

**A War Not Easily Won:
Curbing Infectious Diseases in Developing Countries**

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Preface

The world is in the midst of a pandemic. Thus far, at least 198 million people have contracted COVID-19, and at least 4.2 million have died from the disease.

This is not the first pandemic; outbreaks of infectious diseases have regularly engulfed major portions of the world. A few examples: the fourteenth-century Black Death” killed nearly one third of the people in Europe; the sixteenth-century cocoliztli epidemic killed roughly 10 million people in the portions of the Western hemisphere controlled by Spain; the 1918 flu pandemic killed roughly 50 million people worldwide; and AIDS-related illnesses have thus far killed 33 million people. The World Health Organization tells us that more pandemics are surely in the offing.

In most such outbreaks, poor people and poor countries suffer more than rich people and countries. For example, the overwhelming majority of the deaths from AIDS have occurred in the developing world. For a time, COVID seemed to be an exception to this pattern. For much of 2020, infections were highest in the United States and Europe. But the typical distribution of cases is now reappearing. Death rates in most Latin American countries are rising fast. India recently experienced a catastrophic surge in COVID cases and deaths and appears on the brink of another. And infection rates in most African countries, which in 2020 were remarkably low, are now increasing steadily.

Although the disproportionate vulnerability of the residents of developing countries to infectious diseases is especially visible during pandemics, it is surely not limited to them. In ordinary times, while mortality rates from noncommunicable conditions (such as cancer and heart disease) are similar everywhere in the world, the mortality rates from communicable conditions are roughly 30 times greater in the poorest countries than in the richest countries.

In short, in both bad times and good, people in developing countries suffer and die from infectious diseases much more often than do people in developed countries.

Because the causes of that inequality are complex, initiatives of many sorts will be necessary to alleviate it. Several are well underway. For example, the vectors by which most infectious diseases are transmitted are now well understood, and various initiatives to suppress those vectors have already proven highly beneficial. Educational programs that show residents how to reduce transmissions have also had huge benefits. It is crucial that such initiatives be continued. However, they cannot eliminate the problem altogether.

To bring infection and death rates down to acceptable levels – and to enable developing countries to respond effectively to future pandemics – we must also harness more effectively than we have to date the power of pharmaceutical products. Specifically, we must improve the systems by which we create drugs capable of controlling or, better yet, preventing infections and then make those drugs available to all of the people who need them. Identifying practicable ways of achieving those improvements – and persuading decisionmakers to adopt them – is the ambition of this book.

We have been working on the book for quite a while – perhaps too long. In the process, we have published preliminary versions of some of our recommendations. But the bulk of the argument is appearing here for the first time.

In recent years, we have drawn on our evolving analysis when providing advice and assistance to government officials in some African countries who are striving valiantly to address the scourge of infectious diseases. Specifically, in ways detailed in the book, we have collaborated with officials in Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, and South Africa. In those interactions, we have learned as much as we have taught.

We have also benefitted enormously from the reactions of many colleagues to early drafts of portions of the book. We are especially indebted to Yochai Benkler, Jamie Boyle, Anupam Chander, Louis Kaplow, Jamie Love, Rob Merges, Arti Rai, Diane Rosenfeld, and Madhavi Sunder. They of course bear no responsibility for our errors; indeed, we are certain that some of them continue to disagree sharply with some of our recommendations.

The title of the book is derived from a poem by Charles Bukowski.¹ It suggests, among other things, that, while the problem we are addressing will not likely be solved soon, the fight is worthwhile.

After the publication of the book, we hope to continue to lend our aid to the many governments and organizations that are striving to solve it. If those engagements prompt us to revise or supplement our recommendations, we will make our reflections available at tfisher.org/a-war-not-easily-won/.

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¹ Biographical information about Bukowski is available at <https://bukowski.net>. The poem at issue is “Nobody But You,” available in *Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way* (posthumous publication, 2003).