covid collective
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH FOR COVID-19 ACTION

Covid Collective Research for Policy and Practice:

Covid-19: Community resilience in urban informal settlements

Foreword

Around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated differences that already existed. Health outcomes and the economic impacts of resulting lockdowns have not been evenly distributed and inequalities have deepened. As the pandemic began, there were widespread concerns for the urban poor. Population density and limited service provision in informal neighbourhoods meant that standard measures to reduce transmission were difficult or impossible. Livelihoods based on day labour and the unskilled service economy were also most seriously affected by the resulting lockdowns.

The three reviews presented here provide a clear contrast to these expectations. Based on analysis of research in Bangladesh, Kenya, and Yemen, all three highlight the active role of urban residents. Overall, three messages stand out: (1) urban residents are not passive recipients of political or economic directives. Residents' responses vary widely and will determine the final outcomes; (2) residents' responses are shaped by the pre-pandemic context, including civil society engagement, residents' trust in government, and wider threats, including conflict; (3) where outcomes were more positive than expected, this was largely the result of self-help activities, amplified by government assistance and public recognition.

Overall, perceptions matter. Residents developed their own responses as a result of a withdrawal of state and NGO-led support, although once activities had been initiated, progressive public policy became important in supporting residents' initial responses.

In Bangladesh, the prevalence of Covid-19 in Dhaka slums was much lower than expected, even in the very largest slums, such as Korali. Researchers identified widespread community-led initiatives in key areas such as sanitation that were later supported by government efforts.

In Yemen, the pandemic was simply one of a number of major health challenges faced by the population. The long-running conflict resulted in low levels of public trust in police and security services who were also the government actors responsible for reinforcing anti-Covid measures such as the closure of markets. This resulted in low levels of compliance. Researchers argue that a reliance on more trusted public actors, such as health professionals, would have improved this response.

In Kenya, a well-established community-led network, the Muungano Alliance, began to collect data on infection rates, existing responses, and additional support needed in multiple informal settlements. This participatory response was central to developing widespread public support and initiating effective government responses.

Kenya care group volunteer, 2020.
PHOTO: MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE – CONGRESO MUNDIAL MENONITA/FLICKR UNDER CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

These findings are significant as they show what works in responding to some of the most complex challenges resulting from Covid-19.

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Key messages

- Urban residents are not passive recipients of political or economic directives. Residents' responses vary widely and will determine the final outcomes.

- Residents' responses are shaped by the pre-pandemic context, including civil society engagement, residents' trust in government, and wider threats, including conflict.

- Where outcomes were more positive than expected, this was largely the result of self-help activities, amplified by government assistance and public recognition.

Urban governance from below: Covid-19 response in a Bangladeshi slum

It has been suggested that the Covid-19 crisis might have a disproportionately damaging effect on slum dwellers compared to other urban residents, where precarious living and livelihood conditions were predicted to cause higher transmissibility of the disease and higher fatalities (Corburn 2020).

However, although Covid-19 cases and deaths in different clusters of Bangladesh increased rapidly for most of 2020, surprisingly few cases were reported in the slums. Although many cite lack of testing as an explanation, systematic Covid-19 testing in June 2020 in Korail, the largest slum in Bangladesh, found a 6 per cent infection rate, lower than in other sites in the city (icddr,b 2020). Various expert and lay explanations were put forward: slum dwellers had better immune systems, or were receiving special blessings from God. These 'explanations' treated the slums as passive spaces and the residents as 'epidemiological curiosities'; no systematic investigation was conducted to understand the 'slum phenomena' in Bangladesh in the context of Covid-19 from the perspectives of the people themselves.

Given this background, we initiated an exploratory study to find out how slum dwellers understood and dealt with the Covid-19 situation. Using trained ethnographers, we recruited slum dwellers as peer researchers for data collection.

A similar situation was observed in Dharavi, the largest slum in India, where the case rate was very low despite widespread speculation on the disastrous effect of the pandemic. A number of timely, practical measures were taken by the local government of Mumbai to contain transmission of the virus in the slum (Altstedter and Pandya 2020). The story of Korail, however, is different – the responses have been mainly informal, local, and adaptive – an example of collective agency and community governance from below.

