Market Shutdowns, Policy Failures and the Mishandling of Food Logistics

By Laureen Akoa Wesonga

Way before Kenya officially reported its first case of COVID 19, it was an open secret that the country was woefully unprepared to deal with the pandemic. The public health system was deplorable and ill-equipped to handle the country's ongoing health concerns even without the added strain of managing the pandemic. Lack of piped water in informal settlements in urban areas presented an infrastructural headache, which was compounded by the high population densities in these areas. About sixty per cent of Nairobi's population, Kenya's capital, is said to be living in informal settlements, which occupy just 5 per cent of the city's land.

Between the crowded living arrangements, lack of running water to guarantee constant and proper handwashing and a poorly managed health system;, the lack of preparedness made for a grim situation. By the time the first case of COVID 19 was officially reported on Friday, the 13th of March 2020 (the more superstitious amongst us were quick to connect the date with the event), there were concerns that low-income urban households, due to the nature of their design (or lack thereof), were more prone to infections. Experts also warned of the economic effects of the pandemic mainly taking the form of reduction or loss of income and reduced supply and access to basic utilities.

On 25 March, with a total number of 28 positive cases nationally and over 400,000 cases globally, the President of Kenya announced a raft of measures to contain the pandemic. Movement in and out of the country was heavily curtailed as borders with neighbouring countries were closed, passenger flights were suspended, schools were closed, large gatherings were banned and a countrywide dusk-to-dawn curfew was announced. Many have argued that the move to put in place a curfew rather than a total lockdown was seen as a compromise, a political economy calculation that took into consideration the socio-economic structure of Nairobi whilst endeavouring to reduce the spread of infection.

Nairobi is a city where the majority of the labour force comprises casual workers and informal petty traders who survive on daily earned wages and income. A total lockdown would have denied these citizens access to money for food, rent and basic utilities, which could potentially pose a political threat of social unrest. Others have speculated that the night curfew was intended to forestall criminal activities to supplement lost incomes.

On 6th April 2020, the president announced further containment measures, including a 21-day ban on all movement in and out of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kwale and Kilifi counties except for movement of food supplies and other cargo. By this time, 158 infections and 4 fatalities had been reported.

On 22nd April, Mandera County was added to the list of counties with restricted movement. On April 25th, the nationwide curfew and the cessation of movement in the four counties was extended for another 21 days until May 16th. Another extension was announced for 21 days until 6th June. On 6th June, the cessation of movement in and out of Kwale and Kilifi counties and Eastleigh (Nairobi County) and Old Town (Mombasa County) neighbourhoods was lifted, and the nationwide curfew hours reduced to 9 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Movement in and out of Nairobi, Mombasa and Mandera counties remained restricted until 6th July 2020. (At the time this article was being written, the restrictions in and out of all counties had been lifted and there was a scheduled roadmap to allow for intra-country travel and the resumption of domestic and international flights. Places of worship had been reopened on condition of adherence to social distancing precautions along with a limit to 100 faithful and gatherings not lasting more than an hour. It was announced that schools would reopen in January 2021.

Taking cues on precautionary measures from the national government, county governments also put in place containment measures that mainly targeted market places. In March 2020, Kwale, Kiambu and Kajiado county governments ordered all their open-air markets closed. Kisumu County closed the famous Kibuye market and Nyandarua County closed all Sunday markets. In June 2020, Machakos County closed 8 markets in Kangundo and Mwala sub-counties, where it was reported 3 people who had tested positive for COVID-19 had interacted with local residents.

The economic impact of COVID-19

As earlier speculated, the economy has taken a beating due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, the Central Bank of Kenya revised its 2020 economic growth forecast from the original 6.2 per cent to 3.4 per cent.

More ominously, in late May, the Central Bank indicated that up to 75 per cent of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were at risk of collapsing by the end of June 2020 due to the hostile COVID-19 business environment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecast a 0.3 per cent economic contraction, the result of disrupting livelihoods across the country.

Findings from household surveys on the effect on COVID-19 seem to reflect this gloomy macroeconomic prognosis. They all indicate loss of jobs, decline in incomes, rising cost of living and hunger as key concerns for those interviewed. A survey by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics released in mid-May 2020 revealed that 30 per cent of households sampled were unable to pay rent. In addition, 21.5 per cent of households that met their rent obligations on time were unable to do so and had to renegotiate with their landlords on repayment. This goes to show the extent to which the COVID-19 economic shock has affected households' ability to pay recurrent bills.

