



international
alert

The impact of COVID-19 on peace and conflict dynamics

A case study of Korogocho informal
settlement, Nairobi, Kenya

Research summary



Funded by:



Peace
is within
our power

About the Peace Research Partnership

Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a research programme that generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace.

We focus on solving the root causes of conflict, bringing together people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we come together to build everyday peace.

Peace is just as much about communities living together, side by side, and resolving their differences without resorting to violence, as it is about people signing a treaty or laying down their arms.

That is why we believe that we all have a role to play in building a more peaceful future.

www.international-alert.org

© International Alert 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

Layout: D.R. ink

Front cover image: © RZAF_Images/Alamy



international
alert

The impact of COVID-19 on peace and conflict dynamics

A case study of Korogocho informal
settlement, Nairobi, Kenya

Research summary

May 2021

Acknowledgements

This is a brief summary of research conducted by Thomas Kimathi Nyagah, Agatha Ndonga and James Mwangi on behalf of International Alert, as part of the Peace Research Partnership. International Alert would also like to thank Flavie Bertouille, Elizabeth Kariuki, George Grayson, Rabindra Gurung, Lucy Holdaway, Cindy Chungong, Julian Egan, Geoffrey Chege and Phil Vernon who provided support in planning the research and reviewing and editing the report.

International Alert would like to thank all those respondents from the Korogocho informal settlement who generously gave of their time and knowledge to make this study possible, including representatives of women's groups, youth, village elders, *Nyumba Kumi* and local government officials. Without sharing their stories and insights, the study and this report would not have been possible.

Special thanks go to Samson Kuboko and Rose Mbone, the community mobilisers in Korogocho who mobilised respondents, identified safe venues for undertaking the fieldwork and helped ensure the security of the research team and respondents.

The production of this research was supported by UK aid from the UK government as part of the Peace Research Partnership programme.

International Alert is also grateful for the support of its core donors: the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

The views expressed in this report are solely those of International Alert and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its partners or donors.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had a major impact in Kenya, not just through illness and deaths caused by the virus, but also due to the effects of measures put in place to limit its spread. Kenya's economy has contracted¹ and household food insecurity has increased markedly.² Many women, young people and members of vulnerable groups are worst affected by the socio-economic impacts.³

There is a growing body of literature on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in Kenya and elsewhere, but less attention has been paid to the impact on conflict and peace dynamics. These are critical, especially in countries or places known to be fragile, such as informal urban settlements, where conflict and insecurity interact with high levels of poverty and informal (and illegal) economic livelihoods. This study analyses the impact of COVID-19, including mitigation measures and relief efforts, on conflict and peace dynamics in Korogocho informal settlement in Nairobi.

Stability and peace depend, among other things, on fair access to livelihood opportunities. This is because unfair access to livelihoods creates grievances, which can lead to conflict, especially if those who feel excluded perceive that this is linked to questions of identity or other structural causes. Further, people who lack access to a decent livelihood have a lower opportunity cost of engaging in unrest or conflict.⁴ Peace and stability are also conditioned by good governance and social cohesion: the presence of trusting and collaborative 'horizontal' relationships between and among different social groups, and trusting and collaborative 'vertical' relationships between people and those in authority.⁵

It is well known that underlying conflicts in fragile societies and communities are liable to be exacerbated, at times leading to violence, when they come under additional external stress – for example, when a pandemic strikes. Unfortunately, humanitarian interventions in conflict-affected contexts frequently exacerbate this negative effect, unless they are designed and implemented 'conflict sensitively' – i.e. based on a good understanding of prevailing peace and conflict dynamics.⁶

This research sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 not just on people's livelihoods, but also on social cohesion in Nairobi's informal settlements, with a focus on the Korogocho informal settlement, which was known to have a history of conflict and had experienced particularly high levels of violence following the 2007 general election.⁷ Korogocho was also thought to be less 'researched' than some other informal settlements in Nairobi. The research was designed to fill a gap, as scanty information was available on how COVID-19 had affected economic livelihoods there, nor how it had interacted with peace, conflict and social cohesion.

The study specifically sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the responses by practitioners and policy-makers to the economic impact of COVID-19 in the informal settlements in Nairobi?
2. How have the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to it impacted economic livelihoods in informal settlements in Nairobi?
3. In which ways has the economic impact of COVID-19 affected conflict and peace dynamics in informal settlements?
4. How have political and social economic dynamics during the COVID-19 crisis affected conflict risks in the informal settlements in Nairobi?
5. From the above analysis, what can policy-makers and practitioners do to ensure that Kenya's post-COVID-19 economic recovery is both conflict sensitive and conducive to peace?

