



POLICY BRIEF

May 2020

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON KENYAN YOUTH

Key Messages

- Young people are an important resource in mitigating risks.
- Youth should be involved and acknowledged for their effort in fighting COVID-19.
- There is need to craft youth targeted interventions within the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

• The COVID-19 pandemic continues to claim more lives in Kenya. In addition, the Government measures against the pandemic have far reaching effects on Kenyans. Unfortunately, COVID-19 affects different populations differently. It does not only highlight but also widen existing inequalities. The youth form the largest part of Kenya's population. It is important to focus on them to actively join the fight against COVID-19 by using their creativity and innovation. To achieve this, the Government, the civil society, the private sector and all community members must unite in empowering the youth to play positive roles in this war. If the youth are safeguarded and are involved in mitigating risks, the country will come out of this pandemic stronger.

INTRODUCTION

The 2010 Kenyan Constitution defines youth as any individual between 18 and 35 years in age. They are a key constituent in Kenya because they form more than one third of the population (KNBS, 2019). The population of Kenya's youth grows annually by an estimate of 400,000 (IED, 2013). Before the pandemic, over 7 million youths were engaged in various

learning facilities. The youth were vulnerable to manipulation by perpetrators of violence such as politicians due to their high levels of unemployment. Most of them have been recruited into violent extremism, crime and terrorism on the basis of gaining good perks. Nevertheless, they are agents of peace in their communities.

Psychosocial wellbeing of the youth

The Government directives to stay at home has had a huge impact on the Kenyan youth as they feel trapped with people, they are desperate to escape from. This is happening to most youth across the globe. A study by the UK Youth organization in March 2020 revealed that the youth feel more lonely and isolated, have no safe space since they cannot access their meetings, face more challenging relationships with their family as they stay at home, lack a trusted person to turn to and face increased social media or online pressure. The increased cases of depression are aggravated by restricted movement out of or into some counties, lack of counselling for out of school youth and persons and lack of mediators in the community to support local administration.

Crime and Violent Extremism

Global statistics show that COVID-19-induced movement controls imposed by governments, as well as the closure of local businesses, has disrupted the work of criminal gangs who thrive on drug trafficking, terrorism and illegal control of social services to survive and are looking to cybercrime as a possible alternative source of funding (Bwire Victor, 2020). The good interventions to curb COVID-19 like subsidized bundles¹ from Safaricom to assist University students and faculty in online learning are opening avenues for recruitment of youth into crime including terrorism. Negative ideological forces like extremists are likely to exploit existing grievances like increased loss of employment, and the glaring inequalities between the rich and the poor to attract the youth population into crime, violent extremism and terrorism.

Already, young people have been associated with reported crimes such as school going children who are taking advantage of school closure to participate in cattle raids in the North Rift and the activities of local gangs in Mombasa. On the other hand, there are reports of emerging crime such as fake Ministry of Health officials going to homes with purported information on COVID-19, sale of fake 'cures' of the virus, petty

thieves and pick pockets not being fully identified because of wearing face masks, dousing masks in chemicals that render people unconscious and then robbing them, and stealing car parts from unmonitored parking lots of those staying at home. Ironically, gangs are enforcing lockdowns in informal settlements thereby using the pandemic to build their legitimacy.

Loss of Employment

The youth have been highly affected by job losses following the onset of COVID-19. Young people in Kenya are already disproportionately unemployed. Youth unemployment is estimated to be as high as 38.9%, compared to the overall national unemployment rate of 9.3% (KNBS, 2019). But many of those who are employed work in the informal economy and on precarious contracts or in-service sectors of the economy. Following calls for social distancing, service sector jobs that depend on customer-provider interactions or involve the congregation of large numbers of people reduced tremendously or closed. With reduction in business, most companies rendered their employees redundant, sent them on unpaid leave or altered their contracts. Citizen Digital estimates job losses in Kenya to affect about 20,000 in the informal sector (Ahmed Faizal, 2020). In fact, more than 7,000 employees in Kenya's aviation sector alone are either on reduced pay or unpaid leave (Anami Luke, 2020). Some counties like Machakos banned the youth dominated boda boda, maruti and tuk tuk operations.

