

COVID-19 and human rights: Perspectives and lived experiences with regard to government COVID-19 response measures in informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya

Contributors

Elizabeth Kimani-Murage (APHRC, Kenya), David Osogo (APHRC, Kenya), Florence Sipalla (APHRC, Kenya), Hilda Akinyi (APHRC, Kenya), Faith Kathoka (APHRC, Kenya), James Smart (Tazama Africa), David Ngira (Cardiff University, UK), Jill Ghai (Katiba Institute, Kenya), Christine Nkonge (Katiba Institute, Kenya); John Harrington (Cardiff University, UK).

Abstract

A number of response measures have been put in place by the Kenyan Government as central elements of response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures including the imposition of curfew, movement restrictions, social distancing and school closure, among others have disrupted livelihoods and resulted in human rights abuses. We conducted a qualitative study to document the perceptions and attitudes of slum residents toward the response measures in relation to their constitutional rights, with a focus on the right to food, as well as the impacts of these measures on everyday life. This was done in Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements of Nairobi.

We conducted a cross-sectional survey employing qualitative data collection methods and participatory methods including Focus Group Discussions, In-depth interviews, Key Informant Interviews, photovoice and digital storytelling. Data revealed escalated food insecurity and violation of the right to food as a result of the response measures. The right to food of the urban poor was not guaranteed in the execution of these measures. The resultant coping strategies, actions and inactions of both the state and people violated more human rights including right to health, education, freedom of worship, movement, association among others.

Key words: COVID-19, Response measures, Food security, Right to food, Human rights

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, declared a pandemic by WHO in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), was first reported in China and has since spread globally to many countries. The outbreak of the pandemic sent the world into a state of panic, with evidenced disruption of normal livelihoods across the world. Governments worldwide reacted in various ways to curb the spread of the virus. For instance, international travel was restricted in most countries while many other restrictive measures were taken by individual states,

including curfews, and closures of businesses and social and sporting activities likely to generate crowds. Kenya was not an exception.

Mounting reports on the consequences of the government's COVID-19 response measures do not give a sufficiently nuanced or detailed picture of people's experiences with the restriction measures as well as the impacts of and overall effects on their wellbeing. This study aimed to generate this picture in collaboration with the community itself, ensuring that the picture is carefully mapped to human rights standards.

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted in Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements in Nairobi where the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) has run the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS) since 2003.

Data collection approaches: *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), In-depth Interviews (IDIs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), photovoice and digital storytelling activities.*

A total of eight FGDs, each involving six people were conducted, four in each site. The participants included separate groups of women, men, youth and traders in each site. The participants were purposively selected in order to get adequate representation from the communities. Also, a total of eight IDIs were conducted, four in each site. The participants were adult men and women (30 years and above). In addition, twelve KIIs were conducted with community leaders (chiefs, village heads, ward administrators, religious leaders, Community Health Volunteers, and Public Health Nurses), six in each site. A mixed group of both youth and adults was engaged in each site, for photovoice activity, with each activity having six participants. A similar approach was taken for digital storytelling activities.

Data Analysis: Analysis across all transcripts was done thematically.

Results

Data shows skewed pattern in compliance to the measures. Doubts in the existence of Coronavirus in Kenya and effectiveness of the response measures were expressed. Food insecurity vulnerability of the urban poor was exacerbated by the response measures. Data also revealed violation of human rights in the process, key being the right to food. Other rights notably violated included the right to health, education, freedom of movement, association, and worship among others. Our results therefore focus on these aspects of the experiences and perceptions of the measures in relations to food security and human rights, with focus on the right to food.

