

COVID COLLECTIVE KEY ISSUE GUIDE:

# Informality and the Covid-19 pandemic



# Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on certain groups, as it exposed and deepened existing marginalisation and inequalities (UN 2020; Collyer 2021). The measures taken in response had severe consequences for people's livelihoods and access to food (Rohwerder 2020). Those living in informal settlements or working in the informal economy were amongst those most at risk of the negative socio-economic and health impacts of the pandemic (UN 2020). At least 1 billion people live in informal settlements/encampments, while 1.6 billion informal workers risked losing their livelihoods as a result of Covid-19 restrictions (Farha 2020; ILO 2020).

People living in poor and densely populated informal settlements struggled due to a lack of space, water, resources, and services, and were reliant on informal work which was severely affected by Covid-19 containment measures such as lockdowns (Farha 2020; UN 2020). Workers in the informal economy had no or limited access to social protection, with no economic security to take sick leave or cope with lockdowns when their work was halted due to the pandemic (UN 2020). Official responses were often inadequate and, as a result many informal communities had to rely on their own limited resources and support networks to respond to the pandemic (Wilkinson 2020). In this Key Issue Guide, we focus on some of the key issues and lessons that have emerged relating to informality during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Key Issues

### Informality and difficulties implementing Covid-19 prevention measures

The high concentration of people, the conditions, and the limited service provision and infrastructure to contain the virus meant that there were serious concerns about the transmissibility of the Covid-19 virus in informal settlements (Wilkinson 2020; Collyer 2021; Lenhardt 2021). The legality of settlements is a key determinate of vulnerability, as this can determine the levels of protection and services that were available, as well as affecting the availability of reliable data on the number of, and conditions of, people living in informal settlements, which is needed to plan a suitable response (Lenhardt 2021; Wilkinson 2020). Past experiences meant that some people in informal settlements may have been mistrustful about government messaging around Covid-19 control measures (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Wilkinson 2020). However, despite these difficulties, case rates were low in many urban slums – possibly, in part, as a result of community-led health and information measures (see below for more detail) (Zaman *et al.* 2021: 2; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Lines *et al.* 2023).

Work in the informal sector also tends to involve activities and locations where social distancing and other prevention measures is difficult (Lenhardt 2021; WIEGO 2022). Research by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) across Africa, Asia and Latin America, found that many informal workers had an increased risk of catching the Covid-19 virus as they also lived and/or worked in crowded spaces with little or no access to water and sanitation or personal protective equipment, or access to healthcare and information (WIEGO 2020, 2022).

People living in informal settlements also had issues accessing Covid-19 vaccines when they became available, due to low or unreliable global supply and low prioritisation of vaccine access for them (Lines *et al.* 2023; WIEGO 2022). Misinformation meant that there were concerns about the vaccine's side effects and safety, which also affected uptake (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Lines *et al.* 2023; WIEGO 2022).

More serious than the health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic for people living in informal settlements or working in the informal

sector were its socio-economic impacts, compounding pre-existing challenges they faced (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Lines *et al.* 2023).

### Increased poverty and food insecurity

People working in the informal sector were amongst the groups most at risk of being impoverished by the Covid-19 pandemic due to 'lost income and employment due to lockdowns and other disease containment measures, travel restrictions constraining mobility to access markets and livelihoods opportunities, and higher costs of staples such as food' (Lenhardt 2021: 4; Rohwerder 2020; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Lines *et al.* 2023). Most people living in informal settlements also work in the informal economy (Lenhardt 2021). For example, in May 2020, during the first lockdown, 84 per cent of respondents living in five informal settlements in Nairobi reported losing complete or partial income due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Population Council 2020).

