

Chapter 3

Youth-Led Response To COVID-19 In Informal Settlements: Case Study Of Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya

Douglas Ragan¹, Olga Tsaplina^{1,2}, Amandine Mure-Ravaud^{2,3}

¹ UN-Habitat, Canada; douglas.ragan@un.org

² UN-Habitat, Russia; olga.tsaplina@un.org

³ UN-Habitat, France; mr.amandine@yahoo.fr

Abstract

While being disproportionately affected by the pandemic, youth globally have as well been playing a significant role in community-led containment of COVID-19. Over the past 10 months, UN-Habitat has been working in close collaboration with youth in the informal settlements of Nairobi supporting them in their frontline COVID-19 response.

This article analyzes the factors of success for the COVID-19 community response using the case of youth-led COVID-19 Emergency Response in Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya, and draw some lessons learned for building the backbone of prevention and response mechanisms for the future.

We conclude with the statement that an emergency response can only be effective when the community is onboard. The most important factors of success of Mathare response include the availability of well-reputed entity on the ground that served as an entry points to the community, meaningful engagement of local young men and women at all stages of the project, development actors and international organizations playing an auxiliary and advisory, non-intervening role and the consideration of the economic needs of the youth involved in the implementation of the project.

Keywords

COVID-19 response, Youth-led development, Urban development, Inclusion, Informal settlements, Nairobi, Mathare

3.1 Introduction

The destabilizing effect of COVID-19 pandemic is widely discussed in literature, public addresses and press, with the social and spatial dimensions of its spread and impacts almost immediately having emerged on surface. The cities were soon labelled as ‘frontlines’ of the fight against the deadly infection. For as many as 1 billion people residing in slums and informal settlements (UN-Habitat 2020), implementation of the public health guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) was close to impossible, given the lack of data, as well as aggravating access to water, sanitation, health, basic services, and housing. Vulnerable populations living in these areas are most at risk to contract the infection, suffer from the most severe cases of illness and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

In Kenya, the situation is made more critical by the fact that the country has a notable number of people living in informal settings. Since 2009, when 54.7% of Kenya’s urban population was estimated to be living in informal settlements, amidst the slight decrease in the proportion of people living in slums, the absolute number continues to grow. Nairobi hosts some of the largest slums in the country, including Mathare, which is home to over 60,000 inhabitants per square kilometer. The population in these informal settlements is largely composed of young people, who generally constitute over 35% of the total Kenyan population for those between the age of 15-34 (UN-Habitat et al. 2015).

Young people make up a large proportion of the world's population and are among the hardest hit by this pandemic. Yet they are also an incredibly dynamic human resource, and thus – the backbone of any community strategy. The concept of youth-led development places young people at the center of their own and their communities’ development, “moving youth from passive receptors of development to agents of positive change” (UN-Habitat 2012). Therefore, policy responses must include youth groups and recognize young people in decision-making to ensure positive change.

Confronted by the spread of the disease, like it was shown in the past experiences of fighting the epidemics, community-led initiatives have proven to be successful in mobilizing their internal resources to prevent the virus’ spread (UN-Habitat, 2020). Originating complex systems operating in a highly uncertain environment, the effectiveness of the community-led interventions vary dramatically into the crisis. However, some similarities in the responses have proven to be successful and can be identified, creating a ‘community of practice’ amongst stakeholders spearheading the process.

This article aims to make an argument that young people, when fully and meaningfully engaged and put in leadership positions, contribute to building the resilience of their communities and drive a collective response to emergency situations like the pandemic.

UN-Habitat works in partnership with youth and youth organizations in informal settlements, particularly through the support provided to the One Stop Youth Centers and the Urban Youth Fund. This work is also part of UN-Habitat's COVID-19 Response Plan, which has allowed UN-Habitat to work hand in hand with the wider UN family, national and local governments, and communities, in providing immediate support in 17 countries.