The full report is available on request.

Methodology

The research was based on 20 key informant interviews, nine focus group discussions (FGDs) and six informal group interviews conducted in January and February 2021, with respondents selected from the nine villages that comprise Korogocho (Figure 1). A total of 131 community members (67 male and 64 female) were involved in FGDs and other informal discussions, with diverse representation based on ethnicity, age, gender, affiliation to economic activities undertaken and areas of residence within the villages. Key informant interviews were held with 20 local community leaders such as the Korogocho Chief and Assistant Chiefs, *Nyumba Kumi*⁸ representatives, community-based organisations (CBOs), religious leaders, women, youth and elders from different ethnic groups.

This research was based mainly on perceptions drawn from the interviews and group discussions, and included questions that were both sensitive and likely to produce subjective responses. The research team was, therefore, careful to triangulate the information received, by comparing responses from different sources. Attention was paid to maximising the diversity of participants in the research, but International Alert recognises limitations in the methodology.

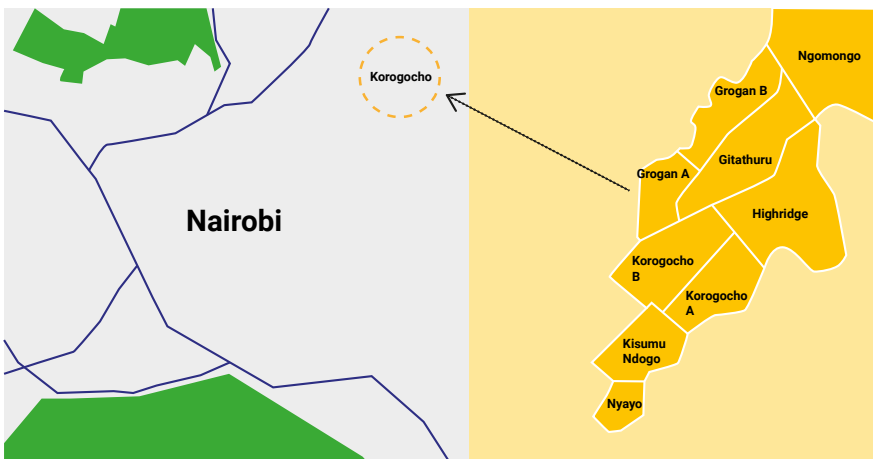


Figure 1: Korogocho's nine villages. Source: VSO, Community volunteering in Korogocho, 2014

Findings⁹

Korogocho is one of Nairobi's informal settlements, covering 1-1.5km² and situated about 11km northeast of the city centre. It consists of nine villages: Grogan A, Grogan B, Korogocho A, Korogocho B, Highridge, Gitathuru, Kisumu Ndogo, Nyayo and Ngomongo (see Figure 1). Accurate population data for the settlement is disputed, but it is commonly said to contain 150-200,000 residents;¹⁰ certainly it is known to have a high population density.¹¹ In common with other informal settlements in Nairobi, it is affected by high levels of persistent poverty. A 2011 study found "high levels of poverty and low levels of infrastructure development compared to [sic] other urban informal settlements".¹²

The economic impact of COVID-19 and the measures imposed to limit its spread in Korogocho are clear: respondents in this research estimated that household incomes had fallen by more than half as a result of losing jobs and other sources of income. This has had, and will continue to have, an impact on poverty and wellbeing, especially in a context where most households rely on the informal sector for their income. Governmental and non-governmental initiatives going forward will no doubt focus heavily on re-dynamising the economy and supporting people's socio-economic recovery, but the research findings show that the pandemic has also had a major impact on social cohesion in Korogocho.

A fragile backdrop for COVID-19

Conflicts and violence typically increase when fragile societies and communities are placed under additional stress. This research demonstrates that there were already signs of fragility and conflict in the community before the pandemic hit. Rates of poverty were high, as were crime rates. Public policy had combined with a history of evictions and political conflicts to create instability and conflict around the ownership of land and housing, as well as conflicts between landlords and tenants. These conflicts



© Reuters/Natasha Elkington/Alamy

A tailor works at her open stall along a street in Korogocho

were interwoven with an uneasy multi-ethnic demographic mix, subject to its own historical and political tensions. These tensions in turn were subject to exploitation and manipulation by national ethno-political leaders, in the shadow of widespread and severe violence that had occurred following the 2007 elections in Korogocho as elsewhere. Properties appropriated from Kikuyu landlords at that time have yet to be returned, which has remained a source of conflict. Meanwhile, an ongoing, stop-start process of allotting government land to private owners in Korogocho has also stirred up conflicts. These tensions have been further exacerbated by the prevalence of corrupt local political decisions creating persistent grievances among members of ethnic groups who felt they were being excluded from public resources and opportunities. Young people also expressed grievances at being excluded, as they saw it, from economic opportunities by corrupt village elders. The police were widely viewed as corrupt, involved in organised crime and using brutal tactics.

