

MAY 2020

DILEMMAS OF PREVENTING COVID-19 AMONG KAMPALA'S POOR URBAN DWELLERS

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Introduction

Since reporting its first case of Coronavirus Disease (COVID19) on March 22, 2020, Uganda, like most countries around the world put in place a number of restrictions and introduced night curfews to curb the spread of the virus and maintain order during the lockdown period. Key among the measures that were introduced was the ban on movement of people, non-cargo vehicles and the closure of offices and businesses except those providing essential services such as markets, health facilities, and shops selling agricultural products. On the other hand, schools, churches, shopping malls, entertainment centres and all other public places where large groups of people often congregate were banned. The President also urged the public to stay at home and only go out if it is absolutely necessary for them to do so. However, with several weeks into the lockdown, some of these restrictions have been relaxed, including allowing some non-essential businesses such as those dealing in whole sale, hardware merchandise and Insurance to re-open. According to the President, the easing of the lockdown will continue to be undertaken in a phased manner in order to reduce the risk of any spread of COVID19.

According to the World Health Organisation COVID19 spreads when an infected person's cough droplets or sneeze comes into contact with others. The virus can also spread when a person touches a contaminated surface such as a table, chair or door handle and then touches their mouth, nose or ears. Health experts say some of the important and effective ways to prevent infection or slow down the spread of the virus is by reducing the way people come into close contact with each other what has come to be known as social distancing.

Besides social distancing, the public has also been encouraged to practice frequent handwashing with soap and running water while at the same time employing additional preventive measures such as using a hand sanitizer and wearing face masks in public spaces. In fact, the government has now made wearing of face masks compulsory for everyone who is in a public space. As part of the government's COVID19 public sensitisation and education campaigns, these are the kind of messages you are likely to hear every day on radio, television or even read in the newspapers and the various social media platforms. National and local leaders, including security agencies, are leading the different COVID19 taskforce teams that have been set up throughout the country to ensure that the public adheres to these measures.

But some critical questions remain: How are these measures being effectively implemented among urban poor populations? How effective is social distancing if you live in a slum and have no luxury of space? How can the urban poor frequently wash their hands with soap and running water when access is limited? This article, therefore, examines what blanket measures to control COVID19 such as encouraging social distancing means for urban poor people living in slums and other informal settlements of Kampala city.

Kampala's slums and growing urbanisation

Access to decent housing remains a big challenge in Kampala. It is estimated that 60 per cent of the city's population lives in informal settlements, including slums. These settlements are often characterised by limited access to basic infrastructure and social services such as running water, proper drainage, sewage, or solid waste management. The National Urban Policy 2017 is the key frameworks that has been set up by the government to guide the urbanisation process in the country, including addressing infrastructure challenges. The policy states: "Due to the absence of a comprehensive Urban Policy, the country has been experiencing high urban growth that has not be properly guided and planned. This led to the organic growth of unplanned urban areas that are characterized by a weak urban economy, slums and informal settlements."

According to the National Population and Housing Census 2014 data, 12 per cent of the country's population resided in tenements, commonly known as "muzigo" while 67 per cent resided in semi-detached dwellings. The census data further showed that the proportion of households who lived in tenements was five times more in urban areas—at 37 per cent compared to rural areas at 8 per cent. Nearly 47 per cent of these households resided in dwellings with one room for sleeping while 29 per cent resided in dwellings with two rooms for sleeping.

Urban areas were likely to have households using single rooms for sleeping—at 57 per cent compared to rural households at 44 per cent. Tenements, which are the typical housing structures found in Kampala's slums often consist of single rooms measuring about 10x10 feet, with households of about five to seven adults sharing an enclosure with other tenants. The number of people sleeping in one room is a major determinant of over crowding and hence affects the health of those living in these households.

This outlook, coupled with the fact that Uganda has a fast-growing rate of urbanisation—estimated at 5 percent per annum creates a development challenge. The country's population is also projected to rise from 41 million people to 50 million by 2030. Given the high rate of rural-urban migration that continues to happen in the country, populations of cities like Kampala are likely to grow at a faster rate and overwhelm the existing infrastructure. This, therefore, calls for targeted planning and allocation of resources to manage the challenge that a fast-growing city presents for its future's development and progress.

Additionally, as more people move from rural areas to seek employment and other economic opportunities in urban areas, there is increased demand and pressure on the available basic social services such as housing. Most people migrating to the cities are often engaged in informal jobs where incomes are so low that they cannot afford decent housing, with slum settlements being the next available option for them to have a roof over their heads. Living in a slum is tough on its own. But now the economic situation for its inhabitants is being complicate by the COVID19 related movement restrictions that have been imposed across the country. Because majority of the city's slum dwellers live hand-to-mouth and are not able to earn an income during this lockdown period, they are also more likely not to be able to afford to pay rent and therefore face eviction and other economic hardships associated with the lack of a social safety net.