This paper presents the case study of youth-led community response to the spread of COVID-19 in the informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya, focusing on Mathare – the second biggest slum in Nairobi. The COVID-19 Youth-led Emergency Response project (March 2020 – March 2021) that was carried out by local youth groups with the support of development actors can be used as a reflection material in responding to COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters globally. With many countries facing consecutive waves of the virus, there’s a need to adhere to the WHO guidelines and facilitate the continuation of initiatives that empower vulnerable groups, especially in informal settlements.

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

- Analyze what key characteristics of youth and youth-led organizations influenced the effective response to COVID-19 pandemic in Mathare.
- Identify lessons learned from this youth-led community response, and
- Derive implications for bigger policy questions about public health responses.

From March 2020 onwards, UN-Habitat worked hand in hand with young people in informal settlements to provide an effective and multi-partner response to the pandemic. To be

able to trace back the process of building up the response, several semi-structured interviews were conducted with the core people from the projects, while data gathered in time-series surveys in Mathare have been used as supporting evidence.

The main body of this paper is composed of four sections. First, through a literature review, we identify the effect of the pandemic on vulnerable communities, with the primary focus on informal settlements. The second chapter deals with the case study of Mathare's youth response to the public health crisis, its achievements, and challenges. The conclusion outlines the findings and potential areas of further research

3.2 Community-led response to COVID-19 crisis: why youth matter

The sudden emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020 caught the world off guard; since approximately 90% of all cases were reported in urban areas (as of July 2020), cities and towns have become the center of attention for prevention and control measures. The effectiveness of these measures depends on the inherent ability of a system to respond and adjust, including imposing restrictions, tracking the spread of virus, conducting effective awareness raising campaigns and so on.

In urban areas where informality and inadequate living conditions exist, local communities and authorities do not display enough mutual trust, which would otherwise foster adherence to the new rules. And as the core learning gathered from the humanitarian response to the epidemic of Ebola in West Africa in 2014-2015, in settings where such trust is missing, where horizontal communications are not necessarily in place, it is of vital importance to properly engage with existing socially coherent local communities, i.e. reach out to community leaders that can lead the response, as well as support grass-roots self-mobilization efforts (Campbell et al. 2017). Provided that external actors such as international organizations and NGOs take on a supportive role of providing funds and requested training, the principle of ownership of a self-organized community is more likely to be upheld.

The inequalities and differences in contexts lay the groundwork for the disparity in responses. While new technologies are used, with the best ones known being ones that trace contacts to track the spread of the virus across the community to more experimental ones that can recognize the symptoms of being infected by COVID-19 by an owner's facial expression, the overwhelming majority of those living in informal settings do not possess these.

In contexts where strong preparedness mechanisms are hard to implement, reliable transmission and other data are not available, conducting communication and awareness raising activities are challenging, and the level of trust towards authorities is low, like in case of informal settlements, it was more likely to be observed that civil society and individual advocates take over the initiative. One example is in Liberia where youth have undertaken COVID-19 measures and initiated a grass-root initiative that has grown to be recognized as part and parcel of the nation-wide COVID-19 prevention mechanism (UN-Habitat 2020). Some evidence from Ethiopia suggests increased effectiveness of youth mobilization for the success of the COVID-19 response (Getaneh, Yizengaw et al. 2020). International organizations such as UNHCR have shared inspiring examples of community-based responses to the pandemic, including youth-focused ones (UNHCR 2020).

The pandemic disproportionately impacted different population groups, hitting hardest the underprivileged. Structural inequalities proved to be exacerbated by the pandemic. The multilayered intersectionality of destitution, precarious employment, inadequate housing and

supply of basic services, youth, and seniors, and migrant or indefinite status populations such as slum dwellers, also impacted groups disproportionately. Due to precarious living conditions, slum dwellers are more prone to contracting infections because of malnutrition, lack of access to healthcare services and weakened immune systems (Bourke et al. 2016).

The impact on the health of people residing in informal settlements and other precarious settings is more significant as they are at high risk both physically and mentally due to the worsening conditions. In terms of housing conditions, informal settlements are densely packed, oftentimes with several people sharing a poorly ventilated room, making it difficult to practice physical distance. Preventive sanitary measures, such as hand washing, are equally difficult, given the lack of running water and basic facilities. Finally, since a large majority of the workforce is informally employed, and most cannot work from home, thus requiring them to use overcrowded public transport which also makes social distancing impractical (UN-Habitat 2020).

