



## CHAPTER 6

# COVID-19, Education, and Well-Being

## *Experiences of Female Agriculture Students in Ethiopia*

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into gender-specific challenges facing female students during the pandemic and to provide sound recommendations for change to improve their situation. We thought that this information might also be useful in future pandemics or similar events that necessitate home-based learning. Research questions included “What are the social effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has on young women studying at agriculture, technical, vocational, education, and training (ATVET) colleges in rural Ethiopia?” and “What are the effects on education that the COVID-19 pandemic has on young women studying at ATVET colleges in rural Ethiopia?”

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the health and well-being of people around the world (Gilbert et al. 2020). In Ethiopia, the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on 13 March 2020. The government of Ethiopia implemented various measures including a five-

month state of emergency, border closures, and periods of mandatory quarantine. Large institutions were closed, meetings were prohibited, and physical distancing measures were imposed.

On 16 March 2020, four agriculture, technical, vocational, education, and training (ATVET) colleges, where many female students between the ages of seventeen and twenty-eight are enrolled, closed under federal government mandate and all the students were sent home. At the time of writing, staff members have had no contact with them since the onset of the pandemic, and colleges are unlikely to open fully until March 2021 at the earliest. This raises concerns about the effects of pandemic closures on the daily lives, well-being, and access to education of female students.

As Jewel Gausman and Ana Langer (2020: 466) note, “It is urgent that we adopt a gender lens to study the pandemic and its effects . . . This may be especially important in disadvantaged populations and resource-poor communities, where women are especially vulnerable.” This is, of course, timely and relevant since women and girls in Africa are considered to be among the most vulnerable to the effects of this pandemic (Chuku et al. 2020). In addition to health impacts, COVID-19 is having serious socioeconomic consequences that disproportionately affect women, youth, and people employed in the agriculture sector (United Nations Ethiopia 2020).

While confined to their homes, many of these women are without access to the internet, as Alemayehu Geda (2020) reminds us. This restricts their ability to continue their education, makes them feel even more isolated, and may increase their vulnerability to sex- and gender-based violence (SGBV). It is evident that further research linking pandemics to an increase in violence against women in Ethiopia is needed (Peterman et al. 2020; United Nations Ethiopia 2020). As Tilahun Mengistie (2020) points out, attempts to continue education for students at home have been limited, sporadic, and focused mainly on students in the university sector who live in urban environments.

Ethiopia offers a unique situation given that over 69 percent of the population is under twenty-nine years of age (WHO n.d.). This means that the disruption of the routine of daily instruction, and of the general momentum of education, is likely to affect the well-being of many young people enrolled in post-secondary studies. Effects include depression, anxiety, and an overall decrease in their current quality of life (Kaparounaki et al. 2020). Although most of the international research findings in this area are from Europe and Asia, mental health effects from this pandemic

are expected to be significant among higher education students in Ethiopia (Negash et al. 2020) and further research in this area is vital if we are to provide evidence that increased interventions and policy changes at government level are needed.

## Methodology

In this study, we interviewed female students from four ATVET colleges in rural Ethiopia. These are supported by the Agricultural Transformation through Stronger Vocational Education (ATTSVE) project, which is funded by Global Affairs Canada and led by Dalhousie University and partner organizations and was designed to develop agricultural education at four ATVET colleges across Ethiopia to ensure that students and graduates are equipped with competencies to support Ethiopia's policy priority to shift from subsistence to market-based agriculture. The ATTSVE project, through a gender mainstreaming approach, established and initially funded gender offices at each college. These provided a range of services including counseling, mentoring, training, day-care centers, and small financial grants to needy female students to ensure that they could continue with their education and afford food and sanitary supplies. We were interested in the views of these female students on how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed their daily lives, affected their overall well-being, and affected their access to education and other resources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a list of thirteen predetermined open questions.

### *Study Population*

The study population for this research was made up of young women students at four ATVET colleges in Ethiopia that, as mentioned above, are supported by the ATTSVE development project. The colleges supported are Maichew in the Tigray region, Nejo in Oromia, Woreta in the Amhara region, and Wolaita Soddo in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). This spread represents the four major regions of Ethiopia and includes rural and semi-urban students. The four colleges then had 3,095 full-time students in total, of whom 38 percent were female, so this sample represents 2.4 percent of the female student population pre-COVID. All these students are now living in their family homes with one parent or two, one or more siblings, and, in many cases, additional extended family members.