This challenge, which is complicated by the fact that the country still has a huge housing deficit means, cheap, affordable housing is a far cry for many city dwellers. A 2018 Statistical Abstract by the Uganda Bureau of Statics points to a housing deficit of 1.2 million units nationally, with Kampala having a deficit of over 220,000 units. Although there have been several government efforts and initiatives to address these challenges over the years through different strategies and policies, the benefits are yet to be realised. For instance, the National Slum Upgrading Strategy and Action Plan 2008, was drafted by the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to upgrade slums and improve the living conditions of its residents. A number of action points were also suggested on how this could be achieved. In the same vein, the Kampala City Council Authority has stated that one of its plans for the city includes constructing affordable and decent housing units within the different slums in the five divisions of Kampala. It is not clear how far these plans have been implemented. But what is clear is that as planners find ways of tackling the problem of decent housing, slum dwellings continue to attract more people as they migrate into the city to seek better economic opportunities, and subsequently a better life for themselves and their families.

COVID19: How can social distancing be enforced in slums?

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme - UN Habitat defines a slum household as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following: durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions, sufficient living space which means no more than three people sharing the same room, easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price and access to sanitation among others. If you look at the typical slum in Kampala, it ticks all the above descriptions. Slum housing is usually made of brick and mud, rusted tin roofs with poor or no ventilation. Furthermore, the dwellings are often characterised by overcrowding and a high population density, chronic poverty and a high presence of easily preventable diseases.

Given the above characteristics, and while social distancing plays a critical role in controlling the spread of COVID19, how then are these measures being implemented in the city's slums and informal settlements? To social distance means people need to have enough space to keep away from each other by up to a three-foot distance, according to recommendations by WHO. Social distancing also assumes that everyone has adequate space in their homes and immediate surroundings to keep a distance from one another.

But as already explained above, a typical household in a slum usually has between five to seven individuals sharing a room. This, coupled with the nature of housing in these dwellings—with houses often facing each other means it is not possible to keep a social distance from one another even if the people wanted to. Sustainable Development Goal 11 aims to make cities and human settlements, inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. It notes that apart from inadequate housing, people living in slums tend to be excluded spatially, socially and economically from the opportunities that other city dwellers benefit from. Because slum dwellers make up the city's biggest percentage of urban poor, many usually live hand-to-mouth, surviving on the informal systems that keep the city afloat.

The COVID19 control measures that have restricted their movement, therefore, deprives many of a basic income and subsequently their ability to afford basic needs such as food, health care or even soap to wash hands regularly. The inability for people to afford basic needs is reflected in the growing poverty levels that have been registered in the country in recent years. While previous data showed progress being made to reduce poverty across the country, the UBOS 2016/2017 National Household Survey shows that in fact, the number of poor people living

below the poverty line increased from 6.6 million in 2012/2013 to 10 million in 2016/17. According to the UBOS data, it is estimated that 21 per cent of Ugandans live in households which spend less than what is necessary to meet their daily calorific requirements and to afford them a mark-up for non-food needs.

Survival Vs COVID19

With such high poverty levels in communities, most people living in slums and informal communities are more concerned about their livelihood and survival than the threat that COVID19 poses. Food insecurity also means increased risk of malnutrition among children as they are unable to access the right diets to facilitate healthy growth. These challenges compound the need to go out and look for food for survival. It also means that stay-at-home restrictions become hard to implement.

As one local council chairperson from Bwaise told me by telephone, "people are more concerned about where to get food from. You can tell them about how to wash hands but if they have no food to eat, no one actually cares about these guidelines".

Indeed, with access to food being one of the challenges at the moment, residents of some suburbs within Kampala were recently engaged in running battles with police when they took to the streets to protest the lack of food relief from the government. They said following the lockdown, they had spent over a month without working and had therefore run out of food. To address the challenge of food insecurity, the government stepped in with a food relief package on April 4 for the city's most vulnerable households, with a target of reaching 1.5 million people with food support. The exercise is ongoing not only in Kampala, but also targets other vulnerable groups across the country.

"On the issues of food support, it is mainly for groups depending on daily earnings. People in salons, bars, night clubs, garages, boda boda riders, and people selling non-food items. People in the village have been growing their food, coronavirus has not stopped them from farming," the President noted in one of his addresses while explaining why urban poor populations were being targeted for the food relief.

Other vulnerable urban poor groups such as people with disabilities, commercial sex workers and urban refugees also continue to be disproportionately affected by the stay-at-home measures. These groups of people are more likely to be less educated, and therefore end up being poor, economically marginalised and stigmatised based on their status.

For instance, in recent weeks, there have been several media reports of sex workers being arrested and accused of flouting social distancing rules. Some claim they have been denied food relief by local government leaders on the basis of being sex workers. Although these acts have been condemned by sex worker rights organisations, they continue to have a negative impact on the wellbeing and livelihood of these groups of people.