GOVERNMENT COVID-19 MITIGATION MEASURES

i) The measures

Community members were cognizant of the response measures as many of these were already in implementation, including dusk to dawn curfew, use of face masks, social distancing, ban of gatherings, regular handwashing with soap and sanitization, closure of schools and religious centers, travel restriction and cessation of movement, among others.

ii) Enforcement of the COVID-19 response measures in the community

The police prominently featured as the most recognizable enforcers of the government COVID-19 response measures in the communities. They were the main government enforcement machinery, featuring notably in the enforcement of curfew, wearing of masks, ban of gatherings, cessation of movement and travel restrictions among others. This was done through arrests, fines, and the use of force in some instances. The community leaders, notably chiefs, chairpersons (Nyumba Kumi heads), village elders and CHVs were also instrumental in enforcement through community sensitization and awareness creation, resource mobilization and liaison.

iii) Views and perceptions on the response measures in the community

Many participants did not believe in the existence of COVID-19 fueled by the running perception that the government was being dishonest about the pandemic as a conduit to steal from public coffers. Some believed COVID-19 was a 'rich man's disease'. There was also the argument on the observation notion that none of the people they know in the community had been infected or killed by the virus.

"...There are people who have not believed completely that there is Corona in Kenya and maybe this one I can also say because initially I was also ignorant before I met a few people who had gone through this so we were thinking that this disease is not with us. And because someone wanted to see someone who had Corona; so whoever hasn't seen or shared with someone who has had Corona is very hard for them to believe. When they see it on TV they feel it is just a western (world) disease..." -KII, CHV, Korogocho

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 GOVERNMENT MITIGATION MEASURES

i) Food and nutrition security

Food availability

The availability of food was negatively affected by the response measures. The food available in the local markets within the communities reduced in quantity and diversity. This is because the ability of the

traders to access the wholesale markets (their immediate source of supply) in the manner and time most suitable to them, and which would normally enable acquisition of adequate amounts, type and variety of food, was hampered.

“...Yes, things like greens, fruits and cereals were the most affected unless one stocked them because you would go to the market but wouldn't find them available or if they were available they would be very expensive...” -KII, religious leader, Korogocho

Food accessibility

The loss of jobs, disruption of businesses and other livelihood sources and increase in food prices negatively affected accessibility of food in the informal settlements. Most people here live on a hand-to-mouth basis.

“...People who work in informal sector like us do have hand to mouth (model). You go to work to earn a living but there were no jobs so we didn't have any food as well – you go to work to get something to eat and if you don't go to work you can't have any food to eat” - FGD, adult males, Korogocho

Food utilization (quality, safety, nutrition)

The food access challenges prompted some people to consume foods of compromised quality. Sometimes one would have little money that couldn't afford a decent meal for the family, thus, one would prioritize buying food that could at least hold every household members' stomach without focusing on safety, quality and nutrition concerns. Food quality, safety and nutrition were never a priority due to the prevailing circumstances.



“...The photo shows a challenge as there is food but they are not eaten. So it has affected the community because they don't have money and that's why the businesses people will sell their products for two days or a week and that is costly to them. And it is not even safe as we are supposed to eat fresh foods. But since there is no money people will not buy fresh foods and it's not their liking...” - Photovoice, mixed group, Viwandani

Coping strategies

Some community members started engaging in urban farming during this period to produce food for their consumption, owing to the food insecurity challenges highlighted above.

“...On my side, there was a time I was idle and I didn't have any work so I started doing some farming because we had water the whole time of the pandemic – so I grew some kales and spinach which would always support me. Whenever I had flour I would just get kales or spinach from the farm and eat them...” - FGD, adult females, Korogocho

Other common coping strategies highlighted included skipping meals, reducing food portions, scavenging, sex-for-food, depending on food donations from upcountry relatives, and sharing in the spirit of *'ubuntu'*.

ii) The response measures and human rights

Participants pointed to violation of human rights stemming from the response measures. The right to food, notably, was not guaranteed for the urban poor. This right, as articulated in article 43(1) (c) of the Kenyan constitution guarantees everyone access to adequate food of good quality at all time in a dignified manner (CoK, 2010). Police brutality was widely reported in executing the measures. The freedom of movement, worship and right to education among others were reportedly violated by the measures.

Conclusion

There exist mistrust towards effectiveness of government response measures to COVID-19, and the existence of the virus itself in Kenya among the urban poor. Although the measures were meant for the good of the population, execution contributed to violation of basic human rights, key among them, the right to food. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of our food system. There is need to strengthen the urban food system to make it more resilient to external shocks. Response measures to pandemics and other misfortunes should be human-centered, and executed in ways that guarantee protection of human rights.

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