At the same time, when the first data on COVID-19 impacts on different age groups emerged, governments of various levels, international organizations and non-governmental nonprofits have found that the lesser susceptibility of young people to the virus can be capitalized on to build up a stronger public response as a supplementary tool for either facilitating governmental response, or shifting the burden of it. Countries which undertook mobilization mechanisms have been quick to employ youth volunteers in areas such as reaching out to the elderly, who, being critically susceptible to the virus, have suffered most from the restriction of movement.

In contexts where strong preparedness mechanisms are hard to implement and reliable transmission and other data is not available, conducting communication and awareness raising activities are challenging, and the level of trust towards authorities is low, like in case of informal settlements, it was more likely to be observe how civil society and individual advocates take over the initiative. An example of the Liberian youth movement against COVID-19 that started as a grass-root initiative, grew to be recognized as part and parcel of the nation-wide COVID-19 prevention mechanism (UN-Habitat 2020). Some evidence from Ethiopia suggests increased effectiveness of youth mobilization for the success of the COVID-19 response (Getaneh, Yizengaw et al. 2020). Some international organizations with great presence on the ground like UNHCR, share the lists of inspiring examples of community-based responses to the pandemic, including youth-focused ones (UNHCR 2020).

Moreover, engaging youth in crisis response matters because it does matter to them. Although young people are less likely than older people to develop severe forms of COVID-19, they are an age group hit hard by the long-term socio-economic effects of the pandemic (United Nations 2020). The negative impacts of the virus are exacerbated in contexts of fragility, emergency, disaster risk reduction and conflict, where social cohesion is already undermined, and institutional capacities and services are limited. In a global wellbeing survey conducted by UN-Habitat between August and December 2020, as many as 70% of young people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your everyday life routines’, with 64% of all the respondents sharing that their life has changed for the worse. In these circumstances, being involved in community response to the pandemic, be it locally based production of protective equipment or sanitizers, income from servicing handwashing stations or creating awareness raising materials, was a way of making their ends meet for many young people.

The same survey pointed out that almost 14% of the surveyed young people connected their negative experience of the pandemic with feelings of isolation and resulting loneliness. It

is likely that school shutdowns (27% of all the responses), as well as decreased opportunities to spend the spare time outside the house with their friends contributed to this feeling. A significant number of young respondents linked COVID-19 to positive influences in their life, sharing that the pandemic and associated restrictions helped them discover more opportunities, bond with their families and/or acquire the feeling of being connected to the rest of the world. Participating in or in some cases leading a community response to COVID-19 pandemic was found to be one of the ways to overcome this impression of being excluded.

On top of that, young people globally have disproportionately suffered from the effects the pandemic has had on education. Due to fear of community spread of the COVID-19 virus, educational institutions were closed during the epidemic, depriving children, and youth of their education. Despite the adoption of e-learning and the use of online platforms to continue the curriculum, it was difficult or often impossible for young people in informal settlements to access online classes due to lack of internet access or Wi-Fi access points, electricity, and infrastructure.

The economic and social effects of the health crisis, as well as travel restrictions and social isolation, have led to a significant increase in domestic violence. An increase in violence against young women and girls has been reported worldwide, leading to the exacerbation of the ‘Shadow Pandemic’ as observed by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women Executive Director. In informal settlements, many young people are forced to stay for extended periods of time in their homes with their abusers. Due to the limitation of services during the pandemic, support services for victims have sometimes been interrupted or inaccessible.

In times of nation-wide imposed social distancing rules and curfews, youth have also been increasingly targeted by police and other law enforcement officials (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In a context of increasing police violence to regulate curfews and containment directives, young people in informal settlements are particularly vulnerable. As the conditions in which they live hinder the application of curfew and confinement measures, they are often more targeted by police control operations. In Nairobi, violent and coercive enforcement of emergency measures is omnipresent, particularly in informal settlements. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner’s monitoring work with the Mathare Social Justice Centre have documented widespread police violence, including beatings, the use of live ammunition and tear gas, sexual violence, and damage to property (OHCHR 2020).

