

**People, not numbers**  
**Humanity in the time of COVID-19**

The arrival of COVID-19 in Kenya was inevitable. It has rudely exposed weaknesses in our health, transport and infrastructure systems not least due to graft and unresponsive policies. It is a perfect storm. However, in the face of this pandemic, all sides of the divide must step up. Life first.

Listening to the Ministry of Health briefings since the first case was reported and confirmed, I am concerned by the largely “elite gaze” that deploys a language of enforcement that is used to coerce WaKenya into compliance with regard to screening, testing, self-quarantine and treatment. Threats of arrest and jail only inspire fear, fake news and knee jerk and even violent reactions.

We want a government response that is rights based, empathy-infused, inclusive and practical. A government that realises that however urgent, people always come first.

The government should not lie or withhold crucial information from citizens who are expected to cooperate fully. If one lies - by omission or commission - one is not fit to lead an emergency response.

For example: what happened to the 239 [Chinese] individuals who arrived in Kenya on the China Southern Airlines on 26 February, 2020? Said persons have since disappeared without a trace. Court orders were issued and ignored; 14 days have come and gone; and we still don't know how they fit into the spread of COVID-19. Lies and preferential treatment erode trust & willingness to cooperate.

Most WaKenya rely on daily earnings to support their families. This “kadogo” economy means that a single day of missed work results in no food, water, medicine, fuel and rent. Telling WaKenya to stay home and maintain “social distance” or “self-quarantine” sounds like Greek when eight people share one room. Mores so to traders who rely on human contact for sales. Think of the mama who sells you pre-cut sukuma wiki. Think of the construction worker. Think of the matatu driver. Think of “Mama Fua”. Think of blue collar workers. Proposing a total lockdown without a concrete plan to care for those who will immediately lack food, belies a callousness that will ultimately backfire.

Parents are also dealing with children who are unexpectedly home from school. Precious few and fortunate households might afford the luxuries of E-Learning but the vast majority of students are idle, hungry and anxious. What about unemployed youth? Who is listening to them?

Global economic shocks do not resonate with the ordinary MKenya whose cost of living is prohibitive in any case. The government should immediately suspend VAT, excise taxes and levies on food stuffs, essential goods and services including electricity, water and fuel. This will have a significant, real time and positive effect. The government should take the revenue hit in order to save lives.

Medically speaking, take services to communities. Create – for example - zones and establish medical hubs, where people can seek emergency medical support without resorting to public transport and inevitable shoulder rubbing that COVID-19 thrives on. Decongest existing facilities that will not be able to deal with an exponential increase in the numbers of infected. The assignment of additional existing medical training centres might not always be responsive to the spatial realities of the pandemic. Consider setting up rubb halls (large tents) that can serve as field hospitals complete with triage, testing, isolation and treatment centres. Consider protocols for handling the mass fatalities in a worst case scenario. Otherwise, we will find ourselves precariously perched atop a public health powder keg.

Consider those who are already ill and on other treatment regimes requiring ARVs, insulin, chemotherapy or dialysis, for example. Consider pregnant and lactating mothers. Consider those living with disabilities. Consider the elderly. Consider the young.

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Consider tracing systems that are less about surveillance and aggression, and more about community-centred understanding of people's mobility in order to monitor the movement of COVID-19.

Consider the curative aspects of our vast and rich Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Consider volunteers, medical personnel and other professionals whose physical, mental and emotional energies will be heavily taxed. They must have protective gear, psychosocial support and commensurate compensation.

Free food distribution for the most vulnerable – for starters - must be at the centre of this emergency response. Without which, WaKenya will continue to leave their homes in search of work and money to purchase basic supplies for their families. If I cannot afford to sit in the house with my children, I will not watch them suffer and go hungry. I will go out. Even the somnolent middle class is secretly worried about day 10 of lockdown, when food and water finally run out and the costs of basic goods have gone through the roof.

Distribute oil, salt, flour, pulses and commodities including sanitary towels. Systems can minimise attrition, double-dipping and criminal resale, an unfortunate by-product of emergency operations.

Next to food is water. Most WaKenya only have access to [cartel-run] water sales. Provide clean water free of charge. Provide soap free of charge.

Ditto electricity; without which, essential domestic and public services will be impossible to maintain.

The Diaspora – heavily taxed without representation - is starting to reel from the global effects of the pandemic. Remittances will likely not flow as usual. The government should consider a one off cash transfer at the beginning and end of the acute phase of the emergency.

The importance of civil military coordination cannot be overstated. The disciplined and armed forces need to understand that if a lockdown is announced, theirs should never be about terrorising WaKenya. This is a medical emergency and not an attempted coup. It would be wonderful to see the uniformed forces erect rubble halls; reassign medical personnel; offload supplies; support crowd control; escort women and children to their homes; protect food, water and medical supplies; deter criminality; and ensure the prevention of sexual exploitation and violence – something that is unfortunately prevalent during emergencies.

This may all read like common sense because it is but there is a multi sectoral science behind it.

Having been in humanitarian emergency response for a number of years, our most successful actions can be traced back to people-centred approaches in preparedness and response. Without a doubt, rapid responses come with a significant budget. During such times, extreme bureaucracy should be suspended and replaced with ethical, accountable and auditable Standard Operating Procedures.

I urge complete transparency around the use of resources, for example, Philanthropist Jack Ma's donation of 100,000 masks and 20,000 test kits. Same for the Sh6 Billion World Bank facility, and all other funds allocated towards Kenya's COVID-19 response. Spend it on WaKenya. Not on Eurobond-style "catch up" payments or on humanitarian industrialist schemers such as food importation cartels.

Ultimately, issuing directives from an ivory tower is a failing proposition in the race to curb the spread and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. Humanitarian emergency response is about people, the love of life and its preservation.