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BUILDING A BETTER WORLD: THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

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Building Forward Better: Inclusive Livelihood Support in Nairobi's Informal Settlements*†

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Abstract For the large population living in Nairobi's informal settlements, the long-term effects of Covid-19 pose a threat to livelihoods, health, and wellbeing. For those working in the informal sector, who are the lifeblood of the city, livelihoods have been severely suppressed by Covid-19 restrictions such as curfews, pushing many into further poverty. This article draws on community data, meetings, and authors' observations as community organisers, to explore the challenges posed by existing government responses from a community development perspective. We found that poor accountability structures and targeted income support only for the 'most vulnerable' exacerbates tensions, mistrust, and insecurity among already vulnerable communities. We draw on a rapid desk review of existing literature to argue that community-led enumeration to validate entitlement claims, improved accountability for distribution, and widening income support is required to build solidarity and improve the future resilience of these communities.

Keywords informal settlements, Nairobi, Covid-19, income support, urban, informal, youth.

1 Introduction

In Nairobi, approximately 70 per cent of residents (2.5 million people) are estimated to be living in around 200 informal settlements, occupying just 6 per cent of the city's land (APHRC 2012). People living in informal settlements experience many vulnerabilities due to a lack of secure tenure, basic amenities, and infrastructure. Data collected by Muungano wa Wanavijiji,⁷ the Kenyan federation of 'slum dwellers', found that in Nairobi's informal settlements, an average of 230 households live in an acre of land – an area less than the size of a football field. Residents face multiple deprivations, including crowding, with families often

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sharing a single room, and inadequate access to water, sanitation, and hygiene and other vital services (Corburn *et al.* 2020).

This article draws on the observations and experiences of community organisers (employed by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) SDI Kenya) working with federations of the urban poor through Muungano. It explores community experiences of livelihood insecurity and access to government income support during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on formal and informal data collection with community members. These include a 'coronavirus situation tracking' survey, in which mobilisers were asked to interview five people in their village (a sub-unit of a settlement) every two to three days in May and June 2020 (Muungano wa Wanavijiji 2020; Banyai-Becker, Mwangi and Wairutu 2020). This is supplemented by information reported to staff (i.e. the authors – Kimani, Wairutu, Makau, and Nyambuga) at SDI Kenya from community-based organisations, during meetings. Drawing on a rapid desk-based literature review, the article considers the case for providing a temporary basic income to informal settlement residents during shocks such as Covid-19.

2 Livelihood and wellbeing shocks due to Covid-19

Crowding and a lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities make adherence to government guidelines for preventing Covid-19 transmission, such as quarantining, physical distancing, and handwashing, difficult for people living in informal settlements. Beyond the health risks posed by Covid-19 to these communities, by far the most enduring risk is the loss of livelihoods. It is estimated that Kenya's informal sector accounts for 83.6 per cent of total employment (Kinyanjui 2020). The informal sector not only creates jobs but is of vital importance to the country's economy because many households rely on it for their basic needs; for example, the fresh vegetable trade is largely informal (*ibid.*).

In 2017, an estimated one fifth of the annual revenue attributed to Nairobi County was generated through the informal economy of one settlement – Mukuru (Corburn *et al.* 2017). Informal work is often the only option for the urban poor. Yet, those in the informal sector typically rely on low, daily wages for subsistence (Corburn *et al.* 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the implications for disease transmission: residents of informal settlements often work throughout the city (for example, in city transport, as domestic workers, and as street vendors) and are unable to either work from home or desist from working. Covid-19 response measures, such as curfews, severely constrain already limited access to resources for the urban poor. Reduced livelihood opportunities, together with price increases mean that at least 43 per cent of the Kenya informal settlement population face high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC 2020). As in many low-income countries, social protection systems are weak and largely exclude informal workers (Molina and Ortiz-Juarez 2020).