This is not to say that Korogocho had not also shown signs of improvement – becoming somewhat less fragile and more resilient – in recent years prior to the pandemic. The presence of large numbers of daily commuters, travelling into Korogocho from other areas for business or work, is an indication that the economy was dynamic in many respects, despite the persistence of poverty. Respondents to the study gave examples of a number of successful initiatives designed to improve security, stability and social cohesion. Nevertheless, despite this evidence of progress, if social cohesion is a product of trusting and collaborative vertical and horizontal relationships, then there is plenty of evidence that these were fragile and under continual strain.

The impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion

Based on the testimony of research respondents, the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion is concerning. The incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has increased, including against young girls. This is partly because of changing patterns in household and public behaviours due to social distancing and other restrictions, with more people shut indoors and reduced household incomes affecting domestic relationships. Tensions between landlords and tenants have also increased because people have found it harder to pay their rent. These tensions have been coloured by ethnicity, because rental properties tend to be owned by members of only a few ethnic groups, thereby exacerbating conflicts between them and the other groups who rent housing and business properties from them.

Ethnic tensions linked to governance have worsened, due to widespread accusations of ethnic favouritism and exclusion in the registration and distribution of COVID-19 relief programmes. Some of the relief programmes have been conceived and executed conflict insensitively. Some have relied on corrupt local governance structures, which has further worsened tensions and divisions. Vulnerable people for whom the relief was intended have not received it. This situation has further undermined trust in local government, and led people to be less willing to help their neighbours, despite the need for mutual help having



© Reuters/Natasha Elkington/Alamy

A hairdresser peers out from her salon stall in Korogocho

increased substantially. Respondents used strong language when referring to the behaviours of people from other ethnicities. Social cohesion has been frayed, as both vertical and horizontal relations have been weakened by the way the relief has been provided.

Crime patterns have also been affected by the pandemic. The incidence of some crimes such as burglary and mugging was said to have reduced, even if only temporarily, while opportunistic petty crime is said to have increased. Some respondents felt that young people were being newly drawn into crime, including into gang membership, due to the loss of other sources of income and the closure of schools. Respondents accused the police of using the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions as a licence to commit corrupt acts and human rights abuses, further undermining people's trust and confidence.

All this suggests very strongly that social cohesion – resilience – has decreased, at the very time when it is most needed, and that fragility, and therefore the risk of conflicts and violence, has increased. At the same time, some of the community initiatives intended to improve peace and cohesion have suffered setbacks, impeded by social distancing and other restrictions. Korogocho has not experienced major episodes of politically inspired violence since 2008, but given the historical links between national political rhetoric and local unrest, there is a concern that increased local fragility may have put the settlement at greater risk of this happening in the future, for example, during the 2022 national elections.

Recommendations

The fragile social cohesion in Korogocho has been further eroded by COVID-19 and the measures taken to limit its spread. The recommendations emerging from this study are therefore based on the premise that mitigating this erosion and purposefully strengthening social cohesion must be central to all relief and recovery efforts. In particular, this means protecting and strengthening horizontal and vertical relationships, i.e. promoting trusting and functional relations between and within social groups, and between citizens and those in positions of authority. Learning from the negative impacts of some of the relief efforts currently in place, all of these recommendations need to be conceived and implemented conflict sensitively – so that they heal, rather than worsen, social cohesion. They also need to be gender sensitive, paying attention to improving gender relations and to the different opportunities and vulnerabilities of women and men of different ages and social situations.



© Reuters/Natasha Elkington/Alamy

A child reaches out at a shop counter in Korogocho

These recommendations were developed by International Alert, but they draw on and reflect suggestions made by respondents. They are grouped into two categories: short-term initiatives designed to improve the impact of relief and mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on social cohesion and longer-term recovery measures. They are aimed at governmental and non-governmental bodies in a position to implement the recommendations in Korogocho settlement, but it seems likely that they are also relevant to other informal urban settlements in Kenya.

Short-term measures

Local and national government, and others engaged in supporting Korogocho communities during the pandemic, should make fairness and inclusion key criteria in the design and implementation of all they do.

