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## Policy pointers

**Equitable partnerships** with local government, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and academia can help amplify and expand grassroots responses to COVID-19.

**Government officials** and other local stakeholders should address several 'threats' — including insecurity, fire, unemployment, food insecurity and disease — that our bottom-up research identified in Nairobi's informal settlement of Mathare.

**Our action research** revealed an ongoing need for training in people-centred risk-mapping tools, such as Views from the Frontline (VFL) and the support of youth leaders via additional grassroots 'champions teams'.

**Moving forward, a key objective** will be for Kenyan urban policymakers to develop a multisectoral, participatory upgrading programme that can address the array of risks in Mathare.

## Amplifying grassroots COVID-19 responses in Kenya

The pandemic has led to rising precarity and has exacerbated several human rights violations in Nairobi's informal settlements, including unemployment, food insecurity, sexual and gender-based violence, police brutality and other socioeconomic concerns. Grassroots groups have collaborated to address these challenges by developing arts-based strategies, mutual care and bottom-up knowledge generation. Our project has explored these community-led responses to COVID-19 in Nairobi's informal settlement of Mathare and asked how the pandemic may encourage more equitable development trajectories to address multiple risks. The initiative has generated valuable risk data from Mathare to inform future interventions, while simultaneously strengthening relations with local decision makers and other grassroots organisations.

### COVID-19 in Nairobi's informal settlements

Kenya's first confirmed case of COVID-19 was on 13 March 2020, with strict lockdown measures enacted soon afterwards. In Mathare and other informal settlements, together housing over 60% of Nairobi's population, these measures immediately rendered a significant number of residents unemployed. Due to many Mathare residents working as daily labourers, restrictions in movement and the resultant effects on businesses suddenly made vast swathes of the population unable to support their families for many months. These negative impacts were further intensified by the absence of Kenyan government interventions benefiting vulnerable residents who lack access to vital social protections.

Mathare emerged from the colonial period as an area long shaped by racialised structural

violence, and such legacies have continued to be sustained by urban governance that does not seek to remedy Nairobi's entrenched injustices. Mathare's population of roughly 200,000 citizens live primarily in poor-quality single-room shack rental housing. Furthermore, less than 20% of these households can access a clean, affordable and reliable water supply. The pandemic's multifaceted socioeconomic impacts in Nairobi have led to worsening conditions across a range of spheres, including rising food insecurity, gender-based violence, public health concerns and even police brutality.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Learning from grassroots priorities and responses to COVID-19

We partnered with Kenya's slum-dweller federation *Muungano wa Wanavijiji*, its support NGO Slum Dwellers

## *Grassroots exchanges and networks are generating a more unified advocacy front for better services, and fostering governance that can better attend to the needs of marginalised urban citizens*

International Kenya (SDI-Kenya) and the Mathare Social Justice Centre. The project sought to document and enable co-learning between grassroots groups responding to the pandemic's complex, highly inequitable impacts. These efforts aimed to encourage a more inclusive and united front for community advocacy with local officials, both during and beyond the pandemic.

We engaged different local stakeholders in community-led data collection, knowledge exchanges and arts-based strategies. Our action research utilised the 'Views from

the Frontline' (VFL) method — a tool operationalised by local researchers in the community, using a co-developed question guide to ask about the main threats facing residents (see Box 1). Our interactive VFL surveys were complemented by conversational community fora, where these threats were further discussed. The information from these multiple action research arenas were then analysed to reveal:

- The main threats and their diverse effects
- How these were experienced differently across the community
- Barriers to addressing them, and
- Ongoing and potential solutions.

Residents have prioritised tackling immediate risks in Mathare (such as fires and food insecurity) and the underlying causes of risk, including inadequate housing and exclusion by local authorities. At the same time, there have

been significant community efforts seeking to address the dire structural conditions that have anchored them. This local work could be expanded on with the support of diverse actors, including local and national officials and civil society organisations.

Between November 2020 and March 2022, the project engaged in the following activities:

1. We analysed grassroots responses to COVID-19.
2. We supported data collection on Mathare's risks.
3. We facilitated exchanges with other grassroots organisations.
4. We documented community mobilisation strategies to address COVID-19 alongside other risks. This involved utilising a range of action research methods and facilitating arts-based strategies, including murals and videos from local young people,<sup>3</sup> geared towards both entertaining and educating the masses. We also hosted community forums and multi-stakeholder meetings, and engaged in community-led interviews and surveys.

Based on VFL findings from Mathare, residents highlighted five key 'threats': insecurity, fire, unemployment, food insecurity and disease. Whilst taking shape within a constellation of structural concerns, these five threats were the ones prioritised for community, NGO and government intervention. Such challenges were certainly present before COVID-19, but had been intensified by escalating rates of precarity, particularly in terms of livelihoods, inadequate access to healthcare and the state's inability to address both the socioeconomic and psychological effects of the pandemic. Other salient pressures intersected with these five conditions, such as water shortages, pollution, forced evictions, police brutality and flooding.

All these threats had pronounced gender dimensions and were also differentially experienced by disabled people in the area. For instance, frequent fires were especially dangerous for those who were unable to get out of their houses by themselves if there was a conflagration. Caregivers were spending longer hours outside their home in search of daily employment (made increasingly scarce because of COVID-19),

### **Box 1. VFL via video**

Our action research video tool captured diverse local actors' experiences of the pandemic. Women, men, youth, disabled people and local leaders in Mathare were interviewed for this process. These recordings provided a more accessible means to explore residents' experiences and actions in their surroundings. In addition, the video clip format helped build a visual and aural repository of voices, making present and future analysis of threats and responses easier for the local co-researchers. Video clips were complemented by murals and numerous community forums in Mathare.

which meant they were not present to keep their disabled kin safe from fires. This is just one example of how disabled members of the population in Mathare could experience more pronounced impacts linked to the pandemic and their underlying vulnerabilities.