On 30th June 2020, TIFA Research, a market research company, released a report focusing on the impact of the global pandemic on low-income neighbourhoods in Nairobi. The study, which sampled respondents from Huruma, Kibera, Mathare, Korogocho, Mukuru kwa Njenga, and Kawangware, had several key findings. Over 90 per cent of those interviewed said the COVID- 19 pandemic had had a huge and immediate impact on their lives, with 54 per cent of the respondents reporting having lost their jobs and attributing this to COVID-19. Ninety-four per cent of the respondents reported having to cut down expenditure on food and drinks.

More worrying was the 42 per cent whose immediate concern was hunger. The seriousness of this is reflected in the subsequent finding that only 6 per cent of those interviewed had been able to save during the pandemic, which exposed the economic vulnerability of most households. Most of those interviewed had supplemented lost income by selling off assets and cutting down on their expenditure on food and drink.

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Another survey conducted between 28 May and 2 June this year by Infotrak Research Consultancy had similar findings. The survey showed that more than 80 per cent of those interviewed struggled to feed their families. More than 60 per cent of Kenyans were unable to pay rent in full, with an almost similar proportion who were struggling to pay rent on time. In urban areas, almost 4 out of 5 of those interviewed who used to send remittances to rural homes were unable to do so.

The government containment measures, whilst reducing the spread of infections, have also had a domino effect on other parts of social and economic systems, particularly in urban areas where the effect of these restrictions has been felt the most. They have had direct and indirect effects on food security in urban centres and on their linkages with food production areas and distribution networks.

Hybrid food systems and systems of care

Most African urban centres tend to have complex hybrid food systems characterised by a delicately balanced co-existence of informal and formal food systems. Nairobi, Mombasa and other big towns in Kenya are no exception. The restrictions on movement and closure of markets have had three immediate effects on informal food systems in the areas the markets are located. First, the income of the traders operating in these markets is lost. Depending on their business size, traders could be wholesalers getting produce from outside counties to retailers selling their wares to customers. Second, informal retail traders, such as hawkers, who normally source their food supplies from these markets are unable to do so. Closure of markets means there is a reduced supply of food produce in urban areas, leading to an increase in food prices. Third, the curfew was already eating into the operating hours of informal traders to get supplies from the markets in the morning and the hours they would have used to sell their wares in the evening. These hawkers have to work within reduced hours and still ensure they sell enough wares to make ends meet. They face another challenge in their potential customers having less money to spend, thus reducing the hawkers' returns.

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Another secondary effect on the food supply chain is the transport of food produce from the source county to the destination county. While the government announced that food supplies were essential services and movement would not be curtailed by the imposed restrictions, implementing that is not a clear-cut intervention. Whereas formally registered transport businesses can get the documentation and clearance to supply food without restriction, smallholder farmers use other forms of transport to get their produce to markets, such as passenger vehicles or motorcycles. Since these have been restricted from moving during the curfew hours, a key element of the food supply chain has been disrupted.

Most urban Kenyan households have ties to their rural homes and get care packages of food supplies from relatives in rural areas to supplement their urban food sources. These systems of care – what some would categorise as informal social protection – also offer a sanctuary to urban families, a space they can retreat to and reconfigure their livelihoods when urban life is too expensive. A recent article in the *Daily Nation* revealed an increase in these care package to families in urban areas in the last three months as urban households struggle to get food. Food sent includes cereals, bananas, Irish and sweet potatoes, dried fish, among others. So lucrative is this business that previous passenger shuttle businesses are repurposing their vehicles and obtaining permits to transport food to urban centres.

Rural-urban support systems also allow parents to send their children upcountry to stay with relatives over school holidays. During these dire circumstances, families can relocate to the countryside where the cost of living is much lower than in urban centres. The restriction of movement in and out of the major urban centres in Kenya has disrupted these systems of care as families are unable to exercise the option of easing the economic burden of their urban households by moving to their rural homes. In a past Infotrak survey, up to 40 per cent of Nairobi residents were willing to move to rural areas the moment the government lifted the movement restrictions.

Food security during this pandemic is also compromised by challenges faced by counties that grow food. Where production is going on as normal, restriction in movement has seen source counties facing a glut in food. This has led to reduced prices of food and increased wastage as food producers lack the storage capacity for their supplies.