As research team members, we selected, from student lists, twenty-eight participants who then had cell phone access in their homes; this was the only way of contacting students given the COVID-19 restrictions, since the majority do not have access to the internet. Although twenty-eight female students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven were interviewed, for the purposes of this chapter, given its focus on girls' experiences, only the twenty-two interviews with students between eighteen and twenty-one have been used. We also thought it important to use the input of students based in both rural and semi-urban areas so as to represent both geographical categories.

### *Ethical Considerations*

There were several ethical considerations that influenced the direction of this research, including some concern about using college and, in particular, project staff to conduct the interviews. It could have been argued that students might feel coerced into participating, since their refusal to do so might affect their being provided with services from the ATTSVE project or by the gender-focal staff, lecturers who in addition to their teaching responsibilities, are responsible for coordinating and managing gender-related issues on campus, when they return to the colleges post-COVID-19. However, the available interviewers were limited because of language barriers and COVID-19 restrictions. A discussion in the preliminary call with students about the different roles played by the providers of project services and by the researchers attempted to mitigate any power imbalances between students and interviewers.

As a mixed group of researchers from the Global South and Global North and from different socioeconomic backgrounds, we considered our own feminist positionality in relation to different cultural imperatives, such as gendered norms, as well as evaluator assumptions and biases, as we designed the questions and interpreted the data in the social and cultural context of the study. This involved detailed discussion among all four of us as researchers when we coded the results to ensure that the data was being interpreted without cultural bias.

### *Data Collection*

Each student was given a preliminary call to check that she was interested. Following the Dalhousie Research Ethics Board Approval process, participants were asked to provide verbal consent to their participation in the study. Since there are many different local languages spoken across the

sample population, college interviewers were given informal training by researchers to cover the aims of the study, to provide interview techniques, and to discuss ethical issues.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted over the phone; these lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and used a predetermined list of open-ended questions intended to encourage lengthy answers that would provide detailed qualitative information and allow the researchers to seek clarification when necessary.

### *Changed Scope*

An important initial aim of the study was to identify whether female students were experiencing increased SGBV as a consequence of the pandemic, as is happening in many countries (United Nations Ethiopia 2020). However, we were concerned about discomforting students or putting them at additional risk by asking such questions, since during the isolation period they were likely to lack privacy during the interview calls, being, as they were, in small homes with other family members present. Therefore, we changed the focus to asking students about their general well-being and giving them the opportunity to direct their responses as openly as possible (see the third question below).

### *Key Qualitative Questions*

The main qualitative questions asked were as follows:

What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on your daily life?

How is COVID-19 impacting your education?

How has COVID-19 impacted your overall well-being (health, safety, comfort)?

Are you looking forward to returning to your ATVET education?

In addition, one quantitative question was asked: What do you miss about being at the ATVET college? Interviewees were given a range of responses from which to choose; we list these below in our discussion of the replies to this question. This gathering of quantifiable data was designed to draw some measurable conclusions to complement or contrast with the qualitative data.

Ten interviews were conducted in the Ethiopian national language, Amharic, by the team of researchers. The remaining interviews were conducted by gender-focal officers from the colleges in their local languages,

and the transcripts were then translated by the researchers into English. The translations were carried out by two members of the research team based in Ethiopia and known to the Canadian members of the team as being competent to do this. Transcripts were reviewed by the researchers as a group and any that were particularly difficult to understand were discussed.

### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Although researchers had some deductive ideas that influenced their broad areas of interest in the study and the interview questions, inductive coding was used to ensure that themes emerging from the research came as directly from the findings as possible, even though this is more complicated when one is using translated transcripts. A first round of open coding followed by some focused coding allowed us to narrow down the themes emerging from the responses. These were validated through discussion among all of us to ensure that findings were not lost in translation. We also conducted a small statistical analysis to calculate percentages of quantitative responses about the main things that students missed from before the pandemic struck and the main challenges they have faced during the pandemic.

