



The Unyielding Resilience of Mathare Residents Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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About SDI-K/Muongano Wa Wanavijiji

SDI-Kenya is a non-profit organization that supports the urban poor to advocate for inclusive cities, through Movement building, agenda setting and precedent setting in community urban development. Our advocacy goal is Making slums visible.

SDI-Kenya is dedicated to providing technical support to Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the National Movement of the urban poor in Kenya. Founded in 1996, Muungano wa Wanavijiji is a powerful movement that unites local groups from Cities and towns to advocate for policy changes and engage in dialogue. Their aim is to improve the quality of life for slum dwellers and urban poor in Kenya through, policy advocacy and communication with the federal, state, and municipal governments, as well as civil society and private sector groups.

"Muungano wa Wanavijiji's fundamental principles, which we promote revolves around land, housing, sustainable livelihoods, and access to essential services."

SDI Kenya shares **Muongano wa Wanavijiji's vision of creating inclusive cities, where low-income communities have access to adequate housing and services and can live with dignity.** Building on our expertise and experience, we work towards this vision through movement building, agenda setting, and precedent setting in community urban development. Our slogan, **"Building inclusive cities for the urban poor,"** reflects our commitment to creating equitable and sustainable urban environment for all.

Muongano wa Wanavijiji, actively encourages its members to join savings organizations in order to address the unique challenges faced by informal settlement-based groups. Muungano supports and organizes these groups to advocate for community-wide issues such as securing land rights and improving housing, water, sewage, and electricity services. The federation also supports youth groups focused on climate change action by building networks and strengthening their capacity to catalyze collective activity in their communities.

Additionally, Muungano follows a community-led data collection model, which helps deepen the understanding of settlement-related challenges, overstretched services, and infrastructure. This model helps identify the type and level of services needed to improve the settlement's functioning.

Key messages that inform SDI-Kenya/Muongano Wa Wanavijiji's work



- To collaborate with both state and non-state actors for access to basic services, land tenure, decent livelihoods and housing.



- To collaborate in strengthening our agenda setting and precedence setting



- Through policy advocacy and community engagement, SDI-Kenya is improving the quality of life for slum dwellers and urban poor in Kenya.



- The organization leverages its expertise and experience to advance the agenda of inclusive cities in Kenya.

The transformation we seek



Good economic livelihoods



Improved health and well being



Quality education



Upgraded, climate-friendly settlements and housing



Safety and security in settlements



Pro-poor data-driven development



Collaboration between the urban poor and government



Secure land tenure for the urban poor

Introduction

Muongano wa Wanavijiji, with the support of Shack Dwellers International Kenya (SDI-K), conducted the Covid Collective research in the Hospital ward of Mathare informal settlement. This research, funded by the UK FCDO, played a vital role in assessing the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community and assessing their resilience in the process of recovery post-pandemic.

COVID-19 Impacts on Mathare Residents

Informal settlements in Nairobi have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other marginalized communities worldwide. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the economic, social, and health conditions of the population. Residents of informal settlements face ongoing challenges such as limited access to healthcare, inadequate housing, and high poverty rates, which made it difficult to protect themselves from the virus. The economic lockdown and restrictions on movement made it even more challenging since many relied on informal economic activities that were either halted or severely curtailed, leaving households with limited savings.



Additionally, schools were shut down to contain the virus, leaving many children with idle time. Some of them engaged in extracurricular activities like recycling discarded materials to create homemade toys. These creative ideas emerged partly due to what they had learned through the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) education system. Despite the challenges, the pandemic provided an opportunity for the community to reflect on their unique skills and innovations.



Residents of Mathare face several challenges, including insecurity and water shortages due to poor housing and lack of infrastructure. Water pipes running through sewers and garbage pose a health risk, and the absence of street lights contributes to the prevalent insecurity in the area.

Furthermore, the pandemic resulted in many people being unable to afford rent, leading to the evacuation of some houses. These vacant houses became hideouts for thieves and drug users, while some young people turned to stealing at night. The lack of proper waste management has also resulted in a buildup of garbage, posing both health and environmental risks. The poor housing conditions exacerbate these issues, with many residents living in cramped and unsanitary conditions.



