



IMPACT OF COVID ON YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES IN KENYA



GIFTED COMMUNITY CENTRE, GCC
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RESEARCH TEAM

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ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES

Gifted Community Centre, GCC is a youth led community-based organization formed **for and led by** youth with disabilities in the Kibera informal settlement –embedding ‘nothing for us without us’ in their work. GCC works with **all types of disabilities** and gender 7 years- 40 years (adolescents, women, and men) (the age is above 35 years due to the inequalities persons with disabilities undergo compared to their mates without disability). It applies a human rights approach in their work and believes in developing community home grown solutions led by youth with disabilities themselves. GCC is the leading Disabled Organization to run Live Twitter Chats weekly most of which are led by persons with disabilities themselves not only to engage the duty bearers on different thematic areas but also to instill confidence in persons with disabilities of their capabilities and abilities. GCC works with local administration, mainstream organizations, and community organizations for sustainability measures. GCC has ambassadors in different counties who are youth with disabilities and who help us to locate youth with disabilities not only from within Kibera but also nationally. GCC is the first organization to conduct a research on HIV among girls and women with **invisible** disabilities (13-59 years) in Kibera and Kenya entitled *Silent Conversations: Enhancing HIV/SRH Knowledge of Women with Invisible Disabilities in Kenya*.

GCC's **mission** is to become the leading organization where every youth with disability has the opportunity to achieve their full potential and fully participate in all the aspects of life.

GCC's **core programs** include advocacy and outreach, employability and economic empowerment, educate and inform, and leadership and mentorship.

GCC's objectives include: to support persons with disabilities into sustainable livelihoods through capacity building training, business startups, and direct employment; to improve the skills, knowledge, and experiences of youth with disabilities through multifaceted approaches; to improve the literacy levels and rates of children and youth with disabilities; to assist and support individual talents and enhance personal employability programmes; and to advocate and create awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities.

Leonard Cheshire is a UK-based charity with over 65 years' experience and is one of the world's largest Charities wholly dedicated to supporting persons with disabilities. Leonard Cheshire believes that children and adults with disabilities should have the rights, freedom, and

opportunities to access education, contribute economically and to participate fully and equitably in society. The Global Influencing and International Delivery Department of Leonard Cheshire (LC) implements projects around our inclusive education, economic inclusion, and youth leadership models and in partnership with our Global Alliance partner organizations, which are an extensive network of over 200 members in 54 countries.

INTRODUCTION

With no data available on COVID-19 and youth with disabilities, in December 2020, Gifted Community Centre, with Leonard Cheshire's support, embarked on a national research to explore the *impact of COVID-19 among youth with disabilities in Kenya*. The study applied a participatory action approach, an approach to research in communities that emphasizes participation and action. The approach seeks to understand the world by trying to change it collaboratively and following reflection, PAR emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience and social history.

Global context: The world today is home to the largest generation of young people in history - 1.8 billion. Around 12% (that is 220 million) are estimated to live with a disability, and they are among the most marginalized and most impoverished of the world's youth. During a humanitarian crisis like COVID-19, it is vital that youth with disabilities can survive and thrive. Over recent years there has been a shift towards people with disabilities being viewed – and viewing themselves – as citizens with equal rights rather than objects of charity. This is most evident among the younger population. A whole generation of youth with disabilities is emerging with a strong passion and determination to show the world what they can achieve. It is, therefore, the aim of this research to apply a participatory approach to explore the impact of COVID-19 and its response concerning youth with disabilities in Kenya.

Objectives

The purpose of the research is to gather qualitative data on four core areas:

- i. To understand to what extent disability has been mainstreamed in COVID-19 national response strategies, focusing on youth with disabilities.
- ii. To understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of youth with disabilities.
- iii. To understand to what extent youth with disabilities have contributed to the pandemic response.
- iv. To have documented the actions and solutions youth with disabilities would like duty bearers to take in the long-term pandemic recovery.

Research questions

- i. To what extent has disability been mainstreamed in COVID-19 national response strategies, focusing on youth with disabilities?
- ii. What has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of youth with disabilities?
- iii. To what extent have youth with disabilities contributed to the pandemic response?
- iv. What are the actions and solutions would youth with disabilities would like duty bearers to take in the long-term pandemic recovery?

This research paper is divided into five sections including the introduction, desk review research, methodology, data analysis and findings, and conclusions and recommendations.

DESK REVIEW RESEARCH

COVID-19 being a recent phenomenon, has produced different research reports, though minimal in the African context. The data available is hardly disaggregated, especially on disability-youth with disabilities. Though several reports have been published, no research has primarily focused on the impact of COVID-19 on youth with disabilities in Kenya. The studies instead have focused on persons with disabilities in general.