UN-Habitat found that young people in Mathare reported mental health in the community, education, gender-based violence, and police brutality were named as first priorities for any planned intervention. Once given an opportunity to voice their concerns and do something to address them, youth faced the challenges heads-on. Providing evidence on how creative young people can be in responding to a crisis during the pandemic is what this paper is about. Some of the instances are documented through surveys run amongst young people globally since the beginning of the pandemic. Through the analysis, the youth response came down to them being mobile and able to reach out to the most vulnerable, their ability to launch social services and enterprises, and their utilization of technological solutions as an alternative to the traditional mechanisms of help.

During the pandemic, young people have been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 by being innovative and flexible in their response. For example, some young people have turned to the production and sale of protective masks. Many young people are volunteering to fight the pandemic by raising awareness in their communities.

3.3 Case description: youth in mathare responding to COVID-19 crisis

Mathare is one of the largest informal settlements in Nairobi, home to approximately 500,000 to 800,000 people (UN-Habitat et al. 2015). This settlement hosts the Mathare Environmental One-Stop Youth Centre, established in Mlango Kubwa, a ward of the Mathare Informal Settlement. The One-Stop Youth Centre is supported by UN-Habitat to provide a space for information, training, and a platform for setting up projects by and with the youth of Mathare.

The Youth-led COVID-19 response was initiated by youth representatives of local grass-root organizations in early March 2020, through the leadership of Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group (MECYG), an association of local youth that started as a community solid waste collection body, which runs the One-Stop Youth Centre. “Leaders [among youth] are always concerned about their community”, shared Isaac Mwasa, coordinator of MECYG, “It is so congested here – a breeding ground for the virus. We felt that a small act of kindness is needed, so we started looking for funds to establish handwashing stations around the community.’

Youth representatives of MECYG own other youth-led association in Mathare and other informal settlements across Nairobi. Recalling that at the very onset, young people were faced by the challenge of having to deal with fundraising and identifying and approaching donors. “We knew whom to reach out to but felt that we need some help in writing a proposal.” shared Isaac Mwasa, who then adds that having access to partner organizations helped them enhance the capacities of his team.

A proposal was developed which included several strategies identified as critical for the success of the response, including tackling health impacts through sustaining hygiene, implementing a feeding programme, carrying out public awareness campaigns, addressing livelihood impacts through promoting project-serving employment of community members. The Proposal was written initially for Mathare, and was then expanded to incorporate youth groups in other counties in Kenya, and countries such as Somalia and Ecuador.

Sanitation and hygiene were prioritized in the early stage of the response. MECYG submitted the proposal to and received support from the Canadian and Norwegian embassies in Nairobi and private sector donors such as the Victor Wanyama and Chandaria Foundation. Youth from the community were consulted on substantive matters on the design and implementation of the programmes, while communications with donors were handled by the UN-Habitat team working in youth programming.

Initially, as the support from donors was under review, two UN-Habitat-sponsored handwashing pilot sites were set up in late March and achieved 8,000 handwashes in 10 days. Based on the pilot experience, UN-Habitat and Mathare Environmental designed capacity-building courses, comprised of training on handwashing knowledge and self-protection for site assistants, and made up of youth recruited from local youth-led organizations. Following the start of donor funding, twenty-six handwashing sites were established in Mathare. Each site was open from 6.00 am to 10.00 pm with a paid assistant organizing people into properly washing their hands and other sanitary-hygiene best practices.

The next step was to scale up the scope of activities, for which MECYG reached out to other youth-led groups, totaling 33 over the next few months, each having their own geographical and subject area of responsibility. The selection of youth organizations was made by MECYG based on previous experience of collaboration, including groups of local artists for

awareness raising campaigns, environmental and community development groups (e.g. Kambi Saafi, Mathare Roots), women's groups (e.g., Wonderful Mothers), professional associations (e.g., Mlango Kubwa Boda-Boda Group, which is composed of motorcycle drivers), and groups from other communities such as the Kibera informal settlement, Eastleigh and Nyeri and Mandera Counties.

