



**Considering volatile livelihoods is critical in
the war against the Covid-19 disaster**

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We are living in unprecedented times due to the Covid-19 pandemic, an unparalleled disaster in many respects. At the time of writing this article (April 27, 2020), almost three million people have been infected and more than 200,000 people have died from Covid-19 related infections across the world. In Kenya, there are 398 confirmed cases of infection and 14 deaths. Global Prediction models suggest grim but largely uncertain future scenarios. So far, the disaster has resulted in the unprecedented overstretch of global health systems and the conscious closure of social and economic systems by nation states to prevent the further spread of the catastrophe. The outcome has been devastating: Millions of people have lost their jobs or taken pay-cuts; small-to-medium-to-large scale businesses across the world face imminent collapse; education, training and research plans (like our own under the Rights and Resilience program) have been significantly disrupted, and hundreds of thousands of families are grieving the loss of loved ones, whom for precautionary reasons cannot give them usual decent sendoff. With each country investing most focus and resources in managing the crisis within their borders, international humanitarian responses as we know them are severely disrupted. Still, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been at the forefront in helping nations to deal with the crises, particularly in providing much-needed knowledge in the form of health guidelines to manage the outbreak. This, despite notable criticism from the President of the USA for alleged failure to curtail the spread of the pandemic.

Lockdowns

A major response by governments across the world has been partial to total “lockdowns” aimed at preventing further human-to-human transmission of infections. Simply put, a “lockdown” demands that people minimize or completely stop outdoor activities. By and large, this response appears to be an effective way of minimizing risk of infection, if reports of trends in many counties that were initially severely hit such as China and South Korea are anything to go by. It is also in line with WHO’s call for social and physical distancing as one of the most effective ways of minimizing the spread of the virus. But while millions of people have heeded this call, an equally vast number of people, particularly in the so-called developing countries, have defied it. For instance, on March 24, 2020 one of Kenya’s most widely read newspapers, the Daily Nation, reported in bold: “It’s business as usual as Kenyans snub stay home orders.” The result has been cat-and-mouse type chases between law enforcers and the people, leading to loss of lives,

injuries and a plethora of prosecutions. On its part, the government has emphasized that either people observe the strict restrictions or face the full force of the law!

But why would citizens risk their lives and the lives of others by being out of their abode in the face of a deadly virus? Critical disaster studies may help us understand this conundrum.

Disasters and livelihoods

Livelihoods are a major determinant of people's level of wellbeing. Indeed, researchers indicate that people's wellbeing is the first line of defense against a disaster. On its part, wellbeing is by and large determined by the success of a livelihood strategy, a status that can be demonstrated in terms of income and subsistence. Unpredictable livelihood strategies predispose people to various hazards, as uncertain and insecure low incomes for instance may mean that a person or household is not adequately prepared for eventualities, or they have to live or work in dangerous environments since that is all they can afford. Faced with such dilemmas, vulnerable populations will often discount imminent risk for their livelihood activities. In practice, this implies that if an artisan (perhaps already in some predatory debt) ekes out a living out of jua kali assignments in downtown Nairobi, he/she will overlook the risk posed by Covid-19 in efforts to fend for him/herself or their households. The same rationale explains why thousands of people get predisposed to landslides as they undertake crop cultivation in fertile but otherwise fragile grounds, or get exposed to typhoons and hurricanes as they earn peanuts from coastal tourism or fishing.

Important to note is that more often than not, such people do not just wake up to find themselves in such conditions and predispositions. These conditions are the result of deeply rooted historical and contemporary socio-economic and political forces that create contexts of multi-dimensional inequality, where more powerful and politically connected people and sections of the society are advantaged while the poor and marginalized continue as inherently disadvantaged. Such contexts of structural inequality determine employability (and thus income), housing (and thus safety), access to healthcare services (and thus health), access to, use and control of land and land based resources (and thus food security and security of tenure) among other basic necessities that would otherwise buffer them from adverse effects on natural and human hazards. In the event of a disaster,

those most predisposed are the already poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, thus creating a vicious cycle of predisposition to and disruption by disasters.

So what does this mean for Kenya for instance? According to the 2016 National Micro, Small And Medium Establishment Survey, up to 15 million Kenyans engage in the so-called jua kali (hot sun) economy, making it the largest employer in the country. A majority of people under this economy live in urban centers with minimal to zero job security. The sector contributes 28.5% to the country's economy, even though a majority of the businesses are informal. Whether formal or informal, people are motivated to start a business in this sector by two leading factors which are extremely important to underline: better income (23.5%) and lack of other alternatives (18%).

How will these people navigate the Covid-19 disaster? As we saw earlier, people engaged in volatile livelihoods or who pursue livelihood activities due to lack of other alternatives will mostly discount apparent risks to pursue their livelihoods. In this case, many people will likely overlook risks associated with Covid-19, or harsh Covid-19 related penalties, in pursuit for a few hundred shillings (\$1-2) to feed their households for a day or two. This hard pursuit of income may be aggravated by the harsh reality that the poor often pay more for poorer quality of basic services such as water (which is critical in preventing the spread of Covid-19) than their richer counterparts, whether in Kibera, Kenya or in poor neighborhoods in US cities. Thus, designing and deploying a social safety net program to cushion and "keep them at home" during the current disaster may yield better results than engaging them in running battles, as these are likely to be counterproductive and unsuccessful. This approach is a no-regret preventative measure that could result in a win-win situation for the government and the citizen. On the one hand, it would save enormous resources that would otherwise go into emergency response. Indeed, Benefit Cost Analysis in disaster management has demonstrated that the net economic benefit of investing in disaster risk reduction far outweighs the cost of responding to emergencies resulting from the lack of such risk reduction investments. On the other hand, such a safety net may significantly minimize the need for people to go in search of a livelihood during dangerous times. Kenya has been implementing such initiatives to cushion vulnerable populations from natural hazards such as drought which is prevalent in the arid and semi-arid regions. However, such initiatives often focus on the old, the disabled and the extremely poor and they can be improved to enhance transparency and inclusion. In fact, the government has indicated that it would scale up such initiatives during the current disaster, which is commendable. But there is a risk of "leaving behind" those who

engage in insecure livelihoods, and therein lies the challenge. Those engaged in jua kali enterprises are highly mobile and energetic – if not included, they can be significantly exposed to risk, and thus expose others to Covid-19, as they “do-or die” to eke a living. Thus, it is critical for government bureaucrats to recognize that the volatility of the informal sector, which employs a majority of Kenyans and is a major source of national income, is disproportionately predisposed to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts. To mitigate widespread infection and ultra-expensive emergency responses while safeguarding this important section of our economy, the government needs to urgently integrate people engaged in insecure livelihoods activities in its Covid-19 pandemic safety net programs.

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