

Informal settlement communities as first responders to disasters:

Covid-19 pandemic experiences in Harare

Policy brief

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The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated inequalities in cities, with informal settlements being the hardest hit. Relief efforts from governments, NGOs and the private sector have been provided, both locally and globally. But low-income residents of informal settlements face exclusion in developing cities, with many being left to deal with the crisis themselves.

In Harare, Zimbabwe, residents of informal settlements are often left out of important decisionmaking processes, due to the fact that these settlements are deemed illegal. They face a lack of access to basic services and minimal support from the government and local authorities, who prioritise formal, tax-paying residents. As a result, informal settlement communities are disproportionately affected by disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring them to act as first responders. However, a lack of meaningful community involvement, combined with inadequate basic services, has hindered their ability to effectively respond to the pandemic.

The alliance of Dialogue on Shelter Trust and the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation conducted research under the Covid Collective programme to investigate these issues. We conducted our study from June 2022 to March 2023, creating community-led profiles of three informal settlements in Harare: Stoneridge, Epworth and Hatcliffe.

This brief outlines how communities responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and our recommendations to enhance their capacities to deal with future crises.

Research highlights

- > **Social protection targeting was inefficient and not inclusive enough.** Pre-existing registers were used by state and non-state actors, regardless of the kind of intervention being proposed.
- > **Communities were excluded from identifying the families most in need of social protection.** Some families ended up receiving multiple types of support, while others who were equally disadvantaged were continually excluded.
- > **Up-to-date needs assessments and participatory profiling should be employed** alongside pre-existing socioeconomic and spatial data to improve targeting.
- > **Prevailing structural issues from before and during the pandemic must be addressed,** with separate policies around long-term regularisation and more urgent slum upgrading.



Understanding the challenges

The Zimbabwean government, like many others, responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by imposing lockdowns and restrictions that required individuals to stay home and close their businesses. These measures were impractical and detrimental to the livelihoods of many living and working in Harare's informal settlements, as most businesses operate on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, under the claim of cleaning up the city to contain the spread of Covid-19, the local authority oversaw demolitions and evictions, leaving people without homes or jobs.

Consequently, individuals in informal settlements banded together through existing networks, such as the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation, to deliver more effective local responses to Covid-19. Communities organised themselves into savings schemes and solidarity groups, allowing them to save money for various purposes that helped them cope with the pandemic. Some even relied on small projects like vegetable gardens, which continued to operate during the lockdown period.

Access to basic services in low-income settlements like Stoneridge, Epworth and Hatcliffe is a serious challenge. These settlements are not connected to the city's grid of basic services provision. Many residents' livelihoods were significantly impacted by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, leaving them struggling to recover.

During the pandemic, many communities effectively adapted and found innovative means of generating income, such as poultry farming and gardening. They were able to sell their produce within their localities, reducing the need



to embark on long journeys to far-off markets. To promote their goods and services, they resorted to virtual commerce, such as publicising through WhatsApp. Members of the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation, who generally set aside funds for land procurement, used their savings to buy groceries to sustain themselves amid challenging circumstances.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) also worked hard to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic by offering relief to those in need, such as buckets and soap, food hampers and cash transfers. International aid organisations such as GOAL, UNICEF and DanChurchAid were among those leading the efforts. However, we found that most relief efforts concentrated on large, well-known and easy to access informal settlements, such as Epworth, excluding Stoneridge and Hatcliffe.





Considerations and recommendations

Involving typically excluded populations, such as informal settlement residents, in disaster response planning and implementation is crucial to mitigate the impacts of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Both state and non-state relief efforts are necessary, and community data collection on vulnerability and beneficiary targeting can help to improve localised responses and build more resilient communities.

Our recent research, and the alliance's experience in working in informal settlements, allow us to present various policy options to enhance, institutionalise and refine the meaningful engagement of vulnerable groups in post-disaster responses.

Based on the findings from our study, we recommend the following actions to strengthen the capacities of informal communities:

- > **Support community savings groups.** Savings groups form the basis of collective action in low-income urban communities, especially informal settlements. While groups typically save for purposes such as buying land and building houses, savings were used as a financial cushion during Covid-19 and repurposed to purchase essential supplies. When most income streams were abruptly shut off during lockdowns, these groups were instrumental as a grassroots mechanism for cushioning households and protecting communities.

Recognising savings as a form of disaster preparedness, communities have established revolving urban poor funds. Careful management of these loan funds is important, so that communities can adapt to challenging situations. Organisations offering social protection services should support savings groups through offering long-term income generating projects.

As we have seen during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, communities are first responders to disasters and require resources to protect themselves. It is crucial to prioritise and scale up locally led adaptation principles to enable communities to be more resilient. The state should collaborate with NGOs, CSOs, Federation members and representatives of informal settlements to strengthen savings groups in the short and long term, and directly invest in communities so that they can scale up disaster interventions.

- > **Recognise and strengthen marginalised communities' capacity to self-organise.** Grassroots organisations need to mobilise and organise at a community-wide scale to build a broad-based movement of community members. Arrangements such as savings groups, informal settlement networks and residents' associations provide useful starting points for organising and mobilising across the entire settlement. This approach is key, as it establishes community-wide structures with legitimacy and the capacity to include the majority of residents. To enable resilience in times of crisis, this capacity should be supported over the long term, building on learning from community-led Covid-19 response actions, such as data collection and personal protective equipment (PPE) production.
- > **Adopt a multidimensional approach towards social protection responses, in collaboration with informal settlements.** Covid-19 was not only a public health issue, but also a social issue, and required a multidimensional response. The livelihoods of informal settlement residents were largely impacted more than their health, with Covid-19 cases and deaths very low in such areas. Many lost their source of income, mainly from informal businesses. Future social protection programming should therefore adopt an approach that not only provides emergency relief, but also addresses structural issues that disadvantage slum communities, including exclusion from energy, transport, education, water and sanitation services. The post-emergency period should be followed by developmental interventions to deal with underlying issues that result in informal settlements being excluded.



- > **Support community-oriented information dissemination platforms and systems that were self-organised during the pandemic**, and which could help to catalyse awareness processes in the long term. For instance, the community set up and used WhatsApp groups to disseminate updates on Covid-19, including sharing statistics, new regulations and awareness messages.
- > **Mainstream young people in social protection responses.** Young people played a key role in strengthening documentation activities during the Covid-19 pandemic – not only around impacts, but also informing responses through capturing experiences via multimedia tools. For instance, as part of the alliance, young people contributed to information dissemination during and post-Covid, by capturing and sharing videos and photos on impacts and responses in their communities. Investment in further training would help improve their capacities around documentation and dissemination activities.
- > **Use community-led data collection processes to inform beneficiary targeting.** When it comes to providing emergency relief to informal settlement communities, knowledge gaps exist around beneficiary targeting, including needs and priorities. Community-led data collection enhances capacity by filling these knowledge gaps and helping to shape both emergency and policy responses. Co-produced evidence through participatory data collection can be effectively used by both state and non-state organisations to address highlighted gaps in relief provision.
- > **Invest in building community structures to facilitate meaningful participation.** Establishing strong community mechanisms for effective participation in city-level planning in response planning to cope with disasters takes time and effort, requiring commitment and resources from the state.



About this brief

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Photo information: Community savings groups and focus group discussions in Harare. All photos taken by Know Your City TV Zimbabwe.

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.

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