Loss of livelihoods due to Covid-19 containment measures pushed large numbers of people working in the informal sector into poverty (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; WIEGO 2022). In Bangladesh, 70 per cent of main income earners in urban slums and 54 per cent in rural areas became economically inactive during the first lockdown, with a large number (73 per cent of rural and 87 per cent of urban) dropping below the poverty line as a result (Rahman *et al.* 2020). Looking specifically at those in the informal sector involved in this study, 77 per cent of people working in the informal sector with income above the poverty line – but within a band of vulnerability – fell below the poverty line due to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis (Rahman *et al.* 2020). In general, informal workers were hit harder than formal sector workers, and the negative economic effects lingered, as in mid-2021 informal workers were earning only 64 per cent of their pre-pandemic earnings (Lines *et al.* 2023; WIEGO 2022). Loss of livelihoods and containment measures also resulted in increased food insecurity and hunger, especially as people living in informal settlements generally have no capacity to store food, and get most of it from informal markets and street food vendors who were forced to close, as well as having to deal with rising food prices (Wilkinson 2020; Lenhardt 2021; WIEGO 2022).

### Lack of social protection

Coping with the loss of livelihoods was challenging as in 'most informal settlements people live hand-to-mouth with very limited savings or capacity to save' (Wilkinson 2020: 508). People working in the informal sector lacked access for formal social protection or emergency relief, which compounded their economic difficulties and led to increasing levels of precarity and food insecurity during the pandemic (Lenhardt 2021; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; WIEGO 2022).

As a result, some emergency relief and responsive social protection programmes included informal workers, for example in Brazil, where informal workers were paid a temporary monthly salary, or in Kenya where a list of some 50,000 vulnerable households living in slums were provided with a monthly stipend (Wilkinson 2020; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022). However, in other places the emergency relief and social protection coverage was generally inadequate, and in some cases hampered by political favouritism, limited transparency, and poor targeting (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; WIEGO 2022). Some informal settlement residents were helped by being part of neighbourhood women-led savings groups, although even this was not enough to prevent members from being badly affected by the pandemic (Lines *et al.* 2023).

### Women in informality are among the most affected

Women in informal settlements and working in the informal economy were more likely to experience adverse effects of the pandemic. A survey of five informal settlements in Nairobi early in the first year of the pandemic found that women were more likely to report skipping a meal than men (77 per cent versus 68 per cent) (Population Council 2020).

Due to their greater representation in the informal sector, women were more vulnerable to losing their livelihoods during the pandemic (Rohwerder 2020). The closure of schools and childcare centres made it more difficult for women informal workers to work (WIEGO 2020; WIEGO 2022). Women in the informal settlements in Nairobi, for example, were more likely to have completely lost their job/income (47 per cent, compared to 36 per cent of men) (Population Council 2020).

## Emerging Lessons

### Support community led initiatives

Locally led and adapted responses that consider the diversity and complexity of informal settlements are key to effectiveness and reduction of harm (Wilkinson 2021; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022; Lines *et al.* 2023). Where outcomes were more positive than expected in urban informal settlements, this was 'largely the result of self-help activities, amplified by government assistance and public recognition' (Collyer 2021). People living in informal settlements developed their own responses, 'although once activities had been initiated, progressive public policy became important in supporting residents' initial responses' (Collyer 2021).

In Bangladesh, for example, slum dwellers in the largest slum in Bangladesh 'themselves initiated robust medical and non-medical measures to tackle the disease, at personal and household levels and then communitywide', with later involvement of local government in collaboration with leaders of the slum and community members (Zaman *et al.* 2021: 2). In Kampala's informal settlements in Uganda, existing structures such as Village Health Teams and the local council leaders were active in several Covid-19 information campaigns (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022). Worker organisations also provided support to informal sector workers across different countries, sometime in cooperation with the government (WIEGO 2022).

Those living in informal settlements often had more trust in community organisations and the information and support they provided (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022). Constructive collaborations can be built between state and non-state groups (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022). Official levels of support for these community group should be enhanced as they can 'serve as key intermediaries with marginalised residents and co-develop inclusive responses to Covid-19 and other crises' (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022: 17).