The interaction with these grassroots groups as entry points to access the community was instrumental for the success of the response. The unity of goals led to the unity of communications amongst the groups, as streamlined by MECYG and leaders of the participating organizations, forming an 'umbrella ad-hoc committee of emergency response' - which have served as basis for a network gradually growing into a COVID-19 Response Coalition of forces – young people pulled together their human resources to compensate where complimentary funds, space and physical assets could be missing.

Co-led by MECYG and Kibera Community Emergency Response Team, by the middle of the year 2020, the Coalition established over 90 handwashing stations in strategic high traffic places in their respective communities. UN-Habitat performed an advisory role to these groups, while Embassies and the private sector provided financial support. The local government provided logistical support on the ground.

Regarding the management of the health crisis, apart from the pressing need of access to clean water and sanitizers, the socio-economic crisis provoked by the pandemic and associated restrictions made residents struggle with acquiring masks, which were now required to be worn in public places. The following proposed step came as a response to the changes in the national legislation meant to curb the spread of the disease. In Kenya, a person with no mask could be denied a service entry in a shopping or service delivery area or could be arrested and/or fined. A solution was found through donations from charitable groups such as the Victor Wanyama Foundation, led by football player and UN-Habitat Goodwill Ambassador Victor Wanyama, who donated funds needed to cover the costs associated with production of 10,000 masks for Mathare informal settlement sewn by local female tailors. As Gerry Wonderkid, representative of Mathare Empire put it, 'the impact was visible. I attended launches of Victor Wanyama initiative in Mathare and Kibera and saw a great turnout and felt how the people seemed empowered'. The local youth distributed reusable masks which were much cheaper than disposable surgical masks.

To further address the impacts on livelihoods, the response of the youth of Mathare and its partners poised to promote employment and to create job opportunities in COVID-19 response projects for running the handwashing sites, make fabric masks and support the food delivery. For the maintenance of the handwashing stations, the assistants were paid a daily allowance and provided with personal protective equipment kits. The post-COVID-19 recovery challenge was to reintegrate youth back into the disrupted labour market, making the achievements of the programme more durable.

Another strong component of the response was education campaigns through workshops, leafleting, and creating murals. People in informal settlements have limited access to reliable information on health care, such as official information from television. With limited access to education and therefore low levels of literacy in the context of disease prevention, it is more difficult for them to distinguish false information from correct knowledge about infection control. Youth responded by creating a YouTube video blog series. "Mathare Dispatch" became a series of six videos in English and Swahili on COVID-19 recorded by local youth videographers that educated the community on COVID-19 prevention and combatted

misconceptions and misinformation. These videos were then demonstrated at community centres to a larger audience.

Understanding that the spread of accurate information through internet-based media might be limited, Mathare youth mobilized community radio to reach out to those who do not have regular access to broadband. Later, as the handwashing stations assistants conducted the survey among the members of the community, they found out that nearly 70% of all respondents got the information about COVID-19 from the local radio broadcasts.

In addition, the youth-led grassroots organization called Mathare Roots brought together local young artists to paint graffiti on the walls of the main entrances to the local community to disseminate COVID-19 prevention information, public health and messages on other issues related to the pandemic such as police brutality and gender-based violence. A mural at the entrance to Mathare from Embu-Nairobi highway, for example, depicts a boy from the neighbourhood who was killed during a police operation to enforce COVID-19 measures.

In the medium term, an extensive community mapping was carried out to map out the existing healthcare facilities and main entrance of communities, for informing future prevention and response measures. This mapping work was done by the young people, in partnership with UN-Habitat's Research Unit, who provided technical assistance, enabling a tailored response to the existing situation. This consists of geospatial mapping to identify existing assets such as health care facilities, clinics, and water stations.

In December 2020, the handwashing station assistants were trained by UN-Habitat to conduct a survey among the members of the community, to map out the degree of vulnerability of selected groups and generally understand the impacts of the pandemic on the community. The questionnaire was co-designed by local youth and UN-Habitat to include questions that were deemed most relevant to the realities of Mathare amid the pandemic. The survey also allowed to receive some preliminary results of the intervention.

