

Nairobi in the wake of Covid-19:

Civil society organisations key to building resilient capacities

Policy brief

August 2023

While Covid-19's acute phase has now subsided, Nairobi and Kenyan society generally are facing its longer-term socioeconomic, health and political consequences. These impacts remain poorly understood, especially for marginalised urban residents. Previous research into the Covid-19 pandemic in African and Asian cities indicates that there has been a slow economic recovery, particularly amongst precarious labourers and women informal workers.

Conducted as part of the FCDO-funded Covid Collective programme, our research in Nairobi was based on focus group discussions (FGDs) with people living in four areas in Mathare informal settlement, which has over 245,000 inhabitants. Our findings reveal the varied ways through which informal settlement residents in Nairobi were continuously affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has interlaced with other crises and deeper structural inequalities and social injustices.

This policy brief focuses on key steps for a recovery that realises a dignified urban life for all. We describe our methods and summarise our results, concluding with our key policy recommendations.



Research highlights

- > An understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic through the eyes of informal settlement residents and workers should form the base for policy and capacity building across actors and levels in society.
- > There is a need to recognise the nuanced and unique knowledge of civil society and community actors of informal settlements, including community health volunteers. Their knowledge stems from their longstanding work in informal settlements before the pandemic.
- > Civil society and community actors are key in shaping policies and action towards more inclusive, socially just and resilient settlements in the face of present and future crises.
- > Post-lockdown pandemic responses require more research, as it is a crucial period for building resilience.



Methods

Our findings are based on action research conducted in Nairobi: data collection was led by Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the federation of slum dwellers in Kenya, with technical support from SDI-Kenya, who are together affiliated with Slum Dwellers International (SDI). The research team facilitated eight FGDs with residents and informal workers varying in age, gender, (dis)ability and type of livelihoods, alongside four key informant interviews (KIIs) with civil society leaders and public health officers. Data collection focused on the pandemic period from late 2021 onwards, seeking to understand changes and continuities since the official Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. We examined household- and community-level impacts over time, such as deteriorating livelihoods and rising levels of insecurity, while also considering any inclusive collaborations and efforts to revitalise grassroots savings groups.



they were forced in some cases to bribe police or guards to get access to their workplaces in wealthier neighbourhoods. A minority of business owners found ways of producing items – including masks, personal protective equipment (PPE) and soap – to diversify their livelihood base.

Key findings

Informal settlements in Nairobi have been significantly affected during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic period. They already had limited access to healthcare, compounded by inadequate housing and high poverty rates. The economic lockdown in the early phase of the pandemic meant that many residents had little or no possibility of generating an income, which continued into the post-pandemic period, intermixing with other crises. Although coping strategies varied across groups, we can summarise a set of strategies and lessons learnt at *three interrelated levels*.

The overall story is one of struggle, with almost all focus groups reporting that many children, especially teenage girls, had not returned to school after the lockdown. Teenage pregnancies were on the rise during the lockdown period (March–May 2021), while lockdown and curfew measures disrupted education forcing schools to close down. This meant that schoolgoing children spent more time unsupervised within the settlement.

Individual household responses

At the *micro and individual level*, we discovered that what started during lockdown as a severe problem of earning a livelihood has typically continued in the post-pandemic period. Many families in already cramped homes in informal settlements had to host relatives when they were evicted by landlords, who raised the rent post-pandemic. This increased densities in informal settlements like Mathare. With prices of food and necessities also increasing in the post-pandemic period – partly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which led to higher prices of imported grain and energy – families have had to continue eating less food or fewer meals per day.

Some small-scale business owners coped by continuing to work longer hours into the post-pandemic period, to make up for a still weak market. State-mandated curfews and lockdowns left service workers with limited means, and

Government and macro-level responses

Responses at the *macro and government level* were mixed. Although there were several government programmes to distribute extra cash and financial support to households in informal settlements, including food programmes, these often stopped after the lockdown ended. To rebuild livelihoods following crises and shocks like Covid-19, funding is also essential after the disrupting event.

As well as business owners, some disabled and marginalised groups did not receive financial assistance to which they were entitled, because some officers within the local administration favoured kin and friends. Similarly, those tasked to provide lists of vulnerable groups in communities sometimes favoured their own families instead. In some cases, they even listed names of relatives in rural areas, taking from those in need in their own urban community.

Civil society and community organisations' responses

Civil society developed a more potent response at the intermediate scale, harnessing existing networks between household and government levels. Although the state stopped its financial support as lockdowns ended, some civil society organisations (CSOs) continued to deliver food and financial support. This was crucial in reviving micro-scale informal businesses that support thousands of livelihoods and was foundational for building resilience for households and communities that depended on them.

One such example came from Muungano wa Wanavijiji and its financial NGO partner, Akiba Mashinani Trust (AMT), which collaborated with Give Directly and KCB Bank to collate lists of those in most need, including vulnerable groups. This built on AMT's 2020 efforts to organise a coalition led by women from different organisations – the Mama Kwa Mama fund. This initiative mobilises resources to be channelled to vulnerable people living in informal settlements, including organisations like Build Her, Architects of Kenya and several others. Using the mobile-based online platform, M-changa, the coalition raised 1.2 million Ksh (USD 8,460). Half of this was used to provide food to the most vulnerable people, while the other half was used in cash transfers to different vulnerable groups, including people living with disabilities, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions and the elderly over 70 years of age, as well as widows, single mothers and pregnant women.