The impacts of the pandemic have exacerbated long-standing failures in urban governance and existing social inequalities. For example, since the onset of the pandemic, residents living in Nairobi's informal settlements, such as Korogocho, Mathare, Kibera, and Mukuru, have reported an escalation in human rights violations including extrajudicial killings, police violence and aggression, and harassment of small and micro business operators (MSPARC 2020). At the same time, residents continued to experience forced evictions and high rates of juvenile crime. Sexual and gender-based violence, especially against women and girls, has also increased during the pandemic (Ngunjiri *et al.* 2020).

3 Lack of accountability and attention to the 'moral economy' in current social protection approaches

The Covid-19 pandemic is exposing well-worn social fault lines. The government, along with businesses, corporations, and civil society initiatives has provided a range of support to people living in informal settlements, such as emergency food and water. However, this has largely been insufficient to meet needs, and income support has been limited (IPC 2020; Muungano wa Wanavijiji 2020).⁸ The response to date has relied largely on collective strategies from community members, and their ability to mobilise and self-organise to distribute resources. Drawing on these collective strengths, Muungano has been among those community-based organisations working together to provide essentials such as Covid-19 information materials and handwashing stations at key locations within settlements such as Korogocho and Mathare (Wairutu 2020). Limited income support distributed by government and NGOs such as GiveDirectly focuses on 'vulnerable households' in the informal settlements. These include elderly people, people with chronic illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities, and orphans (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development 2011).

There are three major challenges with existing support. First, there is a lack of transparency in the selection of beneficiaries for support via community leaders, which creates suspicion and mistrust; this is communicated through community-based organisations such as Muungano.⁹

Second, such narrowly targeted income support seeks to categorise certain groups as homogeneously vulnerable, ignoring the complex realities of intersections between these markers of disadvantage and others such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or citizenship. In particular, the substantial young population experience vulnerabilities that they feel are overlooked. Young people from their mid teens onwards often experience relatively little support from their natal families, where there is little space in crowded rooms. With limited job opportunities and social capital, they struggle to generate income to rent a room and to meet other costs of living, which are high in informal settlements due to the 'poverty premium' (Lines and Makau 2018). Young men in

particular are often drawn into crime, worsening insecurity for the whole community.

Disaffected young people are increasingly pursuing multiple strategies to demand accountability for improving their situation, ranging from petitions and demonstrations to community and local authorities, to more 'rude' accountability tactics (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017) such as disrupting development projects that do not engage with their needs. These dynamics have worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Third, many community members' livelihoods fall below the poverty line even outside of periods of shock. For example, an estimated 60 per cent of households in Korogocho are poor (Shifa and Leibbrandt 2017). To these vulnerable communities, targeted support can feel arbitrary, which exacerbates existing disaffection and divisions.

A major challenge experienced in the distribution of all support in informal settlements has been the identification and authentication of recipients. There is no official register of informal settlement residents. Thus, support has relied on lists generated by area administrators and civil society project data, which are often inaccurate, exacerbating suspicion and tensions within the communities. For example, the Kazi Mtaani (National Hygiene Programme) aimed 'to provide a form of social protection for workers whose prospects for daily or casual work has [*sic*] been disrupted by the containment policies put in place to limit the spread of Covid-19'¹¹ through paid work in community clean-up activities. However, youth in Mathare perceived that the process of recruitment of people to take part was unfair and corrupt, and expressed this in a letter to local chiefs and County Commissioners, with the support of SDI Kenya.

The narrowly targeted approach to income support and lack of transparency in distribution in the face of severe shocks are thus at odds with the social realities and 'moral economy' of communities (Hossain and Kalita 2014). Lack of verifiable information on residence further compounds the challenges to making claims against existing entitlements.