However, the government, through organizations such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji, SHOFKO, and Ghetto Foundation, provided aid to slum dwellers during the pandemic, including cash transfers, soap, food, masks, and sanitizers, although not everyone was fortunate enough to receive it.



Taking action is crucial to address the challenges faced by Mathare residents. Possible solutions include improving housing and infrastructure, providing better access to clean water, enhancing security through street lighting, and supporting small businesses and self-employment.

The residents of Mathare have played a significant role in mobilizing and organizing community dialogues with state and non-state stakeholders on how to improve their settlement. While the challenges remain, it is important to recognize the resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness of the community and to work towards implementing solutions to improve their quality of life.



The resilience of Mathare residents

Based on the Covid Collective research findings, some community residents showed resilience during the pandemic and found innovative ways to cope with the crisis. For instance, savings groups were able to adapt by adjusting and complying with health guidelines and accessing their savings as emergency funds during financial difficulties. Some individuals shifted from one business to another to meet the high demand for essential products like masks, sanitizers, and soaps which were used to ensure the government's preventive measures were followed.

However, some businesses, such as mask-making, were short-lived due to changes in COVID-19 regulations. The pandemic forced community residents to rethink their livelihoods and be innovative in generating income. Those with skills in areas like carpentry, tailoring, or hairdressing started their own businesses, while others sold essential commodities like food and groceries.

Furthermore, healthcare workers, specifically community health volunteers, have been at the forefront of delivering patient care and disseminating vital information regarding the pandemic. They have been actively involved in raising awareness, conducting door-to-door campaigns in partnership with Muungano wa Wanavijiji, conducting follow-up visits, and collaborating with health centers like SHOFCO to encourage the community to receive the Covid-19 vaccine. These dedicated individuals have played a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of the population and promoting the uptake of vaccination.

The Mathare Photo exhibition

As a result of the research findings, there was a need to conduct a photo exhibition in Hospital ward in Mathare with the community and the co-researchers in order to show the resilient innovative solutions they came up with during and post the pandemic. Through the KYCTV team under Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the community co-researchers were able to document their experiences during and after the pandemic using a participatory research method called "photo voice." This method involves taking photographs and narratives to convey experiences and translate them into actionable knowledge.

The steps taken



The methodology employed

The process began with the community co-researchers capturing photos that conveyed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in their settlements. The images depicted the challenges people faced, the innovative solutions being implemented to address the crisis, and the creative messaging circulating within the community about COVID-19 and its prevention. The photo voice exercise proved to be a powerful tool for fostering community resilience and awareness, as the images were relatable and powerful. Overall, the experience helped shed light on the impact of COVID-19 in the community.

Following the training, a community workshop was organized, involving four representatives from each of the three villages in the Hospital ward. Their objective was to choose the top 10 photos that most effectively conveyed the concept of resilience. The four co-researchers guided the representatives through each photo, and out of the 15 images taken, 10 were carefully selected as the ones that best showcased resilience. These chosen photographs were now mounted for exhibition, serving as a celebration of the remarkable resilience displayed by the Mathare community.

In May 2023, a captivating photo exhibition took place, showcasing the resilience of the community during the challenging times of the pandemic. The exhibition brought together co-researchers, youth, and the elderly, highlighting their strength and determination during that period. The exhibited photographs vividly portrayed the strength, unity, and innovative spirit of the residents amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. Each photograph told a unique story, capturing the community members' determination to overcome adversity and thrive in the face of uncertainty.



Organized by Muungano wa Wanavijiji and supported by Shack Dwellers International Kenya, the exhibition sparked crucial conversations on coping strategies. The community residents present were encouraged to reflect on the lessons learned from the pandemic and discuss potential measures to prepare for future crises. Based on the research findings, one of the biggest challenges of Covid-19 has been the economic impact it had on savings groups. As a result, financial resilience became a crucial skill in navigating these difficult times.

