

“Hunger will kill us before the coronavirus does!”

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“This is a war - and I am confident that as Uganda, we shall win this war against corona virus. This is a matter of life and death. We are not talking about convenience. We are talking about survival.” President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni

The statement above closed the March 30th, 2020 presidential address following the confirmation of coronavirus cases in the country. The presidential address was aimed at informing Ugandans about the number of confirmed coronavirus cases and the directives to be implemented in the country so as to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. Uganda registered the first coronavirus case on the 21st of March 2020. As of the 27th of April 2020, 79 covid-19 cases had been confirmed in Uganda 355 in Kenya, 300 in Tanzania, 191 in Rwanda and 12 in Burundi. In his March 30th address, President Yoweri Museveni ordered a 14-day nationwide lockdown as a measure to control the spread of the coronavirus. The lockdown was extended for another 21 days on the 14th of April 2020. The lockdown saw the closure of what was described as non-essential businesses countrywide and a mandatory curfew between 7pm and 6:30am.¹ Additional measures included restriction of public and private transport with the exception of cargo planes, lorries, pickups and trains as well as vehicles from selected sectors that would be provided with special stickers by the ministry of works and transport for easy identification.² The opening of shops selling non food items was suspended while people involved in selling food items in markets and elsewhere were asked to secure accommodation close to their places of work in order to avoid *unnecessary* movement. The people running factories were asked to keep a skeleton staff that they are in position to provide accommodation for close to the factory premises. Any movements aimed at seeking medical care would have to be cleared by the office of the resident district commissioner. The population was urged to maintain good hygiene and sanitation by washing hands with soap and water regularly or using sanitizers, regularly disinfecting surfaces and not touching the eyes, nose or mouth with contaminated and unwashed hands. Furthermore, the population was asked to feed healthy in order to strengthen the body defence system. Some of the other East African countries like Kenya and Rwanda restricted non essential travel. Kenya implemented a mandatory country wide curfew between

7pm and 5am and movement restrictions were imposed across counties for 21 days. Tanzania and Burundi have what appear to be less stringent measures in place with only restricted entry into the country and no curfews or lockdown. Elsewhere in Africa, lockdown measures have been implemented in most of the West and South African countries. In China, Europe and America we have seen strict nationwide lockdown measures being implemented.

Africa is particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus and the effects of these restrictions given the weak healthcare infrastructure, the huge burden of diseases especially malaria, HIV and tuberculosis, high levels of malnutrition and food scarcity, high percentage of the urban population in informal settlements, high levels of poverty and unemployment with many living hand to mouth and a lack of facilities like running water for sanitation and good hygiene. Through our ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the Antimicrobials in Society (AMIS) Project, we have come to learn about the everyday realities of the people we engage with as characterized by precarious employment, uncertain economic opportunities, a lack of safety nets, scarcity of quality healthcare, climate instability and being unable to afford the basic needs of life, let alone a full course of antibiotics. The AMIS project is a social science research project aimed at understanding the roles of antimicrobials in society and everyday life. Our project sites include households in Namuwongo an urban informal settlement in Kampala, households and health care facilities in rural Nagongera, Tororo and poultry and piggery farms in peri-urban Wakiso. An understanding of the everyday realities of living in these three spaces challenges the narrative of *irrational* medicine use while bringing to forefront how individuals may find themselves in such a situation, where taking an incomplete dose of antibiotics is the only option. In Uganda, many people are grappling with the tension between mitigating the direct potential effects of the coronavirus and the potentially harmful effects of the mitigation measures. The implementation of the anti-corona measures described by the president as *simple* renders visible the everyday realities of the ordinary Ugandan that we have observed in our research while highlighting the unintended negative effects that the mitigation measures may have. The president's statement above raises questions of whose survival counts and when. In this article we take the basic need for food as a window into this debate in urban, rural and peri-urban Ugandan settings that we are engaging with through our ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the AMIS Project.

The urban informal settlement

The country wide lockdown has far reaching financial implications for residents of informal settlements, who are mainly daily wage earners. In a conversation with Annet, a resident of Namuwongo, she describes this situation as worrying. Annet is a food vendor within the settlement and her food vending business like many other businesses has been affected by the directives being implemented, specifically the lockdown. Aware of the pandemic and the danger the virus presents, she recognises that social distancing is not feasible where she lives. She is however more worried about the economic situation this brings to her and her family. In her particular case, the food prices shot up overnight meaning she would have to immediately increase the prices of the cooked food she sells to be able to make any profit. Many of her customers will not be able to afford the increased food prices. Her option right now is to wait for the lockdown period to elapse. She is however still faced with the dilemma of feeding her family during the lockdown period with no income. This will not be sustainable for her as she will run out of money if the lockdown continues. "Hunger will kill us before the coronavirus does," she expresses.