4 A way forward? The case for community-led enumeration and temporary basic income for informal settlement residents

In this context, there is a clear need to improve transparency and accountability in the distribution of current entitlements, as well as expand income support entitlements for the urban poor during times of economic shock. Without unprecedented measures to support livelihoods in the informal sector, large numbers of vulnerable households will be driven further into poverty. Moreover, efforts to limit the spread of the disease will be undermined when slum residents have to undertake unacceptable occupational risks to meet the basic costs of survival. How the government chooses

to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, and how communities are able to hold governments to account in their response will certainly shape the future of these communities and Nairobi as a city.

The urgent need to strengthen transparency and accountability with regard to the distribution of existing entitlements for people designated as vulnerable, highlights the crucial role of credible information in legitimising their claims. Local community-based organisations, such as Muungano, are able to collect and verify information through trusting social relationships (Lines and Makau 2018).

Beyond this, advocacy for wider support to people with vulnerable livelihoods is required. Evidence suggests that the provision of a 'temporary basic income' for people living in informal settlements through unconditional cash transfers is a potential approach to meeting basic rights such as food security. There is strong evidence for the positive short- and long-term impacts of unconditional cash transfers (Bastagli *et al.* 2016). A randomised controlled trial of the short-term impacts of unconditional cash transfers (through the NGO GiveDirectly) in Kenya identified a positive meaningful impact on consumption, food security, assets, revenue from self-employment, and psychological wellbeing, with a reduction in incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016).

Long-term national evidence, at scale, from a universal cash transfer scheme for families with children under five in rural Zambia also shows increasing independence over time (Handa *et al.* 2018). This study indicated that by allowing people to meet their essential consumption needs, cash assistance could lead to the accumulation of productive assets and the diversification of livelihoods (*ibid.*). A recent United Nations Development Programme working paper calculated that it would be feasible to implement temporary basic income in sub-Saharan Africa with between 0.76 per cent and 2.71 per cent of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) (Molina and Ortiz-Juarez 2020). The costs for Kenya varied from 0.72 per cent of GDP to 'top up' to international poverty lines and 3 per cent of GDP for a uniform lump sum transfer (*ibid.*).

Although as yet untested in informal settlements and crisis conditions, a more universal approach to income support at the community level has the potential to support community efforts to promote inclusion and solidarity and to 'build forward better', promoting future resilience by cushioning vulnerable people from shock.

5 Conclusion

For the large population living in Nairobi's informal settlements, the immediate and long-term effects of Covid-19 pose a threat to livelihoods, health, and wellbeing. We have argued that the

absence of a transparent, accountable system that can be leveraged by community members to claim against entitlements is deepening mistrust in already insecure communities. Further, enforcing Covid-19 restriction measures in the absence of a financial safety net contributes towards suffering for most informal settlement residents. Current models of targeted support are insufficient to meet population needs and foster division, disaffection, and insecurity within communities. The Kenyan government's response to Covid-19 needs to recognise its moral obligation to support all vulnerable populations and to take into account the realities for those living and working in informal settlements. Efforts are required now to prevent even more people falling into poverty, threatening the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 11 'to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.

Notes

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- 6 Rachel Tolhurst, Reader, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK and Research Director, ARISE Hub.
- 7 Muungano wa Wanavijiji means 'united slum dwellers' in Swahili. Often referred to simply as 'Muungano', it is a network

of community-based organisations of the urban poor people from cities and towns across Kenya, totalling around 100,000 people from nearly 1,000 groups. For further information see the **Muongano wa Wanavijiji website** and Lines and Makau (2018).

- 8 For example, the Muungano Coronavirus Tracking survey in informal settlements in Nairobi found less than 35 per cent of interviewees said basic needs support was provided for vulnerable people in their village between April and June.
- 9 For example, minutes of the Mathare Special Planning Area Research Consortium (MSPARC) meeting of 7 May 2020 recorded Muungano members expressing concern regarding the lack of clarity about the distribution of government income support and mistrust about whether this has actually been received by anyone.
- 10 Based on observation by SDI Kenya staff.
- 11 According to State Department of Housing and Urban Development Principal Secretary, Charles Hinga, quoted in Capital News (2020).

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