“When sex workers are empowered and their human rights are respected, they can help communities rapidly adopt protective measures—we have seen this with HIV, and it should be the approach of COVID19 as well. Instead, we are being attacked and discriminated against,” said Daisy Nakato Namakula, the national coordinator of Uganda Network of Sex Workers’ Organisation, in a statement.

Already marginalised in most aspects of life, People with Disabilities have also been demanding fair representation on the government COVID19 response plan. That way, they say their unique challenges can be adequately addressed.

But beyond food security and livelihood challenges for the urban poor, pre-existing conditions that these groups of people already face, and which also play a key role in addressing COVID19 have not been adequately tackled.

Take the role that water and good sanitation plays in the COVID19 fight: As already stated above, frequent hand washing with soap and running water has been identified as a critical intervention to prevent the spread of the virus. Yet, just like social distancing, this can be a difficult practice to implement adequately among people living in slums and other informal settlements when they have no access to soap and clean water, not just for handwashing, but also for cooking and drinking. As national data from the 2014 census shows, at least 16 percent of urban households, used water from unimproved water sources. Therefore, while promoting good hygiene and handwashing practices is good, not providing the needed facilities becomes a futile intervention, especially when communities have more pressing demands to spend their little resources on.

And although the 2018 Water and Environment Sector Performance report showed that over 60 per cent of Ugandans don’t wash hands with soap after visiting a toilet, this practice appears to be changing in light of COVID19, as more sensitisation campaigns are undertaken across the country on the benefits of handwashing and good hygiene practices.

Broadly speaking though, there are already COVID19 interventions aimed at addressing water access challenges across the city. For instance, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation has partnered with Kampala City Council Authority to install 300 free handwashing points within the various markets of the city. The Ministry of Water and Environment has also developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to guide the public conduct at water collection points, including boreholes, shallow wells, springs, communal rainwater harvesting tanks, water kiosks, and public standpoints.

According to the guidelines, a caretaker or operator should be available at the collection point to ensure enforcement of the measures, while at the same time providing a handwashing facility within the vicinity of the water collection points. The guidelines also state that individuals must wash their hands with water and soap before accessing the water sources, observe social distancing at the collection point, and wear masks and gloves. Furthermore, caretakers of the water points must ensure that hand pumps and surfaces of the water points are disinfected with a liquid bleach solution at least one a day.

For people living in slums where shared water points are almost always a shared good, the challenge of trying to keep physical distance from each other comes into play. It is difficult to social distance in an environment where services such as water points, latrines, and bathrooms are communally shared. These crowded points become potential risks for the spread of infectious diseases. Because of overcrowding and poor ventilation in houses, people living in these dwellings are also more likely to suffer from respiratory infections such as Tuberculosis. In fact, statistics from the ministry of health show an estimated 86,000 people develop TB in the country every year, with the majority of the cases coming from slums, where living in close proximity to one another is the norm rather than the exception.

Without good sanitation and hygiene services communities become more susceptible to diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and typhoid—all water-borne diseases which can be prevented with adequate handwashing, the same way COVID19 can be prevented. Kampala has over the years registered several cases of cholera, a disease caused by eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated with faecal matter. The current sewerage network system covers only 10 per cent of the city, with most slum households relying on pit latrines. Garbage collection or disposal in slums also remain major sanitation challenges, all of which contribute to the easy and fast spread of diseases.

And just like COVID19, making water and soap available to residents to reduce their risk of catching the virus has far more benefits beyond COVID itself.

Therefore, while government efforts are being geared towards encouraging citizens to observe measures that can potentially reduce the risk of infection from COVID19, it is important to note that some of these guidelines cannot be implemented in a homogenous way. Addressing challenges of urban inequality will be essential in controlling the spread of COVID19 and many more water-borne disease that predominantly affects poor people. Improving the infrastructure for water, sanitation and housing will also go a long way in improving the quality of life for the city's urban poor populations.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is important to recognize that COVID19 is not just a health problem, it is also a social and economic issue. Its impact continues to be more severe among the most vulnerable, poor communities who often have no social safety nets to fall back to. Growing urbanization also means despite the efforts geared towards ensuring access to decent housing and wellbeing for all, slums will continue to grow and expand, as they host migrants coming into the city to seek better economic prospects. As government moves to ease the lockdown and address the economic impact of COVID in the country, there should be no one-fits it all solution.

- There should be inclusive stimulus economic strategies based on the social and economic context of the country. This is because COVID19 has affected the city's inhabitants in different ways. Those at the lower economic strata, especially women and the youth whose daily living depends on the labour they offer every day, and therefore live hand-to-mouth have been the most negatively impacted. It is critical, therefore, that the government takes into consideration their unique challenges while drawing post- COVID19 economic recovery plans.
- Policy and lawmakers should recognize urban poverty as a development challenge and therefore coordinated, workable policies need to be put in place to address the challenge as an integral part of the city's development.

- As the lockdown measures continue to be eased, the government also needs to create a conducive environment that will enable people return to productive economic activities. This will consequently address the challenge of urban poverty and improve their wellbeing post-Covid19.

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