A study titled *COVID-19 in Africa: socio-economic impact, policy response, and opportunities*, which focused on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and policy response, found out that African countries were more affected by the virus. The rising pandemic affected social interaction and economic activities through the imposed social distancing policies in several African countries. The study revealed that social policies could affect the social and economic well-being of citizens. The study also notes the pandemic created social anxiety among families and households in the region. The outbreak also showed how vulnerable African societies are in facing health hazards. The study concluded by recommending that policymakers enforce social policies that unite communities in bad times to reduce social anxiety.¹ Though the study did not capture data on youth with disabilities, it is a relevant study that reveals the deeper impact that is also experienced by youth with disabilities in society, a group that is marginalized by virtue of their disabilities. The study could also reveal the extent to which COVID-19 could have affected youth with disabilities psychologically, some of whom are locked in the houses with or without a pandemic. COVID-19 has made it even worse.

Another study published by the Institute of Development Studies *Disability Inclusive Development Kenya Situational Analysis* reveals that COVID-19 and its responses triggered a global crisis that impacted all areas of life, including people's health, livelihoods, and education. In Kenya, in June 2020, 6,366 confirmed cases of COVID-19 led to government response, including limited movement in places with reported cases; closed of public spaces with high human traffic, such as schools and public events; set dusk-to-dawn curfews, and ensured basic hygiene and social distancing. These responses, however, led to negative impacts significantly on the citizens' livelihoods, such as loss of jobs and decrease in business revenues. The study reports that women were likely affected than men. Over 15 million learners also were affected by school closures.² The analysis study reports that persons with disabilities have been left behind in the response. Many of the current protection measures, especially around transport and social distancing, make their usual means of support and independence risky and challenging to access. Some people with disabilities cannot practice social-distancing due to their support needs. Others are struggling to shop for food and other essentials, do household chores, and so on without their assistants. They

¹ "COVID-19 in Africa: Socio-Economic Impact, Policy Response and Opportunities | Emerald Insight," accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJSSP-05-2020-0171/full/html>.

² Brigitte Rohwerder, "Disability Inclusive Development - Kenya Situational Analysis" (June 30, 2020): 7,8, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15508>.

can no longer rely on others to access transport. Access to information about COVID-19 is often not accessible. They face increased stigmatization due to myths around COVID-19. The disruption to schooling affects the progress of children with disabilities, and provisions for homeschooling, such as e-learning, have often not been accessible. There are increased reports of violence against women and girls with disabilities. People with disabilities' livelihoods have been disrupted, and they face increased food insecurity. They have struggled to access food rations due to a lack of awareness of their needs by those distributing them.³ Though the analysis report does not provide disaggregated data of youth with disabilities and the impact COVID-19 has had on this group (it covered persons with disabilities as a whole). The report provides important insights into the effects COVID-19 has had on persons with disabilities, including the youth with disabilities which is worth consideration.

A paper published on the Open Institute website on the *Impact of COVID-19 on Kenyans with disabilities* in April 2020 reiterates that persons with disabilities have faced severe challenges including public transport, access to information, and E-learning where most parents do not have access to the internet or smartphones, sign language interpreters expensive to afford, and lack of braille materials as schooling from home has such challenges, personal protective equipment which government is yet to roll out, fear of visiting healthcare facilities due to the attitude from health service providers. The paper recommends that the National Council for Persons with Disabilities register PWDs in the interior regions for ease access to COVID government benefits; inclusion of Kenya's sign language on all materials; Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development develop online programs catering to the different needs of PWDs students; provision of PPE such as free sanitizers, gloves, masks etc.; and inclusive dissemination of inclusive COVID-19 information for persons with disabilities in mainstream media not just targeted to PWDs but everyone to reach more people for purposes of awareness and reduce stigma and discrimination.⁴

In summary, there are no studies exclusively on COVID-19 and youth with disabilities in Kenya, and most of the studies available are not disaggregated. The reports provide universal challenges to PWDs. Some of the challenges highlighted above were also stated by the youth with disabilities during the focus group discussions.

METHODOLOGY

The research targeted 100 youth with disabilities from across the country. The study deployed desk research and focus group discussions, both virtual and physical- 5 virtual sessions of groups between 5-16 and 2 physical sessions of groups between 20-30. The youths were drawn from Kenya's regions formerly known as provinces – Rift Valley, Nyanza, Western, Coast, Central, Eastern, North Eastern, and Nairobi. The participants were selected based on a combined set of criteria such as region, county, type of disability, and gender to have a diverse composition. The research deployed snowball sampling and referrals from Disabled Persons Organizations and persons with disabilities. Consent forms were administered and signed before the exercise.