Despite this gloomy scenario, the County governments of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kiambu, Nakuru, Kisumu, Kwale, Kilifi, Isiolo, West Pokot, and Mandera should be commended for supporting the national government to initiate a youth programme dubbed 'Kazi Mtaani' (work in the suburbs) where youth have been hired for the national hygiene programme. The youth will roll out proper health standards and protocols under the supervision of public health officials to limit the risk of infection of the deadly Covid-19 disease (KNA, 2020).

¹ Students and faculty get 10GB data bundles at a discounted price of Sh500 for a period of 30 days, the same data bundle costs Sh1800 in the market.

The Digital Divide

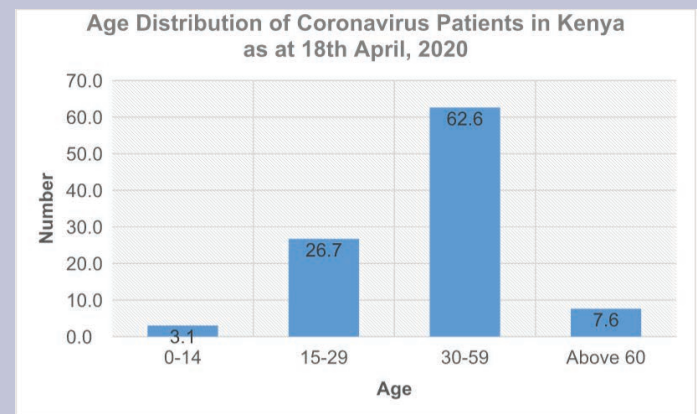
Kenya, like many other countries, implemented the closure of schools at all levels namely primary, secondary and tertiary. The closure of learning institutions has entrenched inequalities between the rich and poor, accentuated the digital divide, compromised nutrition and is likely to elevate school drop-out rates.

In order to keep up with the time, schools were required to deliver their remaining syllabus via digital platforms. Consequently, the Ministry of Education redesigned its content for different forms of online learning programmes and other materials are being delivered through Radio, TV, You-tube and other digital platforms. Even though many schools are providing online learning, students whose families cannot afford access to laptops, phones, adequate internet or phone connections are likely to miss out on vital learning. This impact is heavier on students in rural areas where access to electricity is lower or non-existent. On the other hand, radio education broadcast has been on air since 1970s but it was hardly used even in classes where all students would follow programs.

Maxwell Mwangalla, a second-year journalism student at the Technical University of Mombasa, narrates how his second semester learning has been interrupted due to his inability to access internet even through the local cyber which has since been closed (Jira Joseph, 2020). If conditions persist, there will be a very low transition rate between primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This will in turn affect other factors such as crime and violence. On the other hand, some educationists are contemplating the possible loss of an entire academic year given the conversion of schools into treatment and isolation centres. A case in point is KNEC's cancellation of the April certificate and diploma examinations for early childhood development and special needs education (Oduor Augustine, 2020).

Social Protection

One of the ways a government can mitigate the impact of COVID-19 is to improve the social protection of its citizens (Rutkowski Michal, 2020). Such social safety net systems can act as major resilience factors in the face of pandemics. History has shown us that access to the acquisition of medical insurance varies significantly depending on a person's background, including age. For instance, the youth who miss out on family-acquired medical insurance and do not yet have access to medical insurance offered by their employer hang in the balance. Moreover, the Cabinet Secretary of Health observed that most victims of COVID-19 in Kenya are youth. Table 1 below illustrates that 26.7% of coronavirus patients were between the ages of 15-29 while over 60% are between 30 and 59.



Source: Ministry of Health Press Release, 18th April 2020

From the above statistics, it is imperative to protect such young and vulnerable Kenyans especially due to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the less vulnerable. The Kenyan government has called on youth to embrace the effort to protect themselves and the overall population. While they are highly infected, the most vulnerable health wise are the elderly with lower immunity. So, the youth can help reduce the spread of COVID-19 even as they continue to distribute food and other livelihood supplies, and can aid in increasing public health social awareness campaigns among their communities.

