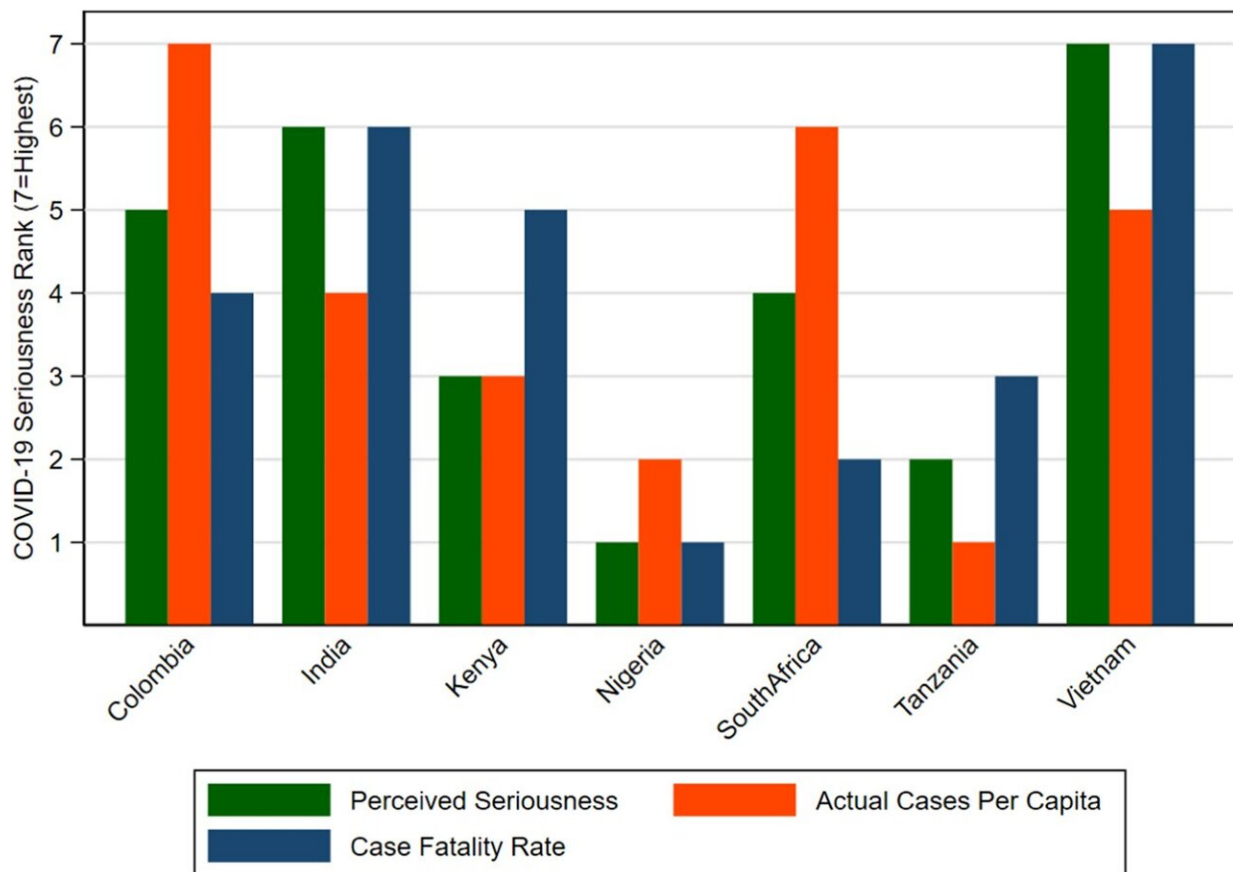


COVID-19 pandemic perceived as less serious than other health problems, suggests 7-country survey

January 26 2024, by Petra Hansson



Actual measures versus public perception of seriousness of COVID-19 (Colombia, India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Vietnam). Credit: *Communications Medicine* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s43856-023-00377-8

Researchers from seven Environment for Development (EfD) centers plus the EfD Global Hub, located at the University of Gothenburg, have conducted an extensive survey on how serious people perceive COVID-19.

This study is now bearing fruit in the form of new publications, [with the first](#) titled "Perceptions of the seriousness of major public health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in seven [middle-income countries](#)." It appears in *Communications Medicine*.

Respiratory illnesses ranked more serious

Over 10,000 respondents ranked the seriousness of the seven health problems (alcoholism and drug use, HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, [lung cancer](#) and [respiratory diseases](#) caused by air pollution and smoking, and water-borne diseases like diarrhea).

Their answers revealed that in most countries, respiratory illnesses were perceived to be a more serious problem than COVID-19. Surprisingly, in six of the seven countries, respondents ranked waterborne diseases as the least serious health problem. In the seventh country (South Africa) it was ranked next to last. In Africa, people felt that alcoholism and drug use were also more serious than COVID-19.

Don't crowd out ordinary health care

These findings are important because they show that people still care about the health problems they were facing before the pandemic.

"An important lesson for health ministries is to not get too carried away by what media focuses on a particular point in time. It is important to avoid crowding out ordinary health services," says researcher Dale

Whittington. "It's also clear that public perceptions of the seriousness of health problems can differ considerably within and across countries and population segments defined by demographics and knowledge."

EfD Director Gunnar Köhlin notes that the study is unique in the way it has tied together researchers from seven countries in the Global South with leading researchers in the US and Sweden in a joint data collection and analysis effort.

"A study like this can put novel phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, into a perspective of the more persistent challenges the countries in the Global South face," he says.

More information: Richard T. Carson et al, Perceptions of the seriousness of major public health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in seven middle-income countries, *Communications Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s43856-023-00377-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43856-023-00377-8)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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