

POLICY BRIEF:

Supporting Just Response and Recovery to COVID-19 in Informal Urban Settlements: Perspectives from Youth Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa



Youth Federation members in Zambia advocacy for inclusion in the development process. (PHOTO: Micheal Chanda)



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Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia
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Background

Sub-Saharan Africa has the youngest population of any world region- with youth aged 15-24 estimated at 226 million (40% of the world's total).

Young people are important demographically, economically, socially, culturally, and politically.

The direct health effects of COVID-19 have generally been less deadly for younger age groups. However, for urban youth living in informal settlements, the threat to their lives and livelihoods arising from disease control policies, such as lockdowns and the closure of public space, has been disproportionately large.

Young people are drivers of innovation and resilience in informal urban communities, they can use their experiences to play a central role in finding creative solutions and recommendations, as key agents of change across these contexts.

However, they are often excluded from formal decision-making structures at community and government levels.

Governments and organisations responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (and beyond) can ensure both effectiveness and proportionality in their responses by working with the skills, inventiveness, energy, connection, and knowledge of urban youth.

This brief captures the key findings and recommendations brought to light through collaborative and youth-led research across six countries, eight cities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Recommendations

Ensure Inclusive social protection

“For one to apply for this grant, you have to go online. So, my question is, what about the people that don’t have access to online? And they don’t have data because most people lost their jobs. And what about the elderly? How are they going to apply for this grant, where they don’t have smartphones, like us? So, I feel like how they did it did was not fair” (Youth, Cape Town).

“Young people can get grants from the government only if they are active and it’s not only those who are connected to the political parties but how active you are in the community. And other young people don’t know where to access it and the procedure” (Youth, Lusaka).

- More localised delivery channels would lead to a fairer, less politicised distribution of government grants. Use grass roots organisations and community leaders, who are in a good position to identify, register and distribute grants (and information about grants) to those who most need support.

- Simple and transparent processes for applying for grants, such as having a physical, rather than online space for registration embedded into the community (e.g. a mobile office), would overcome lack of access to smart phones, insufficient mobile phone data, or technological abilities necessary for registering for grants online.

- Door-to-door surveys and registration carried out as paid work by young people would provide employment for youth and also ensure that the most excluded and vulnerable people living in their communities



Federation Mama’s leading with youth members of the alliance to bring people from informal settlements to vaccination stations nearby to be vaccinated. (PHOTO: Mmakrabo Mqguba)

are reached and their needs accounted for.

- Social media, grassroots organisations and community radio could be used to disseminate information about the grants.
- Social protection could be

designed in a participatory manner.

- The gendered implications of grant stipulations - such as allocating the same amount to a man as to a woman with dependent children - also need to be considered.

Good practice example: The Kazi Mtaani Programme

In Kenya, the Kazi Mtaani Programme was designed to provide a form of social protection for workers whose prospects for daily or casual work was disrupted by lockdown policies. Through this initiative, residents were recruited to undertake projects concentrated in and around informal settlements with the aim of improving the environment, service delivery and providing income generation opportunities (State Department of Youth Affairs, Kenya). The programme helped young people financially (eleven days work for 5,000 Kenyan Shillings) and was mentioned by many of the youth interviewed as a positive thing. However, a couple of young people added that whilst the work and pay were welcome, youth were not consulted about what programmes would be carried out and there was a lot more they could have done.

Invest in youth skills development and livelihood resources

“Can you imagine due to this pandemic also, people are leaving Sierra Leone to go and die in the Mediterranean Sea? Can you imagine people are going, yeah, our Sierra Leonean brothers are dying in Libya? You know, because they do not have jobs.” (Youth, Free Town).

- Invest in long term initiatives which assist youth to strategically plan for their futures. Sustainable investments would help youth build livelihood pathways and orient away from crime and drug abuse, or the highly risky routes to international migration via the desert and/or the sea.

- Long term initiatives could include a mix of skills training and development, such as training in solar installation and other green technologies – skills that

would both provide a sustainable income and respond to the fuel and climate crises. Skills and support for planting vegetable gardens would also help to build food security and enhance long-term resilience.

- Business loans should be made more accessible to young people as well as equipment and resources for individual and community led projects.

Increase the accessibility of COVID-19 vaccines and public health information, including through youth involvement in awareness-raising, as well as addressing deficits in healthcare for other diseases.

“I’m a kind of person that I go to work every day, and so many things to do each day. So, like that is very, very, not so convenient for me. And I am very sure is not

so convenient for every other youth out there. So, my main point is that they don’t make the vaccine very accessible and very convenient for people to get, especially youth” (Youth, Lagos)

“I feel it was not fair because these issues have to be private between you and your doctor. But now you’re being asked questions outside, were being given your medication outside” (Youth, Cape Town).

- Make vaccines available closer to communities. This could include mobile clinics where young people work as drivers.

- Health campaigns should make use of social media platforms that young people already access.

- Grass roots organisations should be used to create awareness in the community, through door-to-door visits.