### Invest in improved data gathering for informal settlements

More information is needed about people residing in informal settlements and working in the informal sector to better inform inclusive policy responses in crises and address their multiple exclusions (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022). Community based organisations can be a key part of this data gathering (Lines *et al.* 2023). In Kenya, for example, the Muungano Alliance, a well-established community-led network, collected data on incidence of Covid-19 (cases, deaths, testing), existing government and community responses, and additional support needed for survival in multiple informal settlements (Muungano Alliance 2021). This 'participatory response was central to developing widespread public support and initiating effective government responses' (Collyer 2021: 1). Information was provided to the government and community leaders to inform appropriate action to support people living in informal settlements during the Covid-19 pandemic, including provision of emergency relief (Muungano Alliance 2021; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022).

### Expand social protection coverage to informal workers

Informal sector workers and residents in informal settlements require access to 'immediate relief in the form of cash transfers, food and assistance in arrears in rent, utilities and debt repayments' when crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic strike (WIEGO 2022). This involves knowing who needs help and expanding social protection coverage to include them. In Kenya, the registration of informal settlement residents by the Muungano Alliance meant that when the 'government subsequently rolled out an emergency cash transfer programme it included, for the first time, informal settlement residents' (Muungano Alliance 2021: 3; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022).

Efforts to include informal workers in social protection systems in response to the pandemic can be built on going forward, to ensure social protection systems are responsive to their needs in future crises and that all workers are covered by social protection (Bhatkal 2023; WIEGO 2022). Informal social protection mechanisms such as saving clubs could be formalised (Bhatkal 2023). Governments can also put in place measures to support the livelihoods of informal workers, especially women workers (WIEGO 2022).

## COVID COLLECTIVE PROJECTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

### Understanding the impacts of the pandemic on those living and working informally in cities in sub-Saharan Africa

- Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Zimbabwe
- University of Manchester Global Development Institute (GDI); ACTogether Uganda; Dialogue on Shelter Trust (DoSt), Zimbabwe; Slum Dwellers International-Kenya (SDI-K); Urban Action Lab Makerere University (Kampala)

This project aimed to understand the impacts of the pandemic on those living and working informally in cities in sub-Saharan Africa and improve governance, policy and programming responses. The objectives of the project were: 1) To inform more equitable policy and programming responses to crises in each location; 2) To increase the capacity of urban social movements working with low-income and disadvantaged households in informal neighbourhoods; and 3) To enhance understanding of urban social movements' significant potential to improve pandemic responses.

### African Cities and Covid-19 – learning and building knowledge: Developmental coalitions in informal settlements

- Kenya, Somalia, Uganda
- University of Manchester Global Development Institute (GDI)

How can local-level partnership teams – involving residents, community groups, government and other actors – support effective responses to the health, economic and social risks posed by the pandemic? This action research project supported the advancement of these multi-stakeholder coalitions in informal settlements in three African cities, responded to emerging knowledge needs related to pandemic planning and co-developed research methods and impact strategies.

### Covid-19 infections in the slums: An anthropological exploration

- Bangladesh
- BRAC Institute for Governance and Development (BIGD); University of Sussex

How are residents of informal settlements coping with the health risks of Covid-19, how they are managing and adapting their lives, protecting themselves and accessing health services? The findings of this study will inform practitioners working in the slum areas of the needs of their target groups and help them to design interventions accordingly.

### What are the lessons that state and non-state relief efforts during Covid-19 offer to social protection for informal settlements post-crisis?

- India, Zimbabwe
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED); Dialogue on Shelter Trust (DoSt), Zimbabwe; India Institute for Human Settlements

This project explored the extent to which community initiatives provided social protection support during the Covid-19 pandemic. The project worked with local and international actors from diverse contexts to analyse and capture informal and formal relief mechanisms that emerged during the pandemic.

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This brief aims to provide rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. It was written by Brigitte Rohwerder, Researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, and commissioned through the Covid Collective.

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