We used comparative analysis to determine whether female experiences were different between regions and colleges or between rural and semi-urban students.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Most students interviewed experienced significant negative changes to their daily lives. We recognize that our research does not reflect the experiences and views of all female college students in Ethiopia, but it does give us detailed insight into gender-specific challenges that some female students are facing during the pandemic. It also provides us with sound recommendations for change as the worsening pandemic affects teaching and learning in the country.

### *What Are the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Your Daily Life?*

Most students experienced increased responsibilities in relation to supporting family businesses or contributing to household labor (or both). One student assisted her sister with her community cafeteria business as

an essential service. While some students interviewed were working externally during the COVID-19 pandemic as agricultural laborers, maids, or cleaners, many others faced economic hardship, since most students normally have to work both while at college and during vacations to earn enough to stay at college. Many could not work because of the government directive to stay at home, the lack of employment, workplace closures or reductions, and, for some, the fear of leaving their homes.

One participant noted that the cost of living had increased, and it was more difficult for her and her family to pay rent. It was also mentioned that the cost of goods and public transportation had increased significantly in Ethiopia since the pandemic was declared, with general inflation rising at that time by 23 percent and food inflation by 26 percent (Geda 2020). It was clear to us that financial concerns were significant for many study participants.

In Ethiopia, female representation in the labor force is unequal, with 68.5 percent of employed women working as unpaid family workers and 24.8 percent in informal jobs. Consequently, women and girls face a larger informal care burden in the household compared to their male family members or male partners (UN 2013).

Students reported that before COVID-19, living on campus freed them from the household labor they were expected to do while at home, although they were still expected to do most of the cooking and cleaning for themselves and the male students (ATTSVE 2019). After returning to their homes, female students were faced with the responsibility for household work, against which they had to balance what they needed to do with regard to their education. Domestic labor and caring for younger siblings had become equal or almost equal in terms of hours to an unpaid full-time job for most study participants. Male students in Ethiopia are expected to do agricultural work or engage in business, and to be involved in politics outside of the home, but this is not, in general, as time-consuming as the domestic labor expected of female students, as an article in *Ethiopia Forum* (“Gender Roles in Ethiopia” 2013) observes.

Women and girls face a larger informal care burden within the household compared to their male family members or male partners (Wenham et al. 2020), which is represented in this study. They are often expected to balance their work or education with an increased demand for contribution to household or family responsibilities. One can see from this study how women have been affected differently in their typical routines because, as the young women pointed out, men and boys have not expe-

rienced the same increase in household responsibilities and the pressure to stay in the home. This balance during the physical distancing associated with the COVID-19 pandemic could become difficult or unpredictable, potentially leading to negative implications for women's mental or physical health (ibid.). The effects on women's mental health are discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Ethiopia has many multiethnic and multicultural groups whose diverse cultural and gender roles affect women and girls differently (UN 2013). The rural respondents in our study from the northern Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray regions had to engage in low-paid, time-consuming employment (often informal) with very long hours, as waitresses, maids, and coffee sellers. In comparison, most of the female students in the SN-NPR studying at Wolaita Soddo college, the only one of the four situated in a small town, appeared to have higher economic status, since they reported that they were now expected only to care for relatives in the home, rather than work externally as well, and this gave them more free time, and, therefore, more chance to study.

Although most changes to daily life for study participants were negative ones, there were some positive social and economic effects. One participant mentioned that she had increased her level of personal hygiene through additional hand and body washing and had had the opportunity to become more physically active through exercise inside her home compound. One student from Maichew was able to start her own business preparing and selling coffee because she had more free time than usual. This gave her valuable entrepreneurial experience and increased her income.

### *How is COVID-19 Impacting Your Education?*

Everyone interviewed had her education significantly affected by COVID-19. The interviewees were in various combinations of the four levels of diploma education, with approximately 50 percent of them originally intending to graduate in July 2020 had the pandemic not intervened. All students will have to return to their campuses if they want to finish their programs and complete their final examinations. Remote continuation of their programs has not been an option. Several students mentioned that they were attempting to reread old notes, but in most ways their education had ceased. One student told her interviewer, "My goal is to complete my education to support my family and the community. I am not attending class because of the virus, so it affects my whole life.