Cessation of Sporting Activities

Measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 including lockdowns and travel and border restrictions have impacted the staging of sporting events at global, continental and even national levels. Some events were postponed indefinitely, others cancelled or played without spectators (Mather Victor, 2020). In March 2020, the Kenyan government called off Kenya's 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualification game away to Comoros in a bid to 'safeguard the public' from the coronavirus epidemic (Kwalimwa David, 2020). Additionally, the Football Kenya Federation (FKF) indefinitely suspended all major football sporting activities countrywide including the Kenya Premier League and the National Super League fixtures (Ondeke Joshua, 2020). The complete cessation of professional sports has severely impacted the money supply of professional players, most of whom are youth.

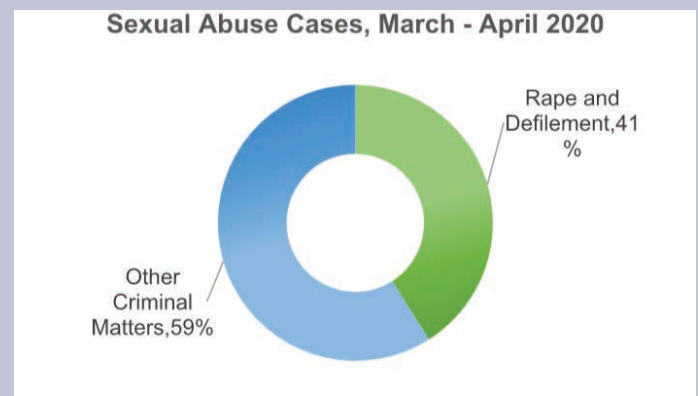
Other than suspending games, the government provided that no public event will have more than 15 persons who should practice social distancing of about one meter (Mutahi Kagwe b, 2020). This has impeded the playing of most sports as they require more than fifteen players and people must come to close contact. Since most youth are not participating in sporting activities such as gyms, neighborhood football and basketball games among others, their health is slowly being compromised.

Online Engagement

With most youth staying at home, they want to keep themselves updated with the situation within and without the country. The internet of things has been the home for most people during these hard times. Besides, school closure has led to overreliance on technology and digital solutions to keep children learning and entertained. Unfortunately, the internet is awash with misinformation in the form of fake news which leaves the youth scared and anxious as they try to figure out how they can stay safe. Moreover, there is reportedly increasing number of virtual sex predators and sexual content online with online sexual abuse highly targeting unsuspecting young people.

Sexual Abuse

Other than online abuse, there has been a significant spike in sexual offenses in many parts of the country. Of the 265 criminal matters reported between March 16th and April 18th, 2020, 95 were sexual offences. 41% of the 95 cases constitute rape and defilement with the perpetrators being close relatives, guardians or persons living with the victims (Mungai Allan, 2020). Therefore, while home is the safest place to ensure sanitization, hygiene and disinfection, it is unsafe for such victims and survivors of domestic violence. This kind of abuse affects the way youth interact with the world. They may become violent, withdrawn, enter early marriages to escape or even fall into depression.



Source: Mungai Allan (2020)

Youth with Vulnerability

It is estimated that there are 250,000-300,000 children living and working on the streets, with more than 60,000 of them in Nairobi. Many of these are youths transiting into adulthood. When the street is your home, how do you keep safe from the pandemic? Youth in the street depend on begging for money, and food or doing casual jobs to earn a living. With the onslaught of the virus, all their sources of survival have been deflated creating a threat they believe to be more severe than the coronavirus; hunger. In addition, although their unity is their greatest strength, it may also be their greatest enemy as efforts of social distancing prove to be difficult (Ben-Hur, 2020).

Other vulnerable youth include those living with disability. Some youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of infection or severe illness

because of their underlying medical conditions. The blind youth for instance use their sense of feel for all their activities. Yet, to reduce one's chances of getting COVID-19, one has to limit their touch of objects, surfaces and even their own face. There are other disabilities that limit the youth's mobility, or their practice of social distancing given that they rely on others for their survival. Some disabilities make it difficult to understand information or practice preventive measures, such as hand washing and social distancing and others may not be able to communicate symptoms of illness.

