial Forecasts (DEPF), the losses incurred by the tourism sector were estimated at 42.4 billion dirhams (\$4.7 billion) in 2020, representing a drop in tourism revenue of about 53.8% compared to 2019. This substantial loss brought about a negative effect on airport traffic and accommodation businesses. As reported by the DEPF, "the volume of arrivals to Morocco fell by 78.9% at the end of November 2020, against an increase of 5.3% at the end of November 2019, and that of overnight stays by 72.3%" (As cited in Allen, 2021).

The automotive sector, which has become one of the main economic pillars in Morocco, also suffered setbacks due to the pandemic outbreak. For example, for the period from March to May 2020, supplies to this sector, which has achieved significant annual growth in terms of job creation and export, contracted by 56%. Similarly, its export displayed a significant decrease during the months of March, April and May by 79%, 76%, and 41% because of the falling demand in Morocco's principal markets. At the end of August, the volume of export sales decreased to 39.4 billion dirhams, after reaching 51.3 billion dirhams in 2019, a decline of 23.3% (Ministry of Economy and Finance and Administration Reform, 2021).

The textile and clothing sector, which occupies a fundamental place in Morocco's industrial activity as it provides 27% of industrial

jobs and generates 7% of the added value created by the country's industrial sector as a whole, was highly affected by the pandemic. At first, the clothing industry in Morocco has shown remarkable stability amid the global turbulence created by the Covid-19 crisis; however, the containment measures globally taken by most countries had a direct effect on both the supply and demand. Foreign demands for the Moroccan clothing and textile products decreased significantly, mainly from France and Spain which account for 60 percent of the sector's exports. Likewise, because of the conditions created by the pandemic, the importation of raw materials used for production was discontinued, mainly from China and Asia (World Bank, 2020).

Like other sectors, the banking industry in Morocco suffered from the negative impacts of Covid-19. As many people had lost their jobs due to the pandemic outbreak, the loan repayment rate decreased at an alarming rate. This unprecedented increase in the amount of bad debts gave rise to a decrease in funds. Therefore, Morocco's Central Bank (the Bank Al-Maghrib) affirmed that national growth in 2020 would stop at 2.3%, which goes against the Bank's earlier expectation that growth would reach 3.8% (Covid-19 Moroccan Overview, 2020).

Another important component of the Moroccan economy that did not escape the devastating effects of the pandemic is agriculture. According to mid-2019 government figures, the sector accounts for around 13% of gross domestic product (GDP) and provides around 38% of national employment (Green Morocco Plan increases Morocco's agricultural output, 2020). Indeed, to supply Moroccan markets with the necessary agricultural products, lenient measures were awarded to the inhabitants of rural areas as they were allowed to work in their fields and harvest their crops. However, many of them were affected by the drop in additional income, usually provided by their household members who work in cities.

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According to the High Commission for Planning, the proportion of people whose income decreased in 2020 is estimated at 77 percent in rural areas and 59 percent in cities (Saran & McDonnell, 2020).

### **Morocco's measures to mitigate the economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 crisis**

In conformity with the High Royal instructions, an Economic Watch Committee (CVE) was established on 11 March 2020 to anticipate the direct and indirect economic repercussions of the pandemic on the national economy. The first decision adopted by the Economic Watch Committee was the creation of a special fund to manage the pandemic. In addition to modernizing the medical device, the fund aims to support the national economy to face the shocks caused by Covid-19, as well as preserve jobs and mitigate the social repercussions of the pandemic (Adimi, 2020).

To mitigate the negative effects on all those affected by the health crisis, the committee adopted a number of decisions and a variety of procedures. Relatedly, the committee decided to provide a monthly flat-rate compensation of 2000 dirhams net for all employees who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. However, to benefit from this financial support, the employees had to be declared to CNSS in February 2020. Employees who benefited from this allowance were also allowed to defer the repayment of bank loans, mainly consumer and mortgage until June 30, 2020. According to, Mohamed Amekraz, the Minister of Labor and Professional Integration, until the end of March 2020, the overall number of those who obtained this financial support reached 3, 892,668 employees. The amount of money allocated for this operation was estimated at 6,240, 140,530 dirhams (Covid-19: Over 3892000 Employees Benefited from Financial Support Until End of March, 2021).