3.4 Case analysis

The required rapidity to dispatch measures to curb the growing public health crisis, which, if unaddressed urgently, endanger lives of thousands of residents of Mathare, left no alternative but to rely on the community to respond. Considering this, we argue that it is the leadership of local youth as exemplified by MECYG that made the response a reality. Founded in 1997 MECYG facilitated the removal of barriers to information dissemination associated with the distrust towards authorities and 'outsiders'. This trust was also supported by the fact that local youth were actively engaged in the project at all its stages, from the design, through the implementation and monitoring stages all the way to evaluation of its outcomes. Despite the difficulties related to the lack of resources, the young people adopted and implemented specific intervention strategies to respond to the most urgent needs, as they saw them in the community, that focus mainly on the health impacts, the livelihood impacts and impacts on resources and service ability.

There are several characteristics of youth that enabled their agency that eventually defined the effectiveness of the response. The dynamism of Mathare youth, their ability to empathize, connect and network beyond community borders allowed the response to more effective scale-up, leading to the formation of the COVID-19 Response Coalition that helped increase the number of communities covered by the intervention. That is why youth mobilization focused on communication and awareness-raising activities within the community was critical in awareness raising. Also, being the most dynamic demographic, early

adopters, and digital natives, appearing at the edge between their home community and the international world, as represented by partner international organizations (in this case UN-Habitat), youth played an essential part in norm internalization across their communities. The instrumentality of community-led response headed by youth is conditioned by the fact that youth, seen as part of a community and not outsiders, step in as entrepreneurs and set a pattern for the rest of the community to follow (e.g., in case of setting handwashing stations and spreading the awareness via murals).

Another point that enabled the involved parties to effectively dispatch the response was the knowledge of the physical community space that local young people possessed and deepened in the course of community mapping exercise. The handwashing stations, placed in strategic locations in the neighborhood such as the main entry points, provided a public amenity for the population of Mlango Kubwa. These public amenities are managed by young people, creating job opportunities for them, and providing the population with information about the management of the health crisis. And while many healthcare facilities can be easily recognized and pointed out by locals, they often did not have the capacity to perform public health functions such as handwashing. The need for broader public health infrastructure to fend off COVID-19 was clearly highlighted – for example, in case of adequate sanitation facilities, which are often missing in informal settlements.

Economic crisis associated with the pandemic created a demand for new opportunities to help ends meet among locals, who were eager to partake in implementing the response measures to support their livelihoods. This points out the necessity to ensure that the primary motivations of the beneficiaries and youth directly involved in implementation are adequately addressed in a response project's budget.

When it comes to informal settlements, as shown by the example of the Mathare case, grassroots organizations often have limited access to external resources. In this respect, an effectively equitable multi-stakeholder partnership between international organizations, non-governmental bodies and development actors, youth and grassroots organizations are an essential prerequisite of a successful community-led response. The existence of a One-Stop center as a structure run by MECYG was beneficial for capturing resources and acts as a platform for incubating youth-led development projects. This creates more opportunities and solutions for young people in informal settlements to enable a transformative change in their communities.

As the experience drawn interventions shows, many challenges that can be encountered in this context are of a structural nature. For instance, the necessary infrastructure to rapidly undertake an effective public health response is often missing, including healthcare, water and sanitation, food supply, education, violence prevention and so on. Secondly, communication channels between an informal settlement and the rest of the world are disrupted causing the atmosphere of fear and distrust due to the long-standing record of unsatisfactory relationships between locals and 'outsiders'. Therefore, it is practically impossible to achieve an effective outreach without the young people who play a role of 'entry points' for any intervention, which makes them powerful agents of change in their communities. Other difficulties in implementing the COVID-19 response program alongside young people from the community include tradeoff between community service and income generation they must make and lack of reliable data about the spread of virus and its consequences.

