



Curfews, Lockdowns and Disintegrating National Food Supply Chains

By Joe Kobuthi



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“Our stomachs will make themselves heard and may well take the road to the right, the road of reaction, and of peaceful coexistence...you are going to build in order to prove that you’re capable of transforming your existence and transforming the concrete conditions in which you live.” - Thomas Sankara, assassinated leader of Burkina Faso

On July 6, 2020, Kenya’s President Uhuru Kenyatta announced phased reopening of the country as the government moved to relax COVID-19 restrictions. That day found me seated in a fishmonger’s stall in Gikomba market, located about five kilometres east of Nairobi’s Central Business District (CBD) and popularly known for the sale of second-hand (mitumba) clothes. The customer seated next to me must have received a text message on her mobile phone because she began howling at the fishmonger to tune in to the radio, which was playing Benga music at the time. It was a few minutes after 2 p.m.

“I order and direct that the cessation of movement into and out of the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Mombasa County and Mandera County, that is currently in force, shall lapse at 4:00 a.m. on Tuesday, 7th July, 2020,” pronounced the president on Radio Jambo.

The response to this news was cathartic. The female customer, on hearing the words “cessation of

movement shall lapse” ululated, and burst out in praise of her God - “Nyasaye” - so loudly it startled the fishmonger. The excited customer jumped on her feet and started dancing around the fish stalls, muttering words in Dholuo. *“Nyasacha, koro anyalo weyo thugrwok ma na Nairobi, adog dala pacho. Pok a neno chwora, chakre oketwa e lockdown. Nyasacha, iwinjo ywak na. Nyasacha ber.”* Oh God, I can now leave the hardship of Nairobi and go back to my homeland. I have not seen my husband since the lockdown measures were enforced. Oh God, you have heard my prayers. Oh God, you are good to me.

“She, like most of us are very happy that the cessation measures have been lifted. Life was becoming very hard and unbearable,” said Rose Akinyi, the fifty-seven year old fishmonger, also known as “Cucu Manyanga” to her customers because of her savvy in relating to urban youth culture. “Since the lockdown, business has been bad. Most of my customers have stopped buying fish because they have either lost their sources of income while others have been too afraid of catching the coronavirus that they have not come to make their usual purchases,” explained Akinyi.

Gikomba market is also Nairobi’s wholesale fish market. Hotels, restaurants, and businesses flock there to purchase fresh and smoked fish from Lake Victoria and Lake Turkana. But with the government regulations to close down eateries, fish stocks have been rotting, lamented Akinyi. She has had to reduce the supply of her fish stocks in response to the low demand in the market.

“With the re-opening of the city, I plan to travel to my home county of Kisumu and go farm. At least this way I can supplement my income because I don’t see things going back to normal anytime soon,” she explained.

Two days later, I found my way to Wakulima market, popular known as Marikiti. The stench of spoilt produce greets you as you approach the vicinity of the market, Nairobi’s most important fresh produce market. News of the president’s announcement had reached the market and the rush of activity and trade had returned.

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“Since the lockdown, business has been dire to say the least,” complained one Robert Kharinge aka Mkuna, a greengrocer and pastor in a church based in Madiwa, Eastleigh. Robert, who sells bananas that he gets from Meru County, noted that “business has never been this bad in all my twenty years as a greengrocer. Now, I’ve been forced to supplement my income as a porter to make ends meet. Before COVID-19, I would sell at least 150 hands of bananas in a day. Today, I can barely sell five hands,” he explains.

Robert, who is also a clergyman, leans on his faith and is hopeful that things will get back to normal since the cessation of movement has been lifted. He also hopes that the county government of Nairobi will finally expand the Marikiti market to cater for the growing pressure of a city whose population is creeping towards five million.

A short distance from Robert’s stall and outside the market walls stands Morgan Muthoni, a young exuberant woman in her early twenties selling oranges on the pavement. Unable to find space in the market, she and a number of traders have opted to position themselves along Haile Selassie Avenue, where they sell produce out of handcarts.

“When President Uhuru announced the cessation of movement in April, our businesses were gravely affected,” Muthoni says as attends to customers. “I get my oranges from Tanzania and with the lockdown regulations, therefore, produce hasn’t been delivered in good time despite what the government has been saying. Before COVID-19, I would get oranges every two days but now I have to wait between four and five days for fresh produce. My customers aren’t happy because they like fresh oranges and I’m now forced to sell them produce with longer shelf life.”



With the prior government lockdowns in Nairobi and Mombasa’s Old Town, which have large populations and are key markets for various food products, the government had to ensure that people in those areas were not cut off from essential goods and services. It was also the mandate of the government to shield farmers and manufacturers of the goods from incurring heavy losses because of the restrictions. Despite good attempts by the authorities to introduce measures that allowed the flow of goods to populated areas affected by the lockdown, there were several reports of police harassment.

“Truck drivers are complaining that they are been harassed by the police for bribes at the police stops, which is gravely affecting our businesses. The police, with their usual thuggery, are using this season of corona to mistreat and extort truck drivers to pay bribes in order to give them way at police checks even if they have adhered to the stipulated regulations,” complained Muthoni.

The movement of goods is further complicated by the disjointed health protocols. “We also hear that because Magufuli’s Tanzania has a different policy towards COVID-19, trucks drivers are taking longer at the border because they need to be tested for coronavirus before they are allowed to pass. But we don’t know how true these reports are. For now, we believe that things will get better since the cessation has been lifted. If God is for us, who can be against us?” Muthoni concludes.