The Mama Kwa Mama initiative directly responded to the pandemic, but it has continued to operate. It demonstrates a model of collective action that combines detailed co-produced knowledge of informal settlements, including lists of those vulnerable, with an online and e-money-based digital system of providing food and cash transfer. While the amount of money distributed is small in the context of all residents living in Nairobi's informal settlements, it shows that a model for direct cash transfers is viable and effective when CSOs' detailed knowledge is harnessed – providing insights that government and international organisations would not otherwise have.

At the community level, SDI's saving groups proved crucial for building resilience during and after the emergency phase of the pandemic. Many groups adapted by lowering their weekly or monthly savings during the toughest times to as low as 50 Ksh (USD 0.35) and shifting to digital platforms, using e-money and WhatsApp. This enabled groups to continue building collective savings but also to sustain support networks. When the economy reopened, these saving groups could provide small loans for households and small-scale businesses to revitalise their livelihood-based activities.

Another activity spearheaded in one area of Mathare was a communal food fund that built both trust and resilience. Set up to keep people connected and supply food for those in need, the fund extended from the household level to wider networks and collectives. Saving groups and the communal food fund – alongside a “food merry-go-around” – also aimed to demonstrate the benefits of joining or creating new saving groups to those in Mathare who were not currently involved, thus spreading this form of collective action and building trust networks for the future.

Two other key groups acting at the intermediate scale in Nairobi, and important after the height of the pandemic, were community health volunteers (CHVs) and youth groups. CHVs played a key role in raising awareness and supporting vaccine uptake in informal settlements. Additionally, youth groups partnered with the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company (NWSC) to continue supplying water to handwashing stations located in the Mathare informal settlement. Although the government supported these handwashing facilities during the lockdown, they are currently being maintained by youth groups in the community, who are also managing the sanitation facilities. This ensures the sustainability of these facilities into the post-pandemic period, with youth groups now playing a crucial role in maintaining these vital infrastructures in Mathare.

Policy recommendations

Through their long-standing work in informal settlements – from long before the onset of the pandemic – CSOs and community groups have a detailed and nuanced understanding of these areas, which in many cases the government, authorities, international NGOs, and private companies lack. These intermediate-scale actors represent a rich layer of knowledge, trust and well-established networks that has supported informal settlement residents and workers in Mathare in several ways, during and after the lockdown.



These groups offer a vital perspective that should be harnessed in government and city policy processes. We recommend five key actions to strengthen the strong foundations laid by civil society and community actors, to build more resilient capacities for socially just responses to future crises:

- > **Establish a dedicated fund for disaster management.** The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how governments can be caught off guard when pandemics strike. A dedicated fund would enable a prompt response to emergencies, along with continued support and intervention to uplift the lives of those affected and to promote more sustainable and resilient livelihoods. This could also raise awareness of how CSOs are involved in facilitating the distribution of existing government support to the community.
- > **Scale up the physical address system in Mathare for easy identification of the most vulnerable and marginalised households within informal settlements.** This is significant in contributing to a more effective emergency response and service delivery by helping the vulnerable populations, such as those living in poverty, the elderly or those with disabilities.
- > **Include civil society, community groups and community members in present and long-term planning and policy processes.** A good example is the collective planning platform, Mathare Special Planning Area Research Collective (MSPARC), which advocates for low-income households and inclusive upgrading initiatives with local officials. Additionally, the declaration of all informal settlements as [special planning areas](#) should be prioritised to enhance access to basic services that will improve livelihoods. This will ensure that development takes place within the settlements and that communities get an opportunity to participate, input ideas and come up with co-produced plans guided by technical teams from the county and other stakeholders. Another example is to strengthen the existing Nyumba Kumi system that anchors community policing at the household level.
- > **Map out all CSOs at the local level and bring them together** for greater collaboration and to ensure successful project implementation within the community.
- > **Co-produce and co-host a database of households in informal settlements,** including those termed as vulnerable populations. Such a database is crucial to provide effective support to the community in case of future pandemics or crises.

- > **Develop a system of direct cash transfers that reaches the most vulnerable groups.** This would involve developing a community-accessible population data platform that can be updated on a regular basis to identify vulnerable people, with community members involved in the planning and execution process to identify the target groups who need support.
- > **Establish policies to recognise and create a safety net for informal traders to address the challenges they are facing.** Additionally, partnering with Muungano wa Wanavijiji federation provides an opportunity to organise a network of SME traders in the informal settlements and create an enabling environment for them.

About this brief

This brief was produced by **Michelle Koyaro, Elvira Songoro, Jane Wairutu** and **Joseph Kimani**. For further information about the research, please contact **Michelle Koyaro**, SDI-Kenya (mmichellekoyaro@gmail.com).

Photo information (by order of appearance): 1. Man delivering water in a handcart to residents; 2 and 3. Installation of the physical addressing system in Kiamutisya village; 4. Community dialogue in Mathare settlement. All photos taken by Know Your City TV in Mathare, Nairobi.

Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). 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.

This brief was funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Covid Collective. It is licensed for non-commercial purposes only. Except where otherwise stated, it is licensed for non-commercial purposes under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0. Covid Collective cannot be held responsible for errors, omissions or any consequences arising from the use of information contained. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, Covid Collective or any other contributing organisation.

© Crown copyright 2023.