This ethnography reveals that there is a temporal dimension to the narrative of Covid-19 among Korail inhabitants. In the beginning, the slum dwellers were as panicked as any other group in the country. They initially received scant support from the local authority or other state agents; NGOs working in the slum stopped their activities and the local government representative disappeared. In the absence of state and non-state actors, the slum dwellers themselves initiated robust medical and non-medical measures to tackle the disease, at personal and household levels and then community-wide. Subsequently, local government got involved in these activities. In collaboration with informal leaders of the slum and community members, local government made systematic interventions at the community level. Whether these measures had any impact on Covid-19 is beyond the scope of

A community facilitator distributes anti-bacterial and disinfecting soap to a family in Dhaka.

PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD ABDULLAH KAIZER/ UN WOMEN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC/FLICKR UNDER CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

this ethnography. However, it does reveal how slum dwellers demonstrate collective agency, through informal and adaptive response to a crisis.

We understand these community initiatives by the urban poor as Bayat's (2013) 'quiet encroachment' or 'non-movement', which refers to the collective actions of non-collective actors. Bayat maintains that developing country states seem to be more tolerant to quiet encroachment than industrialised countries, especially at a time of crisis.

Looking at the pandemic through the eyes of urban informal settlement residents, this study reveals the inequity inherent in a crisis situation but also points to the relevance of governance from below through informality and community participation. We believe that such ethnographic insights can help design more grounded and contextualised responses to such crises. We argue that integrating an understanding of informality in designing crisis responses can be beneficial in urban slum settings.

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Community mapping in Kenya improves state Covid-19 response

This case study shows how an urban social movement was able to produce the knowledge that state agencies needed when the pandemic struck, securing more inclusive policy responses and building legitimacy for alternative knowledge processes and associated development ambitions.

As soon as the Covid-19 pandemic struck Kenya, the Muungano Alliance[1] began to collect data from its community leaders, who are based in 313 informal neighbourhoods across 21 counties. From March–June 2020, the Alliance collated information from hundreds of community leaders and produced regular reports of the situation on the ground. As the data collection processes were fine-tuned, the collection process tracked six informal settlements in Nairobi County, three settlements in Kisumu County, and one in Nakuru County.

The Alliance is a coalition of three agencies working closely together. Muungano wa Wanavijiji is a social movement made up of 1,360 grass-roots savings groups in informal settlements across Kenya (Lines and Makau 2018). These groups attract women residents who are unable to save within their home and who are keen to secure development opportunities for themselves, their families, and communities. SDI Kenya is a small technical assistance NGO that supports the work of Muungano in respect of advocacy and material improvements (tenure security, access to basic services, and housing developments). The Akiba Mashinani Trust is a loan fund which provides the capital Muungano savings groups require to expand both income generation and housing investment.

Ensuring conditions in informal settlements were well understood by county and national governments was an immediate concern of the Muungano Alliance. In addition, the Alliance wanted to help provide appropriate advice to the 89,153 Muungano members in savings groups as well as all their neighbours living in informal settlements.

The data collection process was focused on three main areas: incidence of Covid-19 (cases, deaths, testing), government and community responses that reduced the health emergency, and access to the resources needed for survival (Mumbi and Makau 2020). Narrative reporting was carried out by youth documenters in Muungano covering what was going on in their settlements.

Underpinning the Muungano Alliance's work is the objective to amplify the voice of women within Kenya's urban development policy and planning. As information triggers understanding, women and men who are part of Muungano begin to organise their families and neighbourhoods to address the pandemic. As a programme of required activities becomes clearer to local activists, their demands become stronger that government address health and economic emergencies. The speed and depth of the Alliance's collection and aggregation of data reflects capabilities built up over decades.

Once information began to flow upwards from the community to government and downwards to community leaders, then action was catalysed. Community groups began to improve access to handwashing stations and masks. They identified isolation centres and provided emergency access to food. The relevant authorities began to reach out to the Alliance, recognising the value of the information, which triangulated well with other sources, and the significance of their work. SDI Kenya was invited onto the Ministry of Health's taskforce on Covid-19 in informal settlements (Banyai-Becker, Mwangi and Wairutu 2020). Earlier findings from the West African Ebola outbreak highlight the importance of local ownership of decision-making by informal settlement leaders (working closely with the health ministries) for the required action to be taken.