While response measures are being gradually transitioned towards post-COVID-19 recovery, youth must be among both beneficiaries and agencies of this recovery process, an engagement of young women and men in the recovery as co-creators. This is more crucial in

informal settlements as youth-led and community-driven organizations have often taken over the provision of services considered to be the domain of local authorities, such as waste collection and recycling or the management of public spaces (UN-Habitat et al. 2015).

Furthermore, the skills relevant to emergency response that young people receive are not rendered useless in times when the crisis seems to be averted. They become the backbone of an emergency prevention response that can be enacted in times of other crises such as future pandemics or natural disasters. Moreover, through triggering a set of actions for resource mobilization and partnership building, Mathare youth were able to engage with key agencies, whether governmental (the Government of Kenya), international (UN-Habitat) or private sector (Victor Wanyama Foundation), forming strategic partnerships for the success of future interventions, to the point of forming a youth-led COVID-19 global coalition. The long-lasting impact of this movement should be reflected upon in future research.

The example of youth in informal settlements shows us how important a youth-led response to the pandemic is in building community resilience. The question remains, to what extent we can help sustain this response over time. Indeed, if the long-term effects of the crisis are to be tackled, youth-led responses need to be both sustainable and durable.

3.5 Conclusions and lessons learned

Approximately one third of the global population are living in informal settlements, where high levels of congestion, lack of adequate sanitation, precarious housing makes the spread of virus especially hard to control, leading to recurrent waves, and threatening to transform informal settlements into dangerous points of virus transmission. As disease experts warn, slum dwellers are more prone to contracting infections because of malnutrition, lack of access to healthcare services and weakened immune systems. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation is equally dangerous as it spreads due to lack of trust towards authorities and missing access to correct information about the virus. The protocols are also not likely to be observed if adherence to them would endanger slum dwellers' livelihoods. Lastly, lack of funds necessary for survival, increased mental pressure, movement restrictions, including those forcing women, children, and other vulnerable groups of population to stay within four walls, account for the peaked violence, unchecked in informal conditions.

As it can be seen from the analysis of the case of Mathare, the argument that an emergency response is effective when the community is onboard is well evidenced. The most important factor of success is the availability of essential and irreplaceable assets that youth associations had on the ground. First, having a more than 20 years history of engaging with the members of community, other grassroot organizations and international partners, and yet remaining a youth-led entity, MECYG has become a critical entry point for the entire emergency response project that otherwise would lack in trust of the community members, generally suspicious of outsiders. Secondly, this credibility holds as MECYG and broader community youth have been meaningfully engaged in project design, its implementation, and evaluation of the outcomes. Thirdly, development actors and international organizations were playing a role of enablers by providing necessary funds and capacity building activities to these organizations. And finally, the actual economic needs of the youth involved in the implementation of the project should be taken into account to ensure more long-lasting success.

The success of young people's involvement in the local response to COVID-19 is further evidence of the need for them to have the opportunities to engage with local, regional, national and international agencies focused on public health and wider policies of community resilience building. Young people play a frontline role as drivers of community resilience and social

inclusion. In the informal settlements in Nairobi, the youth demonstrated a strong capacity to organize and mobilize for the immediate management of the pandemic, which once again illustrates the responsiveness and effectiveness of youth organizations in crisis management. Local and national governments should identify and encourage such bottom-up youth-led actions, rather than responding to crisis situations with top-down strategies.

Youth citizenship and engagement in governance goes beyond political engagement but also involves the ability to secure access to economic resources, basic services, and socio-political assets. This begins with engaging young people as equal partners, acknowledging their rights to participate in decision-making processes (UN-Habitat 2013), as '*Building back better*' would require seizing the momentum of community engagement to mobilize public action towards implementing SDGs (United Nations 2020).

The key lesson learned is that community-led responses planned, initiated and executed by grass-root associations, particularly youth groups, as exemplified by the youth-led emergency project in Mathare, remain useful in responding to COVID-19 and similar pandemics in circumstances where institutions are weak, and informality persists. Complementing this finding by the evidence from the past outbreaks in highly congested urban areas, supporting community-based initiatives, not leading, or patronizing them, is more likely to ensure the success of prevention measures.

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