As an integral part of the exhibition, Muungano wa Wanavijiji played a crucial role in educating the community about the significance of savings and the potential long-term benefits for individuals and the community as a whole. Based on research findings, it was revealed that individuals in savings groups demonstrated remarkable resilience during the pandemic. These groups provided a safety net and a sense of financial security during times of uncertainty. The federation's efforts aimed to empower the residents and encourage the formation and strengthening of savings groups to enhance resilience and economic stability.

The photo exhibition in Mathare informal settlement was more than just a display of captivating images; it was a catalyst for positive change. By showcasing the resilience of the community, the exhibition inspired hope and highlighted the power of unity, innovation, and preparedness. It fostered conversations that could shape future strategies and actions to enhance the community's resilience in the face of any future challenges. The exhibition stood as a testament to the community's ability to overcome adversity and thrive, offering inspiration and hope for a brighter and more resilient future.

After the exhibition, three out of the ten displayed photos were chosen as the most outstanding examples that portrayed the community residents' resilience in the face of the pandemic. Through storytelling, these photos formed the basis of a resilience narrative. These particular photo-stories captured the personal experiences of individuals and their ability to adapt and persevere amidst the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photostories

First Story:

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, ensuring access to water became a critical concern in preventing the spread of the virus. Maintaining a proper hygiene, particularly through frequent hand-washing, was deemed essential by the Ministry of Health. However, in the informal settlements, water access remained a significant challenge, hindering the implementation of these preventive measures.

A young man, as depicted in the accompanying picture, can be seen disconnecting a water pipe to fetch water. This action reflects the desperate efforts of individuals to obtain water in the community. Disturbingly, the picture highlights the difficulties faced by residents in accessing clean water during the COVID-19 crisis.



According to data from Muungano Wa Wanavijiji, a community federation working with urban poor communities, around 70% of residents in Mathare settlement relied on informal water vendors. These vendors supplied water sourced from taps connected to the main water supply. However, the quality of water provided by these vendors was often questionable due to irregular connectivity and supply issues. Consequently, vulnerable populations faced challenges in accessing safe and clean water. Furthermore, the prices charged by these vendors during the pandemic surged from 5 to 10 shillings, further exacerbating the affordability issue.

The situation portrayed in the picture and the mentioned statistics underline the urgent need for sustainable and effective measures to address water access disparities in informal settlements. Providing reliable and safe water sources to these communities is crucial, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but also for their long-term well-being.

Second Story:

In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 among students, the Kenyan government implemented nationwide school closures on March 13, 2020. However, this measure had unintended consequences, disrupting the academic calendar and negatively impacting the mental health and well-being of students in Mathare, an informal settlement. As a result of the closures, students experienced increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness. Additionally, economic challenges led to limited access to the internet, further exacerbating the difficulties faced by these students.

The COVID-19 pandemic had detrimental effects on the residents of informal settlements, including Mathare. The requirement of maintaining a physical distance of at least 2 meters was challenging due to the congested living conditions and the high population density in these areas. This made it particularly difficult for children to adhere to social distancing guidelines, especially when their parents had to leave for work. In response, the children displayed remarkable creativity by constructing toys and makeshift play equipment using locally available materials. This resourcefulness not only provided them with opportunities for play but also served as a means to alleviate the mental health challenges they faced during these trying times.



Third Story:

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya brought about a series of changes that significantly impacted the livelihoods of residents across the country. The government implemented various measures to address the spread of the virus, including lock downs in major cities, restricting people's movement to other counties and their usual activities. Additionally, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was introduced to regulate the spread of COVID-19.

As a result of these measures, many residents in Kenya experienced job losses, amplifying the need for innovative solutions to generate income. The picture below depicts a young man from Mathare settlement, who had previously been employed in the Industrial Area before losing his job due to the adverse economic effects of COVID-19. Faced with these challenges, he recognized the importance of finding alternative means of sustaining himself and his family, rather than resorting to criminal activities, as some young people had unfortunately done.



Motivated by these circumstances, he decided to start a food kiosk in Mathare, where he sells Chapati to fellow residents. This entrepreneurial endeavour serves as a means for him to generate income and provide for his family during these difficult times.

By embracing such initiatives, individuals like the young man in the picture demonstrate resilience and a determination to overcome the economic impacts of the pandemic.