Since March 2020, government policy and programming has shifted significantly. First, Nairobi Metropolitan Services finally began infrastructure improvements in Mukuru, an informal settlement of 100,000 households on private land. Research in 2015–16, led by the Muungano Alliance, catalysed the gazetting of a Mukuru Special Planning Area in August 2017. Nairobi County, supported by the Alliance and a consortium of 40 agencies, finalised some sectoral plans in March 2020. Nairobi Metropolitan Services is facilitating the process for finalising the overall integrated development plan in the next few months. Second, by July 2020, the Alliance recognised the imperative to register as many informal settlement residents as possible, in order to pressure the government to provide a universal programme of support for all informal settlement residents. When the government subsequently rolled out an emergency cash transfer programme it included, for the first time, informal settlement residents. The cash transfers represent a positive and significant shift in government response to disasters in informal settlements that Muungano hopes will continue beyond the Covid-19 response.

This rapid process of Covid-19-related information-gathering and dissemination reflects the substantive capabilities within the Muungano Alliance. Logistically, they were able to manage the initial interest by hundreds of their members, develop an appropriate monitoring framework, and roll out multimedia posts. Strategically, the information became a way of demonstrating the organisational power of informal settlement residents. It raised the profile and legitimacy of the Muungano Alliance and helped to extend and deepen relations with relevant state agencies. It is likely that this work had a positive influence on inclusive responses to Covid-19 by the Government of Kenya.

Muungano Alliance, Kenya

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[1] See **www.muungano.net/muunganos-covid-19-response**

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Conflict and Covid-19 responses in Taiz, Yemen: some initial findings

Our research explores the ways in which Covid-19 responses take place alongside the ongoing conflict in Yemen. In Yemen, local actors, governance mechanisms, and communities vary geographically; shaped by regionally differing cultural, political, and conflict conditions. While a nationwide ceasefire or a return to a peace process cannot be reached, we were interested in how local actors would be involved in any response to Covid-19.

So far:

- Participants have suggested a lack of accountability and coordination of civic and public institutions, creating a sense that no clear response plan was established.

- Health experts reported a lack of social responsibility across institutions, associated with people's inability to conform with Covid-19 measures due to sustained conflict pressures; in particular, poverty.

- A combination of conflict pressures, combined with the Yemeni social-gathering traditions that people rely upon, are likely to make Covid-19 measures largely unsustainable unless public institutions could better support people to conform.

The first stage of research in Taiz aims to answer the following questions:

1 What dynamics are Covid-19 measures creating between security actors and the public?

2 How does the implementation of measures against Covid-19 by security actors impact the citizen–security actor relationship, and the effectiveness of those measures?

3 Where security and conflict actors, including non-state actors, are involved in attempts to address the divergent needs of communities, are there conflict-related effects shaping people's engagement with these actors?

The research is being carried out in three stages (December 2020–August 2021). It involves interview-based data collection conducted in partnership with the Yemen Polling Center (YPC). The first stage has been designed collaboratively with the Yemen Policy Center, the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP),[2] and YPC.

Security actors and the city of Taiz

Taiz was chosen as a research location as it reflects the complexity of contested city spaces in Yemen, involving both official and non-official armed actors influencing authority and governance. A YPC study highlighted questions over public confidence in police who were providing public services while involved in illegal conflict activities (Sultan, Transfeld and Muqbil 2019).

Early research insights implicating security dynamics and urban development

- Participants tended to identify 'Taiz police', 'security units', and 'military police' as the groups enforcing Covid-19 measures. These groups were involved in spreading awareness in neighbourhoods as well as closing schools and mosques. Their more substantive roles involved managing markets and temperature checks at checkpoints; arranging the transfer of people to quarantine centres; and providing protection of the centres. Importantly, participants also described the need for changes of personnel at checkpoints and of policing/security unit leaders, in order for coordination between multiple security units to be more effective and to improve Covid-19 health protection measures.

- Respondents noted that police and security actors were unable to enforce market closures. Covid-19-imposed closures required police to manage overcrowded markets, given the overall shortages caused by conflict. Police were generally viewed more positively if Covid-19 policing allowed people to return to crowded market spaces to secure essentials.

- A majority of participants suggested low pre-pandemic confidence and trust in policing systems and state institutions which did not improve after the arrival of Covid-19. More respondents expressed greater confidence in the public health office and emergency committee than in security bodies. Lack of public service and clearly planned Covid-19 measures by all forms of authority were common concerns.