- Young people can be employed



Overcrowded clinics for Covid-19 testing stations have become an issue in informal settlements. (PHOTO: Mzingisi Benekane)

to help sensitise the elderly and those who do not have access to smartphones on the evolving situation of the pandemic and recommended health measures, through door-to-door campaigns.

- Continue to prioritise health care for other diseases. Access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health services is key, and has become more important given some of the effects of the pandemic. As for mental health (below), health workers need to be trained in the importance of providing sensitised care for young people, particularly around confidentiality.

- Youth corners in health centres could help ensure young people can access services without fear of stigma.

Provide mental health support for young people

“Just stay at home doing nothing... I didn't know what I was supposed to do, [it] led to depression... you just don't know what's going on” (Youth, Lagos).

- Invest in government facilities and counselling that is accessible and appropriate for young people in informal settlements to cope with the likely high burden of mental illness.

- Consider some kind of ritual and counselling to help people deal with the trauma and loss they have suffered due to the pandemic, particularly where people did not get a chance to say goodbye to loved ones.

Build in resilience to the provision of services and infrastructure with the active participation of young people

“During the covid there was no school, we had to run online lectures and without data there will be nothing like you attending

lecture so and if there's no electricity, you won't be able to... if I attend a lecture today, tomorrow I might not be able to, based on data” (Youth, Lagos).

“I think for me, I have a critique when it comes to volunteering. Because this word “volunteering”, mostly it is the youth who are being told volunteer. But when it comes to the job or when it comes to, like, getting [paid] opportunities, it's another group of people who get opportunities” (Youth, Nairobi).

- Where infrastructure upgrading and provision is now designed and planned, consider young peoples' needs and mitigate risks (such as pandemic related).

- Ensure paid opportunities for young people to become involved.

- Consider investing in TV or radio programming that could cover periods of school or university closures without relying on

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internet connectivity that is unavailable or unaffordable to some.

- Consider access to laptops and wifi infrastructure.

- Resilient water and sanitation infrastructure is urgently needed for domestic as well as business use.

Create an enabling environment

for youth participation

“They don't know who to speak to, they don't know how to speak to their counselor. And sometimes maybe they'll be brushed off and not heard. And they wouldn't know how to go about it” (Youth, Lusaka).

- Create an enabling environment where youth can be heard by those in power.

- Consider forums run by youth at which decision-makers are invited to attend.

- Where resident boards exist in communities for discussing issues affecting residents with the local authorities, make it a requirement made for a youth representative to be present on these boards, thus giving them a voice.

- Consider using social media as an entry point for participation in community level decision-making, with the idea that bringing these forums online makes them more accessible to youth.

Providing youth with the tools and knowledge to self-organise and participate

“We've been having so many protests, so many riots but we have not seen any change” (Youth, Lagos).

“What helps is when the young people are organised...once they're organised, it's easy for them to know what's happening on the ground....and what it is that they want to advocate or lobby for...Receiving some sort of training also opens your mind, you become more aware of what you can do and what you can get out there” (Youth, Lusaka).

- Develop training programmes where youth can learn how to become more involved in local governance, and gain leadership training and experience,

Good practice example: Grassroots and community-based initiatives supporting young peoples' empowerment and needs

With formal decision-making processes mostly closed to young people, participation in local projects and programmes can offer youth a different route into influencing community decision-making. Youth in Harare, Zimbabwe, highlighted how grassroots and community-based initiatives could play a critical role in addressing young peoples' needs including addressing drug abuse and mental health. As one youth in Harare expressed: "the best way is to engage at the grassroot level, whereby they come to the community. And then.....use.... the youth community leaders, or they use certain youth groups.....the community leaders will be aware of who is doing this and who is not doing this.". As an example, through the process of collecting information for this research project, youth in Zimbabwe interacted with community care workers. As a result, young people, local authorities and government officials engaged through virtual platforms to discuss the challenges faced by communities during COVID 19. This led to young people working together with government ministries to create interactive platforms with their communities to properly educate, disseminate appropriate information and make vaccines accessible to everyone.

including in the public sector and civil society.

- Consider inviting young people to a series of dialogues about the importance of public participation and how to access the channels for engagement.
- Consider support and training in using social media and community media as key tools for putting pressure on government, to push them into action and ensure youth voices are heard.

Support training and sensitisation of young people to adapt to wider sets of risks

"It has really made we the youth to begin to have more enlightenment on our thoughts on how to make ourselves better for the future. Because we have it seen that our present government are not really trying in terms of making we the youths to be what we have always wanted to be. So it's left for us to do it. So due to what has happened last year, it has enlightened more on us to know what is ahead in the future." (Youth, Lagos).

- Use community spaces for sharing local knowledge and community sensitization to support resilience to COVID-19 and other risks, such as climate resilience and adaptation.

Our project

Between 2020 and 2021, youth members of Slum Dwellers International's federation, across eight cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, and researchers from the University of Warwick and Nottingham, sought to amplify youth voices speaking to the ethics and justice issues arising from impacts of COVID-19 and the policy response. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK. This brief was authored by Oyinlola Oyebo, University of Warwick in collaboration with the project team.



Water problems becoming health hazards in informal settlements.
(PHOTO: Mzingisi Benekane)