I miss my friends who are supportive during my studies through sharing materials and mutual support.”

The loss of educational support from the ATTSVE project was of major concern to many students. Of significance was their feeling that they still needed access to many of these services in their home-based context; this indicates that educational support is still of great need for young women in Ethiopia to have the opportunities afforded to their male counterparts.

### *How Has COVID-19 Impacted Your Overall Well-Being (Health, Safety, and Comfort)?*

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the social distancing resulting from it, caused participants in this study to experience changes in their mental health and their overall well-being. Some of these changes relate to their daily lives, in that participants have had to change their normal routines as a result of physical distancing and have had to cope with increased responsibilities in the home. These factors have caused feelings of sadness and isolation and have increased their stress levels.

The reduction in their social interactions led several participants to mention feeling sad, since their typical social interactions with family members outside the home, and with friends and neighbors, ceased because of the pandemic. Increased fear of death and worry about illness along with anxiety about being able to access health services during an outbreak of disease were experienced by our participants, and these emotions are known to lead to undue stress and poor mental health (IASC 2020).

An increase in fear and worry was common among some female students, who said that they feared dying or falling ill from COVID-19. Four students explained that they were worried about the poor health infrastructure in their area given the pandemic, six stated that services providing sanitary materials and contraceptives were not currently operating and that this concerned them, and two students mentioned that they would be uncomfortable accessing health services if they were to become sick. This is in line with other studies that have found that women in particular have difficulty accessing sexual health, prenatal, and maternal care services during COVID-19 (see Wenham et al. 2020) and that this can cause additional worry.

Many studies have demonstrated the negative impact of infectious disease outbreaks on public mental health, including SARS in 2003 and the

2009 novel influenza A epidemic (see, for example, Yeung et al. 2017). Research shows that airborne epidemics are likely to lead to members of the public, especially young people, experiencing psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (see also Liang et al. 2020).

It was evident that most of the participants in this study experienced some level of deterioration in their mental health because of the pandemic, starting with significant negative feelings about the interruption of their education and not being able to graduate in 2020. One participant stated that she will not feel comfortable until life returns to how it was prior to the pandemic. Another noticed that her anger was easily triggered because of these feelings of frustration at having to stay home.

Key terms mentioned in the interviews included “feelings of frustration and hopelessness,” “loss of goals” and “feelings of sadness,” especially about delayed graduation, “disappointment” from their families, and “feelings of depression.” Several students used the phrase “mental health difficulties.” However, mental health support services are limited in Ethiopia generally, and especially in rural areas. This is an area of concern, especially since college and university students in Ethiopia are generally the ones who present with the highest level of mental health issues (Negash et al. 2020).

The reasons behind these negative mental health effects seem to be multifaceted and included financial worry about supporting themselves at home and completing their education, loss of employment, and not being able to graduate and support their families or become independent. Students feared the unknown. Heavy domestic workloads for most of them, and the pressure of working externally for some, were stressful. For a smaller number, feeling bored and the inability to socialize were important factors. These findings are similar to those of a recent study in Brazil that indicated that school closures led to feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, and heightened insecurity among youth (Ornell et al. 2020). As one of our study participants said, “Everyday life is getting difficult and disgusting. I can’t do the things I was doing at the college like reading, studying, and conversing with friends. Now I am assisting my family at home, and I can’t go out.”

### *Have Female Students Been Feeling Safe during the Pandemic?*

While the findings above have been arranged under the key questions asked during the interviews, we offer here the responses to the overall

question we asked about the students' general well-being, rather than the one planned originally about their experiences of SGBV (as explained in the section titled "Changed Scope" above). No students mentioned experiencing serious SGBV themselves, although examples of being subjected to verbal harassment were provided by a few students. One said that many of the interviewed students, in order to survive financially, worked in cafeterias where male customers harassed them by saying, for example, that now that there was no education at all, they should marry them and have children. The Ethiopian interviewers and researchers reflected that these types of comments showed that the expectation for girls from rural and semi-urban environments to marry a breadwinner and have children was still current, at least in some regions.