³ Ibid., 14–15.

⁴ Open Institute, “Impact of COVID-19 on Kenyans With Disabilities,” *Open Institute*, April 27, 2020, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://openinstitute.africa/impact-of-covid-19-on-kenyans-with-disabilities/>.

The sessions began on February 22, 2021 and concluded on March 08, 2021. Each session was scheduled for 1 hour and 30 minutes. A total of 115 were invited to the sessions, and 100 youth with disabilities participated.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data collected was coded and presented in key emerging themes.

Demographic information

The research involved demographic questions. The research participants were youth with disabilities between the ages 18-35 years and out of the 100 who participated in the focus group discussion 52% were female while 48% were men. 92% of the participants were from urban, 5% from rural area and 3% from peri-urban. In addition, 4% had some difficulty seeing and used glasses, 24% could not hear at all, 72% had some difficulty walking or climbing steps, none had difficulty remembering or concentrating and finally 4% had some difficulty in self-care and depend on care givers.

Majority of the youth in the research had physical impairment represented by 72%, followed by those with hearing impairment at 24%, visual impairment at 4% and cerebral palsy at 1%.

All the participants acknowledged and confirmed that there were cases of COVID-19 in their neighborhood/local area and none had been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Knowledge

All the youth had heard about COVID-19, with 99% confirming they had heard it from the media specifically, television and radio stations. They were all aware of the means in which the virus can be transmitted from one person to another and also they felt that some people were more vulnerable in contracting the virus than others. However, none of them thought they were in that category of vulnerability due to their impairment apart from Lilian who said:

"I am not able to see and therefore I can touch surfaces that have been touched by an infected person hence contracting the virus."

Effect of COVID-19

The effects emerged from the discussion into four segments, economic, health, education and social. 99% of the participants stated that COVID-19 had negatively impacted them in all the sectors, and had brought about double harm to them.

Economic

This emerged as the most recurring theme throughout the study. All the youth who participated in the research said they had been affected economically in one way by COVID-19. One of the main economic effect that was confirmed by majority of the youth was loss of job.

Shaban who has physical impairment and depends on sports for income supported this by saying, *"As a sportsman, Corona has stopped me from participating in tournaments thus no income."*

Diana also said, *"due to COVID-19, my employer had to retrench some people and since I am disabled I was the first employee the company retrenched, they thought I was not very productive."*

The other effect was collapse of business/low sales. Some of the youth said they were small businesspeople and since COVID-19 came, the government had to put up some strict measures to fight the pandemic which led to their business yielding less profit that couldn't sustain them and they opted to close down the businesses. James who had a small business said,

“My small business of selling groundnuts collapsed since in a day I could go to sell them and fail to sell even a single shilling”.

Mr. Kyania who has a cyber-business also supports this by saying, *“COVID-19 affected me as a businessman, initially I used to earn a minimum of six hundred Kenyan shillings per day but since COVID-19 arrived in Kenya the maximum I have earned is three hundred Kenyan shillings.”*

Willy states, *“I have been affected a lot. I lost my job, then I started my small business, but the city council has been disrupting and pushing me away. I have not even paid my rent as we speak.”*

Nikodemus says, *“due to COVID-19, I now pay transport twice since before we could share a seats in a bus but due to social distancing, we now sit alone. This means paying double.”*

Education

This was another area that some of the youth especially those in schools expressed had been affected by COVID-19. Some of the effects that were raised by youth were loss of academic semesters, increased costs such as internet, and laptop purchase.

Hilda says, *“I was supposed to graduate in 2020 after attending my final semester in January 2020 to April 2020 but due to COVI-19 the institutions were closed. I had just joined school this year in January to do my final exam in April and hopefully graduate in October. If it was not for the loss of the academic semester, I could have graduated last year.”*

Since learning was to be done virtually, all youth with disabilities in schools stated bundles/internet costs to have been a big challenge. Some of the youth said they had to incur an extra cost of purchasing data bundles and this was expensive for them since they also had school fees to pay. Eunice says, *“I use ksh 250 (2.5 dollars) per day to attend my classes online. This is very challenging and learning is not effective like face to face learning.”*

Bwire who is doing a Bachelor of Arts in education also confirmed he faces similar challenges and further adds he is not able to seek clarification from the lecturers like he used to through physical learning.