### **Synergies between data, grassroots activism and inclusive governance**

In light of the interrelated challenges facing residents in Mathare, this project has encouraged a holistic approach to tackle risks and supported youth leaders to take forward key priorities as part of a new 'champions team'. At the same time, the partners have encouraged horizontal links between social justice organisations working in Nairobi's other settlements to discuss promising tactics and strategies to foster equitable development. Below, we explain how these efforts can form the backbone of equitable, holistic initiatives in Mathare and other informal settlements.

**1. Enhanced evidence base on key risks (including COVID-19) and strengthened grassroots mobilisation via use of multimedia and VFL methodology.** By utilising a variety of tactics from murals to community exchanges, data collection and multi-stakeholder forums, space was created to hear about the pandemic's different effects and community priorities for change. Murals, using local youth talents, were adopted as a visual way to share important COVID-19 messaging, and in key locations with significant pedestrian traffic. The knowledge shared during the fora led to the prioritisation of action by different groups, as well as stronger collaboration between various organisations across Mathare, which could help them to respond more effectively and as a united front in future (see points 2 and 3 below). This knowledge has also bolstered ongoing initiatives for a community planning process to upgrade the settlement, such as that led by the Mathare Spatial Planning Area Research Collective (M-SPARC).

**2. Transformed relationships and collective actions responding to COVID-19 co-created by Mathare residents and key stakeholders.** During the multi-stakeholder forums, representatives from different levels of government (including local chiefs, planners and ward managers) were invited to participate in the community reflections. This led to deepened official commitment to community processes and

support from ward managers, who were initially hostile to residents' mobilisations for better services. Additionally, consolidation of these relationships at different scales helped bolster community organising processes. Following these collective reflections on the environment and pollution, residents have established an environmental group called Mathare 4A Green.

**3. Deepened solidarities and relationships with grassroots groups across the city.** Through the exchanges with social justice centres in Nairobi, youth leaders in Mathare were able to learn about and adapt promising responses in other settlements. For example, murals have been taken up as a priority in Mathare because of their effectiveness in other settlements like Dandora at capturing messages in a visual form and, in turn, shaping community perspectives and actions. In addition, the youths shared their processes to document the pandemic's effects, bolstering cross-community human rights documentation of violations during the pandemic.

Grassroots exchanges and networks are already generating a more unified advocacy front for better services, and, ultimately, fostering governance that can better attend to the needs of marginalised urban citizens. Residents will continue to pursue more accountable and inclusive local governance relations, using community data, youth leadership and revitalised grassroots organisations as the foundation of such partnerships. Moving forward, a key objective will be to develop a multisectoral, participatory upgrading programme that can address the array of risks in Mathare (as envisioned by M-SPARC).

Although COVID-19 is increasingly intertwined with short-term and entrenched exclusions in Nairobi, residents are also creating the building blocks for more just, equitable urban pathways. With further support from municipal decision makers and strengthened grassroots networks in Nairobi, it may be possible to fulfil the holistic vision of change set in motion by VFL's action research. As made evident by our action research processes, this change needs to be channelled through an array of people-centred and youth inclusive tools, including arts-based strategies, VFL methods and — importantly — inter-community group exchanges. These tools, grounded in diverse community champions — women, disabled

people and youth — will enable more equitable, comprehensive responses to the ongoing threats linked to this pandemic and any future crises.

**Wangui Kimari, Joseph Kimani, Rodgers Otieno, Alice Sverdlik and Jackie Waithaka**

Wangui Kimari is a junior research fellow at the Institute for Humanities in Africa, University of Cape Town, and participatory action research coordinator at Mathare Social Justice Centre. Joseph Kimani is executive director of SDI-Kenya. Rodgers Otieno is physical planner at SDI-Kenya. Alice Sverdlik is a lecturer in social development at the University of Manchester. Jackie Waithaka is communications and documentations officer at SDI-Kenya.

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## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

SDI-Kenya is an NGO providing professional and technical support to the Kenyan federation of slum dwellers (Muungano wa Wanavijiji) and is affiliated with Slum Dwellers International (SDI).

Mathare Social Justice Centre is a community-based organisation in Nairobi's informal settlement of Mathare, which promotes social justice through engaged community and social movement platforms.

### Contact

Wangui Kimari  
kuikimari@gmail.com

Alice Sverdlik  
alice.sverdlik@manchester.ac.uk

David Dodman  
david.dodman@iied.org

Third Floor, 235 High Holborn  
London, WC1V 7DN  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399  
www.iied.org

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kimani, J, Steege, R, Makau, J, Nyambuga, K, Wairutu, J and Tolhurst, R (2021) Building Forward Better: Inclusive Livelihood Support in Nairobi's Informal Settlements. *IDS Bulletin* 52(1), 37–44. / <sup>2</sup> Kimari, W (2020) Outlaw Nairobi versus The Pandemics. *City & Society* 32(2). / <sup>3</sup> Omondi, J, Waithaka, J and Wairutu, J (29 September 2020) Arise cross-post: Youth battle against COVID-19. [www.muungano.net/browseblogs/2020/10/20/arise-cross-post-youth-battle-against-covid-19?rq=mural](http://www.muungano.net/browseblogs/2020/10/20/arise-cross-post-youth-battle-against-covid-19?rq=mural)