- Respondents frequently referred to a 'monopoly of merchants' who seize supplies and profit from 'shortages', describing 'disappearances' of all basic goods and Covid-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies or sanitisers/'sterilisers' in markets.

- Most people suggested that they could not comply with Covid-19 measures due to managing the pressures of the conflict, either by having to go to work to secure wages or to markets to obtain basic goods/PPE.

- Participants indicated that while there were no targeted Covid-19 measures for vulnerable groups such as disabled people or internally displaced people (IDPs), a collective of CSOs, Yemeni NGOs, and international organisations provided a level of care and PPE to these groups.[3]

- Participants suggested that Covid-19 preventative health measures carried out by the Taiz Health Office in cooperation with CSOs were met with greater receptiveness and compliance because CSOs were 'closer to the people'.

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[2] PSRP are funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) to undertake this research within the 'Covid Collective' and 'Covid Collective; Lower Middle Income Countries' funding initiatives. PSRP worked with the Yemen Policy Center and YPC funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, in order to maximise the number of interviews undertaken and to not exhaust the research field. PSRP offers our thanks to YPC and to both funders.

[3] Research carried out by the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) and Social Development Direct (SDD) (Heinze and Stevens 2018) highlighted the intersection between shortages of basic supplies causing severe needs among local communities and targeted aid distribution to IDPs. Health activist workers described coming under pressure from communities and being attacked by militants for key resources provisioned for IDPs specifically (ibid.: 41).

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Find out more about our projects

The Covid Collective brings together 28 organisations working on 63 projects to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19-related development challenges. The research is carried out across 25 countries and comes under four broad thematic bases: governance and politics; social development and inclusion; conflict; and humanitarian.

C Covid-19 infections in the slums: an anthropological exploration, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Partners: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)

Research partner: University of Sussex

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

Further information: http://bit.ly/Covid19-slums-Bangladesh

C African cities and Covid-19 – learning and building knowledge: political settlements

Partners: University of Manchester Global Development Institute (GDI)

Working in three African cities, the project will focus on the ways in which political settlements are influencing government policy, programming, and practice during the Covid-19 crisis. The team will analyse pandemic response measures, looking at a range of interventions including health services, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), quarantine measures, the protection of key workers, social protection, and economic assistance programmes. Through a comparative analysis, the project will explore what lessons can be drawn about how political settlements shape those governance variables that have been identified as critical in defining the success of the response – including state capabilities, perceived legitimacy/trust, and the ability to learn lessons from earlier health crises.

Further information: http://bit.ly/Dev-Coalitions-African-Cities-and-Covid19

C How is the peace and conflict nexus with Covid-19 shaping the responses of local actors and systems of local governance in Yemen?

Partners: Yemen Polling Center (YPC)

Research partner: University of Edinburgh, Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP)

Building on an initial pilot project, this study will conduct a longer-term analysis of how Covid-19 will impact everyday life alongside ongoing conflict in Yemen. With a focus on security actors; community actors; women; and other societal leaders, the project will conduct interviews to understand how local systems and actors shape ongoing transitions and processes in conflict settings, and how Covid-19 has impacted ongoing dynamics between conflict actors and daily modalities of societal subsistence. The intended outcome will be further indicators as to how either the national or local peace process could regain direction.

Further information: http://bit.ly/Peace-and-Conflict-Yemen-during-Covid19

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This summary highlights key messages from research focusing on community resilience in urban informal settlements. Based on findings from Bangladesh, Kenya, and Yemen, the evidence highlights the active role of urban residents. Urban residents are not passive recipients of political or economic directives - residents' responses vary widely and will determine the final outcomes. Residents' responses are shaped by the pre-pandemic context, including civil society engagement, residents' trust in government, and wider threats, including conflict. Where outcomes were more positive than expected, this was largely the result of self-help activities, amplified by government assistance and public recognition.

It is written in collaboration with research teams, and collated and edited by Kelly Shephard, Head of Knowledge, Impact and Policy at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The academic reviewer for this summary was Michael Collyer, Professor of Geography, University of Sussex, UK.

This summary was commissioned through the Covid Collective based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and is funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The Collective brings together the expertise of, UK and Southern based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19 related development challenges. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the UK Government, or any other contributing organisation. For further information, please contact: covid-collective.net

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