Divine intervention is a recurring plea in these distressed economic times, but unlike Muthoni and Robert, who remain hopeful, this is not the case for Esther Waithera, a farmer and miller based in Mwandus, Kiambu, about 15 kilometres from Nairobi. Kiambu, with its fertile rich soils, adequate rainfall, cool climate, and plenty of food produce, is a busy and bustling administrative centre in the heart of Kikuyuland.

After the president's announcement of the quasi-lockdown and curfew, Waithera has been spending her afternoons selling fresh produce from her car that is parked opposite Kiambu mall on the weekends and in Thindigwa, a splashy middle-class residential area off the busy Kiambu Road, on weekdays.

"Before COVID-19, I used to supply fresh farm produce to hotels and restaurants across the city. But now I have been forced to sell my produce from my car boot because if I don't, my produce will rot in the farm. My husband runs the family mill and even that has been doing badly since the coronavirus came to plague us. We have had to decrease our milling capacity and the cost of maize flour to adjust to new market prices as demand reduces."

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Maize is Kenya's staple food and Kenyans rely on maize and maize products for subsistence but, "Kenyans are going hungry and many households are skipping meals to cope with these harsh times," explains Waithera.

Waithera, who is a mother of three children, doesn't seem hopeful about the future. "This government that we voted for thrice has let us down. They have squandered the lockdown and have caused economic harm without containing COVID-19. Now we are staring at an economic meltdown, a food crisis and a bleak future for our children."

A devout Christian of the evangelical persuasion, Waithera deeply believes that "God is punishing the country and its leaders for its transgressions because they have turned away from God and taken to idol worship and the love for mammon". And like the biblical plagues, "the recent flooding, the infestation of desert locusts and the corona pandemic are all signs from God that he has unleashed his wrath on his people unless we repent our wrongdoings and turn back to God", laments a bitter Waithera.

For Joyce Nduku, a small-scale farmer and teacher based in Ruiru, this new reality has provided her with opportunities for growth. She acknowledged that her sales have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, saying, "I now have more customers because there are not enough vegetables available in the market from upcountry".

Localised and more resilient food systems

At a time when regular food supply chains have not been assured, some food markets have closed, mama mbogas (women vegetable vendors) are out of business, and the cessation of movement is deterring travel, Nduku attributes her increased food production to meet the growing demand to a business model that lays emphasis on a localised food system and short food supply chains.

Approaching food production through a localised food system, she says, "gives me local access to

farm inputs”.

She adds, “I get my manure from livestock keepers within my locale and my seeds from local agrovets. I have direct access to my consumers, removing middlemen who expose my produce to unsafe and unhygienic handling and high logistical and transport costs. Hence I’m able to increase the access to safe and affordable food.”

Agriculture, forestry and fishing’s contribution to GDP in 2019 was 34.1 per cent, according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics’ *Economic Survey 2020*. Another 27 percent of GDP is contributed indirectly through linkages with other sectors of Kenya’s economy. The sector, the survey revealed, employs more than 56 percent of the total labour force employed in agriculture in 2019. It also provides a livelihood (employment, income and food security needs) to more than 80 percent of the Kenyan population and contributes to improving nutrition through the production of safe, diverse and nutrient dense foods, notes a World Bank [report](#).

Yet, in a matter of weeks, Nduku tells me, “COVID-19 has laid bare the underlying risks, inequities, and fragilities in our food and agricultural systems, and pushed them close to breaking point.”

These systems, the people underpinning them, and the public goods they deliver have been under-protected and under-valued for decades. Farmers have been exposed to corporate interests that give them little return for their yield; politicians have passed neoliberal food policies and legislation at the peril of citizens; indigenous farming knowledge has been buried by capitalist modes of production that focus mainly on high yields and profit; and families have been one meal away from hunger due to untenable food prices, toxic and unhealthy farm produce and volatile food ecosystems.

Nduku firmly believes that the pandemic has, however, “offered a glimpse to new, robust and more resilient food systems, as some local authorities have implemented measures to safeguard the provision and production of food and local communities and organisations have come together to plug gaps in the food systems.”

Food justice

Many young Kenyans have also emerged to offer leadership with more intimate knowledge of their contexts and responded to societal needs in more direct and appropriate ways. If anything, Nduku tells me, “we must learn from this crisis and ensure that the measures taken to curb the food crisis in these corona times are the starting point for a food system transformation”.

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To achieve the kind of systematic transformation Kenya needs, we must “borrow a leaf from Burkina Faso’s revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara”, Nduku adds. Sankara [emphasised](#) national food sovereignty and food justice, advocated against over-dependence on foreign food aid, and implemented ecological programmes that fostered long-term agro-ecological balance, power-dispersing, communal food cultivation, and the regeneration of the environment, which remain powerful foundations for food justice today.

Indeed, we must also not rely on discrete technological advances or conservative and incremental policy change. We must radically develop a new system that can adapt and evolve to new innovations, build resilient local food systems, strengthen our local food supply chains, reconnect

people with food production, provide fair wages and secure conditions to food and farm workers, and ensure more equitable and nutritious food access for all Kenyans.

Importantly, Nduku emphasises, “We must start thinking about the transformation of our food systems from the point of view of the poorest and those who suffer the greatest injustice within the current framework of our food systems.” This will provide a much more just, resilient and holistic approach to food systems transformation.

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