

# Urgent recommendations for a people-centered COVID19 government response in Mathare

MATHARE-Special Planning Area Research Collective — M-SPARC



## The current situation in Mathare

Out of 434 Mathare respondents of a Muungano wa Wanavijiji COVID-19 response survey conducted in early April 2020, 54% said they were taking personal measures to protect themselves; 43% were involved in organizations supporting others in their community, and a vast minority said that they had seen necessary actions being conducted by the National government, 17%, or the County Government, 14%. Related, with 69% of respondents taking it upon themselves to create awareness and 24% engaging in the distribution of essentials such as soap and sanitizer, we can make out the huge role that community groups and individuals are playing in protecting their communities against COVID-19. This is a role that surpasses that of the government – both National and County Governments. At the same time, since 38% of respondents said they still do not have adequate information about COVID-19, and 56% said they lack adequate water while the vast majority, 89%, said they do not have basic needs (food, rent etc.) to adhere to the protection measures, it is imperative that the governments, both National and County, play their part in supporting the Mathare community (and other poor areas) in their local COVID-19 response efforts. Based on these documented experiences of the past few weeks, we urge the government of Kenya to take up the following recommendations to make the COVID19 response in informal settlements effective, safe and dignified for all:

### **1. We urge the government to ensure a steady flow of water to all informal settlements and to all parts within these neighborhoods.**

Many poor settlements still lack a sufficient water supply, despite the government directive that they should be provided with free water for the next few months, and this greatly exacerbates the overall risk situation here and hampers many initiatives by residents and local organizations to make water available for frequent handwashing in public spaces. The

boreholes that have been dug by the government do not solve this problem sufficiently. Also, people with meters have been forced to pay 400 KES per month without the flow of water.

**2. We urge the government to work through local community-led organizations in the informal settlements when distributing food, sanitation and protection items.**

Much of the distribution of food, masks and hand sanitizers did not work through local organizations, and as a result has ended up endangering many recipients because of the chaos that ensued. These initiatives are also highly exclusive because they often go through influential people in the communities. Community-led organizations know their community and are held accountable by them for an even, fair and safe distribution of donations and other items. They know best how to organize a safe and respectful manner in which items can be distributed to those most in need. We also urge that food delivery and any other type of support, like the cash donations, from the government be adequate, inclusive and on an ongoing basis.

**3. We urge the government to include youth as Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) and in other public health interventions in informal settlements.**

Many of the current CHVs in informal settlements are older and some are HIV positive, which means that they are more at risk of becoming severely affected by the corona virus. Their youthfulness and healthy immune systems make them fit for this type of work under these circumstances. In addition, following the stringent corona measures, many of these youth in informal settlements have lost their access to work. Hence, including them as CHVs in the government's public health outreach under its COVID19 response would also support these youth in earning a stipend during such dire economic times.

However, the recent first attempt by the government to hire youth as part of fumigation efforts in Mathare has ended up in chaos due to lack of government planning and corruption, and confused youth were met with a disproportionately heavy-handed response by police (see point 4). This blatantly shows the need for a people-driven planning of Mathare through the declaration of **Mathare as a Special Planning Area** for this would enable community-led organizations and groups to work together with the government to organize both the employment of youth in such schemes and in the participatory planning and improvement of Mathare to benefit safety, health and economic outcomes, all at once. The knowledge on how Mathare can be organized and improved lies with the people living here who are already developing local mechanism of development, work and care. By declaring Mathare a Special Planning Area, the government can build with and strengthen the local knowledges, achievements and arrangements through which government objectives concerning health, economy and safety could easily be achieved.

**4. We urge the government to condemn the violent and corrupt mode of enforcing the current curfew and other corona measures in place by the police.**

Our organizations have been flooded with incident reports on police who kill, maim and beat residents in the informal settlements, and even inside their own homes, when supposedly enforcing the curfew and other measures to stop COVID19 from spreading. The killing of

Yassin Moyo, a 13 year old resident of Kiamaiko, Mathare, by police while he was standing on his own balcony is just one devastating example of many instances of the use of excessive force by police. Besides using illegal force, the police have also been reported to us, by many residents in informal settlements, as taking advantage of the corona measures to extort money from residents. On top of this, a shocking number of young people have disappeared in recent weeks. Some have been found beaten but alive in police stations after days of searching, while others are yet to be found.

**5. We urge the government to include community-led organizations, such as the local Muungano Wanavijiji leaders, in the local task force committees.**

At present, the local taskforce committees that operate under the national taskforce steering the government's response to COVID19 draw membership from local nyumba kumi groups and village elders. While local community-led organizations have vast experience reaching the residents who are most in need and are in general the first responders to any type of crisis in these neighborhoods (fire, cholera outbreaks, violence etc.), they are not part of the local taskforce steering the local COVID19 response. Not including their immense experience and local knowledge could thus seriously jeopardize the effectiveness of the government's COVID19 response in informal settlements. Moreover, the collective awareness, research and food and water distribution efforts they are engaged in during this time, and that precede local government efforts, make imperative their involvement in the local and national COVID-19 committees.

**6. We urge the government to work together with residents and other community-led organizations to locate safe and dignified isolation centers for COVID19 patients in or near-by the informal settlements.**

The plan to have a few large-scale isolations centers, for instance in Kasarani stadium, has sparked enormous fear among residents of informal settlements. Since the proposed centers are far from their homes, this will discourage many people from coming forward when having symptoms, and in this way completely obstructing the COVID19 response in these neighborhoods. There are many local options known by the local organizations that could help residents suffering from COVID19 to stay close to where they live while receiving adequate and dignified care.

**Under the banner of the Mathare Spatial Planning Area Research Collective:**

- 1) Ghetto Foundation
- 2) Muungano wa Wanavijiji
- 3) Kiamaiko Community Justice Centre
- 4) Mathare Social Justice Centre
- 5) Slum Dwellers International-Kenya
- 6) Naipolitans
- 7) Muungano AMT
- 8) Kounkuey Design Initiative