And to strengthen support for small and medium-sized businesses as well as liberal

professions, the Economic Watch Committee implemented a set of measures that can be summarized as follows:

- Suspension of the payment of social charges until June 30, 2020 ;
- Establishment of a moratorium for the reimbursement of bank loan maturities and for the reimbursement of leasing maturities until June 30 without payment of fees or penalties;
- Activation of an additional operating credit line granted by the banks and guaranteed by the CCG;
- Acceleration of payments for the benefit of businesses, in particular SMEs and very small businesses, in order to reduce the pressure on their cash flow and allow them to fulfill their financial obligations ;
- Companies whose turnover for the 2019 financial year is less than 20 MDhs may, if they wish, benefit from a postponement of the filing of tax declarations until June 30, 2020 ;
- Suspension of tax audits and ATD until June 30, 2020 (UNDP, UNECA and World BANK, 2020, p. 7).

On 23 March 2020, the members of the Economic Watch Committee decided to provide support for families operating in the informal sector and adversely affected by the quarantine procedures imposed by the Moroccan government. For this purpose, an electronic cash transfer device was activated to remit money to those families. This subsistence aid was provided by the Special Fund for the Management of the Coronavirus Pandemic in two phases. The first phase, which started in 30 March 2020, was devoted to Ramedist families (those benefiting from a health insurance fee waiver registry). The financial assistance received was distributed in the following manner: Families of two members or less obtained MAD 800 (USD 81) per month, families of three to four members obtained MAD

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1 000 (USD 101) per month and families of more than four members obtained MAD 1 200 (USD 121) per month. The same amount of financial support was granted to non-ramedist families working in the informal sector in the second phase (FAO, 2021).

### Findings and discussions

The main finding of the research indicates that the preventive measures taken by the Moroccan government were very effective in limiting and containing the spread of the novel coronavirus. At a time when thousands of positive cases and hundreds of deaths were daily recorded in countries with well-developed public health care systems, the epidemiological situation in Morocco remained relatively stable. For example, while the total number of infected people in Morocco reached only 219084, including 3695 deceased by the end of October 2020, the number of positive cases in our neighbouring country Spain approached one million and a half, including 37311 deceased (Worldmeter, 2020). A simple comparison between the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths in the two neighbouring countries confirms beyond all doubt that the preventive measures taken by the government managed to stop the epidemiological situation in Morocco from getting any worse.

Another finding of the study emphasises the role of the government in mitigating the adverse impact of the pandemic on people and businesses. In other words, the measures taken by the government to protect its citizens from the infectious disease plunged Morocco into a state of stagnation, which resulted in a severe impact on its social and economic status. For instance, with the curtailment of economic activity the unemployment rate increased among Moroccans and their purchasing power declined. Therefore, the intervention of the government by ensuring financial support for all those affected contributed to some extent to the improvement of their social

and economic conditions and the alleviation of their suffering.

### Conclusion

Morocco, like other parts of the world, made huge efforts to solve the health crisis caused by the new coronavirus. First came the closure of international borders and the sealing off of Morocco from the rest of the world, mainly from the countries most affected by the pandemic, such as Spain, Italy...etc. Then all kinds of gatherings were banned and all state and private institutions were closed. Finally, a state of health emergency was declared on 02 March 2020. The importance of these measures in limiting the spread of the virus is undeniable, yet they led to disastrous economic and social consequences. In other words, the strict quarantine measures imposed by the health authorities adversely affected all sectors of the national economy. And because of that, the unemployment rate rose sharply and the people's buying power decreased. Therefore, there was a desperate need for the state's intervention to deal with the situation. In fact, that is exactly what happened. The government intervened and provided financial assistance for the people and businesses affected by the quarantine restrictions to alleviate and cope with the consequences of the pandemic.

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