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The restriction of movement during the pandemic also affects access to farm inputs at two levels. One, import supply chains have been disrupted and slowed down, hence it may be more difficult and expensive to buy imported inputs, such as fertilizer and pesticides, which are crucial to maximising yields. Two, where these inputs find their way into the country, they are typically found in urban areas and require to be transported to rural areas. Restrictions in the transport of good and services will affect the transport of these inputs to rural areas. Furthermore, the financial costs of importation as well as urban–rural transport are likely to be passed onto the farmer in the form of increased prices, thus disincentivising the farmer from accessing the inputs.

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The locust invasion across the Horn of Africa has compounded Kenya's food insecurity. The country experienced the first wave of locust attacks from late 2019 to early 2020, with swarms moving through the country from arid and semi-arid areas hosting pastoralist communities to the food-producing counties. The Food and Agricultural organisation (FAO) issued a warning in late June 2020 about the second wave of locusts, with some estimating it to be 400 times bigger than the first wave. According to FAO, Turkana and Marsabit counties' crops and pastures are likely to be affected in this wave as the swarms of locusts migrate northwards into South Sudan and Ethiopia. This would reduce the amount of pasture available for livestock in these areas, resulting in loss of incomes and increased health concerns, such as hunger, particularly childhood malnutrition. The food security outlook is grim to say the least, with forecasts of a food shortage in East Africa caused by the locust invasion, low food reserves and the disrupted supply chain of food and inputs.

Mediocre mitigation measures

Pandemic mitigation responses by the government have mostly favoured corporates and individuals in formal employment. The government offered VAT and corporate tax reprieves, financial support for businesses and creatives, and wage tax subsidies for those in formal employment. None of these measures directly targeted the majority low-income earners in urban areas whose employment situation has been worsened by COVID-19.

The Treasury has been criticised for the recommendations it made in the 2020/2021 budget, which included proposals for the removal of zero-rated status on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as well as flour whilst fully aware of the economic impact of COVID-19, especially on urban low- income communities. Members of the National Assembly vetoed these proposals when they were discussing the Finance Bill.

The government reduced its budgetary allocation to agriculture by 18 per cent, from Sh59.6 billion in FY 2019/2020 to Sh48.7 billion in FY 2020-21. The agriculture sector in Kenya plays a significant role in employment, job creation and food supply. Its importance during this pandemic cannot be overstated as it covers issues of production, supply and even access of food, linking producers and consumers.

Government mitigation measures targeting the urban poor have been lacklustre at best. Even as the government moves to reopen the economy, there are no mass testing measures in place, hence there is no credible way of ascertaining the spread of the pandemic within communities. The distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) has been minimal and uncoordinated, putting many residents at risk as the move around in their communities.

Questions have also been raised about the targeting of potential beneficiaries for relief support measures, such as cash transfers and food package distribution. There are claims of government agencies misappropriating funds intended to contain the negative impact of the pandemic at the community level.

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As a society we have been forced to reckon with the consequences of long-term underinvestment by the government in public services. Informal settlements, where the majority of urban residents live, still do not have piped running water and residents have to buy their water at exorbitantly high prices from water vendors. The lack of piped water and the high cost of purchasing water in a time of reduced incomes reduces handwashing campaigns into a classist privileged initiative that only a few residents can comply with. According to Nahashon Muguna, the Acting Head of the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company, the daily demand for water in Nairobi is 810,000 cubic metres whereas the company, at its most efficient, is only able to supply 526,000 cubic metres.

Poor investment in housing and health offer little consolation to those who become infected with the virus. The hospitals are not equipped to handle the pandemic, and with the current state of housing in informal settlements, it is impossible to implement the self-isolation homecare guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health. Moreover, it is one thing to tell people to stay at home and avoid going outdoors. Assuming that they can afford to stay indoors, one has to ask what kind of dwelling spaces do they reside in.

COVID-19 has laid bare the inability of the government to provide basic services to the country's people, services that are enshrined in our constitution under the Bill of Rights. It ultimately boils down to a breakdown of trust and a weakening of the social contract between the government and people it is mandated to serve.

This yawning disconnect between leaders and citizens has to be bridged. It is not enough to guarantee life; the government, in its dealings with citizens, should make sure that people lead a good life, a life of dignity, productivity and happiness. It is time for the Government of Kenya to ask itself what it has done for its citizens and what it should do for them going forward.

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