The rural household

Shifting focus from the Kampala, to a rural setting, Mr. Obbo a resident of Nagongera in a phone conversation says, 'Life is difficult these days!' He says people are going on with life as usual but this time under different circumstances. In fact, he says that his family has been working in the garden preparing to plant rice. Mr Obbo is a subsistence farmer that depends on farming and irregular construction work to meet the needs of his family of six. I ask about the situation with food. He says 'Can you imagine a half kilo of salt is now at 1500 shillings.' He says a kilo of beans now goes for 4000 shillings and yet there is a scarcity of vegetables that people in his area usually count on as their last resort in the absence of 'silverfish' and beans whose cost is exorbitant at the moment. The absence of rain has led to the scarcity of vegetables he says. The local weekly markets that residents would flock to purchase dried cassava that is the cheapest food available have been suspended. He says that the traders from the neighboring district of Iganga that sell dried cassava on trucks come once in a while and so people have to wait by the roadside to secure some cassava whose cost per kilo has increased by 100 shillings. This scenario makes wonder about the directive on nutrition that requires that people to feed *healthy* in order to strengthen the body defense system. What does this mean for someone that is not assured of their next meal?

The peri-urban small holder farmer

In Wakiso district, the small holder farmers describe their experience with the country wide lockdown as a nightmare. The restrictions on public and private transport, have presented new challenges to the households dependant on farming. With no access to transport, the farmers are left with one option which is walking to and from the open market places where their produce can be sold. The distances to the markets are vast and not easy to navigate without vehicles. Farmers have also reported a reduction in demand for pig and poultry products as the usual consumers' purchasing power seems to have been 'quarantined' too amidst restrictions in movement, work and the ban of operation of social gathering places including bars, leisure gardens and parties. In a bid to survive, farmers have been forced to sell their pig and poultry products at a cheap price in order to avoid incurring costs of feeding these animals under the existing circumstances.

Dry food rations, offered as relief by the government to those that have been affected by the anti-coronavirus measures are targeting the 'urban poor' starting with Kampala and Wakiso districts. The 'urban poor' have been described by the president as people that live hand to mouth. His rationale for selecting this group is that the day wage urban workers may not be able to buy food since they are not working. He says the people in the countryside that grow their own food do not qualify for the food relief. Sadly, living hand to mouth perfectly describes many of the people we have engaged with in our rural study site whose efforts to grow their own food have been frustrated by climate change, pests and infertile land. 'Attempted murder' is the charge declared by the president as awaiting people outside the covid-19 taskforce that he described as seeking cheap popularity by distributing food in a *reckless* manner that draws crowds together and puts the population at risk of getting infected with the coronavirus. The decisions made by the president and the covid-19 task force with regard to who gets the food relief have come under heavy criticism by the masses through the media.³ The choice to start food distribution within the urban and peri-urban areas of Kampala and Wakiso was seen by some as off target as they felt it left out the people that are most affected by poverty.⁴ The president emphasized that the food distribution exercise should not be mixed up with the long-term critical issue of poverty eradication. He said "Some people are mixing this up. They think it is an anti-poverty exercise. Poverty is a long-term problem, which has been here and will be here and there are other programmes, like Operation Wealth Creation, in place to address this. We are now dealing with an emergency" he said.⁵ In addition, the first bulk of food purchased for distribution under the office of the prime minister came

under media scrutiny for its poor quality as it was labeled as 'substandard and not fit for human consumption'.^{6,7}

A story in a local newspaper the 'Observer' on the 16th of April 2020 indicated that members of parliament had been allocated 10 billion Uganda shillings to carry out 'supervision and advocacy' against the spread of coronavirus in their districts.⁸ It is reported that the Ministry of Health budget had to be cut by 5 billion to come up with the 10 billion for the members of parliament.⁸ The speaker of parliament explained that members of parliament were 'busy on advocacy' and following up on what is happening in hospitals around the country. Isn't this what members of parliament get paid to do? Ugandan leaders have been criticized for being out of touch with the reality of ordinary Ugandans.⁹ A lack of understanding of local realities is also reflected in the decision to call for social distancing without addressing the question of crowded homes, lack of indoor plumbing and piped water in most households and asking market vendors and factory workers to find accommodation close to their places of work. In his speech, the president describes the lockdown as being similar to 'being silent' drawing from his experience in the bush war where the soldiers had to freeze and keep silent when they suspected an enemy was approaching. He said this freezing would enable those responsible for protecting the Ugandan population from the effects of the coronavirus to *hear* clearly making it possible for them to identify, trace and isolate all individuals that have come into contact with confirmed cases. However, this begs some questions: what does the freezing or being silent mean to the ordinary Ugandan? Who does the silence protect? The social and economic consequences of the covid-19 prevention measures and the impact on the control of other diseases like malaria, HIV and TB seem drastic and yet the benefits are not certain. With reports of challenges in accessing health care,¹⁰ cases of maternal deaths,¹¹ economic losses,¹² hunger and starvation,¹³ a rise in domestic violence,¹⁴ and increasing theft and burglary¹⁵ the costs of the lockdown appear to be mounting rapidly. Why should the population be silent now and at what cost?

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