Youth Involvement in the Fight against COVID-19

Amid the pandemic, the youth are identifying the challenges and needs in their communities, and innovating solutions for them. Kenyans – especially university students – have come up with innovations to help fight COVID-19 such as friendlier hand-washing gadgets, prototype ventilators, Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs), and masks. This has enhanced exploitation of local capacities to replace imports.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Government

Youth Representation in Decision-making

Ensure youth representation in all Covid-19 response planning and decision-making. Evidence across sectors, including economic planning and emergency response, demonstrates unquestioningly that policies that do not consult youth or include them in decision-making are simply less effective, and can even do harm. We must also continue to put young people's voices at the heart of decision making and enable them to be part of the solution to reuniting communities in the aftermath of the crisis.

Target youth in all efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19

It will be important to apply a youth lens to the design of fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes to achieve greater equality, social and economic opportunities.

Ensure that youth have access to COVID-19 public health messages

Health care response must facilitate the development and dissemination of targeted messaging on public health to the different contexts and concerns of youth. Accurate COVID-19 prevention and medical information should also be distributed in various languages including Swahili and Sheng' and using various means such as art and drama.

Adopt No-Tech approaches to sustain home school learning for disadvantaged families

To alleviate the situation, the government should ensure that there is continuity in learning by promoting no-tech solutions such as using chiefs to distribute books with appropriate syllabus materials; or using one public school per sub-location to distribute the materials; or recruiting mentors from local communities to reproduce materials for the people/ regions that cannot maintain online learning. This recommendation should be particularly targeted to class eight and form four candidates.

Social Protection for Youth

Ensure that social protection systems include all youth, with special attention paid to those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, such as those who are jobless. There is generally need to initiate emergency fiscal measures to expand social protection as a response to COVID-19.

Innovation

The youth are creative and highly flexible. Therefore, there is need to incentivize youth innovation for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and the management of its attendant socioeconomic impacts.

Young Carers

The crisis will likely highlight the extent of children and young people supporting their own families – parents, grandparents and siblings with health care and support needs – and this may be an opportunity to build an improved understanding and response. During this period, local authorities should actively check-in on known young carers to ensure that they have the support they need and all agencies should coordinate intelligence around families who are struggling, including in cases where

parents or carers become ill as a result of the outbreak.

Safeguarding Policies in Schools

Schools should adopt student safeguarding policies to reflect the new realities of learning from home and ensure that student have continued access to school-based counselling services

Civil Society Organizations

Recognize young people who are reinforcing the fight against COVID-19

State and non-state agencies should recognize the efforts of youth who are helping to fight COVID-19 in their communities

Enhance efforts of Countering Violent Extremism

As the country grapples with the challenges of implementing COVID-19 measures, agencies and organizations should enhance their efforts in countering violent extremism through online messages and local media. CVE messages should be incorporated in the home-based schooling that is going on to cushion the youth from being radicalized or recruited.

Employment

The response to youth employment during (and after) COVID-19 requires an agenda of resilience and recovery, but also one of innovation. There is need to monitor youth unemployment and underemployment during this period. In addition, targeted measures to promote youth employment and decent work should be implemented. Since youth unemployment in a COVID-19 world is a huge challenge, it requires

the various players across the development sector to work together, innovate and be flexible in their proposed solutions.

Awareness Creation on Online Sexual Abuse

There is need to increase awareness and undertake educational initiatives on cyber safety.

Private Sector

Enhance Safety Measures Online

Meanwhile, the information technology industry, including social networking platforms, need to enhance online platforms with more safety measures, especially while using virtual learning tools.

Communities

Parent Monitoring

Parents should ensure that their children's devices have the latest software updates and antivirus programmes. They are also encouraged to speak to their children on how and with whom they are communicating online and to set new internet rules.

Youth enhancing Intergenerational Solidarity

The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of our solidarity. There is need for all sectors to reach out to the youth but also for the youth to join in collaborative efforts with the community, the civil society and government in fighting COVID-19.

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