However, we were surprised that in response to being questioned about their well-being, and about working and traveling outside the home, many students spoke about their increased fear of SGBV, and some respondents reported incidents of such violence among their friends and in their communities. This led us to question our own positionality in assuming that the students would not be comfortable discussing these issues, since they were much more forthcoming than we had expected and, of course, this enriched our findings.

Ethiopia has among the highest rates of SGBV against students ranging from those in secondary school to those in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa (Beyene et al. 2019). SGBV is an ongoing and documented challenge for female college students. A recent study conducted at the same four colleges before the pandemic struck revealed that rates of prevalence are high, although significant variance exists between colleges (Starr and Mitchell 2018). We do not know exactly how much this has changed for these students because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. As mentioned above, students were not asked directly about SGBV because of privacy concerns, and no student mentioned having directly suffered a serious incident, but some examples of verbal harassment they had endured were provided. However, 70 percent of students mentioned that SGBV had happened to someone they knew or to someone in their communities and that their own fear of it had increased.

The fear of SGBV emerged from the research findings and was mentioned by almost all students interviewed. This affected the young women's daily lives. One student from a rural area told her interviewer, "My parents are worried and scared about me being exposed to SGBV and now my mom directly pushes me to marry somebody that she would like to be

her near neighbor.” One student from a semi-urban area was aware that there had been more SGBV incidents, including rape, unwanted pregnancy, and abduction, among members of her local community during the pandemic. This had affected some of her friends and other community members and led to forced marriages encouraged by family members after the victims became pregnant. These events are not being reported to the police. She said,

I know now the situation is worse and I pay much [more] attention to protecting myself from exposure to SGBV. I feel scared going to [the] market, traveling to work, having medical appointments, and it makes me want to avoid these places.

Most of the students discussed incidents in their communities that led to their increased fears regarding SGBV, and the way that this was affecting them and, in some cases, their families. However, one student mentioned her involvement in the creation of an awareness and sensitization campaign in her district and said that she had advised some of the survivors to report the cases to the Department of Women’s Affairs and the police. We are hopeful that women-led change has begun and that, in the future, more cases will be reported, and that it will be easier for young women to access support.

The local Ethiopian interviewers based at the colleges expressed some surprise that the young women were comfortable discussing SGBV at all, especially on a phone call. They speculated that the students may have been more comfortable mentioning these issues because of greater exposure to training and resources from the ATTSVE project.

The findings show that the daily lives of female students have changed significantly because of the pandemic, and most of these changes are negative. They can be categorized by four thematic concerns that emerged from the interviews: negative socioeconomic consequences; inability to continue their education at home; increased mental health problems; and an amplified risk of (or fear of) sex- and gender-based violence.

### *What Do You Miss about Being at the ATVET College?*

For us to quantify how most of the participants were feeling, they were asked what they missed most about being able to attend college. The options were: attending classes; engaging in self-study; spending time with friends; continuing with previous living situations; having access to gender clubs (extracurricular gatherings of students to address issues such as gender equity, gender-based violence and so on); and getting support from gender-focal offices. They were also encouraged to think of other options.

Of the respondents, 82 percent selected attending classes as the aspect they most missed, which supports our thematic finding that missing education, given its significance to these young women, has been hugely upsetting to them. They highlighted their desire to be able to use library services, the internet, and learning materials to which they had had access before the campuses closed. Access to all this would have allowed them, at least potentially, to continue their education from home. One student from a rural area said, “I miss the support from the gender office, such as pocket money, sanitary materials, and advice, which is very important to strengthen me morally and psychologically.” Given what this student said, the ATTSVE project has perhaps underappreciated the strong importance of gender-focal support and club activities to female students in this educational context.

The most popular second choices in response to this quantitative question, at 36 percent each, were getting support from gender-focal offices and spending time with friends. These findings show that students were missing not only educational opportunities, but also vital extracurricular support in relation to their well-being, along with financial help that would enable them to participate in and benefit fully from their education. One student in the final year of her program said, “My gender club provided skills training like leadership, self-awareness, and assertiveness. This helps me to face challenges, and the financial support and sanitary materials from the gender office helps [me] to continue my education.”

