

'Last Mile' Initiatives: Building Community Networks to Respond to the COVID19 Pandemic in Africa

Introduction

Response to COVID-19 is a collective responsibility requiring actions from the state, non-state actors and citizens. Networks of civil society, private sector and community groups have played a critical role in supporting livelihoods and businesses especially the poor in Africa - filling in a critical gap left by the States (Governments) in most African countries. In response to COVID-19, these networks have emerged as crucial in many ways. First these networks draw enormous technical and financial resources from different unrestricted and non-bureaucratic sources, enabling them to fill capacity gaps faced by many African governments. Additionally, these networks have unique local contexts - they have historically been working closely with the local communities especially the poor, thus are able to play critical roles in awareness creation, communication and pro-poor rapid response and learnings through COVID-19. For instance, in many African countries, NGOs, CBOs and private sector organizations have coordinated the delivery of food and other necessities to vulnerable communities in addition to deploying innovation in developing knowledge products and low-cost but highly effective protective personal equipment (PPEs). In sum, a new mode of governance, through 'last mile' networks, has emerged to fill the gap created by insufficient state capacity in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief draws from the weekly ARIN review to outline some strategic ways in which community-focused networks (non-state actors) are reorganizing their systems to support response to COVID-19 in Africa, and what this means in redefining the future roles and effectiveness of these networks.

KEY MESSAGES

- 1. Mobilizing grassroots networks and evidence for rapid response in line with international opportunities/standards:** While national governments remain at the forefront of providing emergency directives on COVID19, community based organizations and humanitarian organizations have also emerged as important actors especially in utilizing their existing structures and networks to jointly deliver emergency and relief to the marginalized and vulnerable communities. These networks have also become key sources of evidence on what is happening on the ground, deploying technology to support local actions in line with international standards and tapping into the resources and capacities available within the international communities.
- 2. Awareness creation & catalyzing behavior change through community champions:** Communication and behavior change are central in the response to COVID-19. Community networks in many African countries have produced 'community knowledge champions' who are instrumental in creating awareness and catalyzing behavior change in the COVID-19 response. These champions have developed strategic outreach options including media, Art, drama and music to influence behavioral change especially among the unreached or hard to reach populations. These champions have also become a central part of COVID-19 knowledge systems, furnishing the Government and the international community with evidence/indigenous knowledge on COVID-19.

- 3. Pro-poor innovation and entrepreneurship:** Many NGOs and small businesses (SMEs) as well as humanitarian initiatives are currently driving local production of COVID-19 response kits such as face masks, innovation of ventilators, hand washing machines among others. These materials are largely targeted at the poor and needy segment of the society including slum dwellers thereby signaling greater potential of community networks to promote pro-poor response to pandemics such as COVID 19 and offering lessons to Governments. In Kenya, for instance, the national government is responding to these endogenous innovations through operationalization of the Great COVID-19 Innovation Challenge to nurture and incubate ideas and innovations on medical, logistics in the food chain and dignified work designed to support overall containment/management of COVID-19.
- 4. New Alliances and collaborations for future responses.** Linkage of the community networks with international networks and regional bodies, such as the African Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) is driving new alliances and opening new frontiers for collaboration that could enhance effectiveness of community-focused networks and businesses in the future. Such initiatives that also cut across borders would also allow for sharing of innovative technology, such as the \$1 COVID19 testing kit developed in Senegal. African countries have also coordinated their approaches and responses at the continental level through the African Union and also the regional economic communities (RECs).

Various African countries can also learn from each other.

- 5. Preparedness and Sustainability.** Cognizant of the emergency nature of COVID19, the community initiatives open an important opportunity for strengthening long-term responses to COVID19 and future pandemics. Post-COVID19, it will be critical to analyse how such cooperative initiatives can be developed into a sustainable 'last mile' governance model to complement the perennial state capacity deficit. Sustainability of the community initiatives will also allow for resilience in addressing future pandemics. Research, funding and innovation will be crucial to understanding and strengthening the 'last mile' community initiatives.

Recommendation - take home message

'Last Mile' community initiatives have emerged as a crucial complementary response to the COVID19 pandemic. Given the limited state capacity to respond to the pandemic, actors such as private companies, civil society and community groups, among others provide pro-poor support and resilience building to the most vulnerable members of the society. Moreover, such initiatives have been dynamic and tailored to local contexts and realities. It would be important, however, to foster understanding on how such community initiatives work, and how they can be strengthened and made more resilient. After all, they may become a constant feature of many other policy responses, especially given the perennial limited capacity of the state.

About ARIN

The African Research and Impact Network (<https://www.ash-net.org/arin/>) brings together a network of scholars across Africa and who have been undertaking research to leverage their knowledge and experiences in promoting research excellence and impact pathways. ARIN's core focus is on peer learning and sharing good transformative research and impact practices across Africa. ARIN is based at the Africa Sustainability Hub whose Secretariat is at the African Centre for Technology Studies.

Contact:

Dr Joanes Atela;
Coordinator- Africa Research and Impact Network
Senior Research Fellow- African Centre for Technology Studies
ICIPE Duvvile Campus P.O Bo 45917-00100 Nairobi, Kenya
Email: joanes.atela@gmail .com