- **Local government should establish transparent procedures for identifying and registering beneficiaries, and monitoring performance**, coordinated by committees made up of representatives of village elders, women, youth, and other relevant groups, and with a view to ensuring ethnic representation. All relief initiatives should be part of this mechanism, making their plans and progress reports publicly available, along with beneficiary selection criteria.
- **All COVID-19 relief initiatives, whether privately or publicly funded and delivered, should be conflict sensitive**, explicitly designed to maintain and improve social cohesion. They should consult with communities to understand local peace and conflict dynamics, target those most in need, and take measures to avoid nepotism, ethnic bias or corruption.
- **The police should investigate, and where appropriate prosecute, all cases of SGBV**, ensuring accountability of perpetrators and justice for victims. Victims should be supported by social and health services and civil society. This may necessitate training to improve the understanding of how SGBV risks have been affected by COVID-19, and how to respond.

- **Government, donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should keep young people from crime**, by sustaining and expanding counselling and social and economic support initiatives during this critical period.
- **Government, donors and NGOs should support ongoing peacebuilding initiatives**, building collaboration and cohesion between and among social groups during the pandemic, and preparing to expand activities as soon as it becomes possible to do so.
- **Civil society organisations should hold the authorities accountable** for fair, transparent decision-making and distribution of benefits, advocate for justice in cases of SGBV, and call out improper behaviour and human rights abuses by the police.

Longer-term measures

Initiatives designed to support post-pandemic recovery should make healing and strengthening social cohesion a core goal, alongside economic recovery. This is a complex task needing consistent attention over the medium term, with leadership from local and national government, and from across all communities in Korogocho.

- **Local government should make building social cohesion a core strategic priority**, with buy-in and leadership from political, civil society and business leaders including representation of different gender, age and ethnic groups.
- **National and local government, with support from civil society, should improve the functioning of and trust in local government** by encouraging transparency and regular changes in local representation through elections to village elder posts and councils.
- **National and local government and civil society should build greater awareness of democratic norms** through civic education, especially for young people, including how to avoid top-down political manipulation that undermines local cohesion and development.

- **National and local government, working with businesses and civil society, should establish sustained social and economic programmes** to reduce the vulnerability and exclusion of women, young people, people living with disabilities and HIV/AIDS, and other vulnerable groups, ensuring benefits are distributed fairly and transparently.
- **National and local government, donors and NGOs should support the expansion and improvement of local peacebuilding programmes**, designed to improve inter-group relations, to address historic grievances and unfairness in access to services, infrastructure and economic opportunities, and to redress gender imbalances.
- **NGOs should provide training and support to local government representatives in conflict sensitivity, conflict resolution and conflict early warning**, including for local cluster heads, who deal with conflicts on a regular basis.

Endnotes

- 1 World Bank, Kenya economic update, Navigating the pandemic, 2020
- 2 K. Piper, A survey of 30,000 households reveals Covid-19's economic toll in the developing world, Vox, 9 February 2021, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22266951/covid-19-poverty-hunger-developing-nations>
- 3 PMA, Study reveals stark gendered social and economic impacts of COVID-19 for youth in Kenya, 6 January 2021, <https://www.pmadata.org/news/study-reveals-stark-gendered-social-and-economic-impacts-covid-19-youth-kenya-0>
- 4 International Alert, Peace through prosperity, London, 2015
- 5 International Alert, Programming framework, London, 2017
- 6 H. Haider, Conflict sensitivity: Topic guide, Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2014
- 7 I. MacAuslan and L. Schofield, Evaluation of Concern Kenya's Korogocho emergency and food security cash transfer initiative, Concern Worldwide/Oxford Policy Management, 2011
- 8 *Nyumba Kumi* is an administrative cluster of 10 or more households.
- 9 Unless otherwise referenced, the findings presented in this summary are drawn from the testimony of research respondents.
- 10 Population estimates vary enormously. Wikipedia may be the source of a widely used figure of 150-200,000. A 2011 research paper suggested population was "anything between 40,000 (from the 2009 census which is contested in some circles for underestimating the population) and 180,000 (projections based on the 1999 census)". I. MacAuslan and L. Schofield, 2011, Op. cit.
- 11 D. Donatien Beguy et al, Health and demographic surveillance system profile: The Nairobi urban health and demographic surveillance system (NUHDSS), International Journal of Epidemiology, 44(2), 2015, pp.462–471
- 12 I. MacAuslan and L. Schofield, 2011, Op. cit.

International Alert

346 Clapham Road, London, SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800 **Fax** +44 (0)20 7627 6900

info@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

Registered charity no. 327553



[/InternationalAlert](https://www.facebook.com/InternationalAlert)



[@intalert](https://twitter.com/intalert)



[/international-alert](https://www.linkedin.com/company/international-alert)