### *Are You Looking Forward to Returning to Your ATVET Education?*

Every single student said that she was looking forward to returning to her education, which, given the worsening COVID-19 situation in Ethiopia (WHO n.d.), is likely to be delayed until at least March 2021. Although they are extremely keen to return to their education, female students are also afraid of returning to campus because of the lack of the previously supplied sanitary products, uncertainty about hygiene protection from COVID-19, increased exposure to SGBV, and financial issues.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

### *Limitations*

Since only students with cell phone access could be interviewed, all interviews were necessarily conducted by phone. Of the female students over

the four colleges, 70 percent had access to a basic cell phone, so the sample necessarily excluded the experiences of students who have no access to a cell phone, some of whom may well have been more vulnerable.

### *Recommendations and Implications*

We recommend that the government increase funding to ATVET colleges so that they can provide much-needed services and resources for students at home, including grants, sanitary materials, and access to distance tutoring and mental health support. Phone calls from ATVET staff to keep in contact with students would be useful and would allow the students to receive current and reliable information. Improving internet access for rural students is desirable, but we realize that this would require not just infrastructural improvement but major shifts in educational and agricultural policy.

Research shows that female Ethiopian students may experience more challenges in completing their education than male students because of factors including high expectations regarding domestic labor and the lack of teaching support (Demise et al. 2002). Therefore, resources that would allow all students to continue their education from home, even to a partial extent, would be beneficial, and would mean that female students would not need longer to catch up upon their return to campus. However, without improved internet access and greater affordability in rural areas of Ethiopia, intervention in terms of distance education would be of limited success (Mengistie 2020).

It is also important for the colleges and the ATTSVE project to plan carefully and allocate resources to support female students' return to school to avoid perpetuating already-existing gender inequalities in education (Demise et al. 2002). This includes the provision of sanitary materials and personal protective equipment like masks. Extra tutoring and support, revision of courses covered before the closures, and extra financial support for transportation and lost income during their time at home must be provided to the students.

Furthermore, it is crucial that local governments and institutions work toward reducing SGBV through raising awareness and legal enforcement, and that they ensure that support is available to women who are survivors of SGBV or who are feeling more vulnerable to it (or both).

These results also highlight the need for Ethiopia's government to make available appropriate mental health interventions for girls and all young people during this time (Negash et al. 2020). Specific female-focused interventions are needed because of the different challenges girls

and young women are facing compared to their male counterparts. Future research is needed to shed additional light on the mental health implications of COVID-19 in a student context in the Global South.

It would also be beneficial to compare and contrast the differing situations of female and male students who have had to return home because of the pandemic to further illuminate the gendered effects of the pandemic on female students.

## Conclusion

The analysis of our data suggests that female students are facing significant challenges from their interrupted education, many specific to their gender, in the four key areas of negative socioeconomic consequences, inability to continue their education in the home, increased mental health issues, and increased fear of SGBV. The impact of the gendered pandemic on young women in Ethiopia is clear given these research findings. Although significant progress has been made over the last ten years, Ethiopia still has some of the lowest gender equality performance indicators in sub-Saharan Africa. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 ranks Ethiopia at 82 out of 153 countries in terms of the scale and scope of gender disparities (WEF 2019). The qualitative data from interviews with students provides a holistic picture of multiple interconnected impacts of the pandemic on female students.

As the pandemic progresses, specific research on the impact on the education and well-being of young women in post-secondary education in Ethiopia will, potentially, increase, thus allowing greater comparison of results.

This study supports the view that young people, especially young women, are most significantly affected by the pandemic in terms of mental health effects, life interruptions such as leaving school, and financial burdens, as the International Labor Organization (2020) suggests. The members of this sex and age demographic need the most support through the development of innovative solutions, or there will be increased pressure on existing health resources.

The girls who participated in our study had many fears and uncertainties about the future, but every one of them said that she was looking forward to continuing her education. As one student said, "It is a scary disease. How can people continue to live separated from each other?" These

unique student findings provide much-needed gender-focused data for the Ethiopian education system, educational institutions, and development projects including the ATTSVE project to consider, both during this pandemic and afterward as the world recovers from the effects of COVID-19.

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