Vilda said, *“First of all, Covid affected my education in that, lack of communication during the session made it hard.”*

Health

From the discussion with the research participants, they also highlighted that their health had been affected negatively because of COVID in the country. 100% of the deaf stated that they experience communication barrier due to wearing of masks. Initially when COVID was announced, deaf had no clear information whether they were supposed to wear masks as they depend on signing and lips reading. Also, due to lack of income they could not afford the masks, so whenever they went to health facilities they could be turned away and were shocked as no one communicated to them why.

Emmanuel says, *“one day I went to a facility in my local area and since I had not worn the mask, the clinical officers refused to offer me consultation services and hence I could not be treated and I had to go to a local pharmacy to purchase medicines that had not been prescribed by a doctor.”*

Vilda also says, *“COVID-19 was given full attention and other conditions/diseases/virus were sidelined. I remember last year in June when COVID-19 cases were on the rise I went to a certain hospital to seek some services on sexual reproductive health but I did not get the services, when I tried to consult at the reception nobody seemed to mind me.”*

This was also supported by other ladies in the group who said they also had similar experience. Doris said that if you went to the health facility with similar symptoms of COVID-19 you were assumed to be COVID-19 positive and the doctors could not attend to you. Peter supported this by saying, *“One day I went to the hospital with fever and coughing and I was forced into self-quarantine yet I was not suffering from COVID-19 but malaria.”*

Most of the youth stated that their normal medication was affected as COVID-19 was given the first priority and unfortunately when you go to the hospital they think it is COVID-19.

Patrick says, *“When COVID-19 came, my normal medicine were costed highly and this meant I had to stop using them. I also lost my job.”*

Social

Another area that the youth highlighted was the social effect of COVID-19 that came as a result of government directives. The Kenyan government has put very stringent measures to fight the spread of the pandemic and this had some negative impact to the youth. The youth highlighted that their freedom of visiting and meeting friends and relatives was affected. Mental health problems including depression was repeatedly mentioned.

Queen supported this by saying, *“I used to travel a lot in the village to visit my relatives but since COVID-19 came I could not travel there since I feared I could take COVID-19 to my elderly family members. She further added, I have been on medication since 2001 and I also feared to interact freely with people in fear of contracting the dangerous virus. This affected me physiologically since I was stressed for staying long without seeing my close relatives.”*

Jackie stressed how COVID-19 had affected her socially by saying, *“social gatherings were banned and that was one of the avenue that I raised my concerns as a person living with disability through the community forums that means I have not been able to raise my concerns to my leaders in the community, therefore I feel oppressed and denied my rights.”*

Beatrice says, *“COVID-19 has lowered my self-esteem. With no mingling, and having to stay long hours alone, with the loss of job has really affected.”*

Vaccine Roll Out

The study found out that 95% of the youth with disabilities had knowledge about the vaccine program that was to be rolled out by the government of Kenya. They further mentioned the priority list that was developed by the government and out of the 100 youth none of them had been consulted or involved in its development. The research participants further stated that the government had left them out and did not involve them at all whenever making key decisions on vaccine. Nicodemus who said is a disability advocate said that, *“the government only consults the*

disability representatives at the top level who only air their own interest and then the government concludes those are views for all the youth disability at grassroots level.”

The researchers observed that the youth had a lot of questions and fears that arose from the vaccine. They thought the vaccine was not healthy and it could cause more harm to their bodies. The youth wondered why the vaccine had been found very quickly within a year while some diseases like cancer and HIV/AIDS which has been existing for years had not. Akinyi one of the youth shared that, *“I got paralyzed part of my body as a result of a particular vaccine injection that led to this disability and I cannot even advocate for anyone to blindly accept the vaccine.”*

The youth said they could only be comfortable with the vaccine if first the president and other political leaders were in the priority list to be vaccinated.

The research also found out that 100% of the youth did not know any vaccine that was inclusive of persons with disability. They pleaded for more awareness and consultation of youth with disability at grassroots level if they were to be involved in any vaccine programme.

Recovery Efforts

From the research it was evident that the youth were not involved in the recovery efforts in their community and their ability to bounce back from the effects of COVID-19 were very minimal. They attributed this to the economic effect of COVID-19 and therefore, the majority’s priority was to get jobs or seed capital to help them earn a living on their own.

Government support

Out of the 100 youth who participated in the research, only 28% had received support from the government and other non-governmental organizations. The support was mainly cash for just some months. 72% of the youth with disabilities said they had not received any single support from any body and they felt the government had failed them. They said the main reason behind that was corruption by the people who were involved in the process of identifying and recruiting those who were to be supported. Munene said that some of those people were not persons with disability and therefore they did not see any need to include youth with disability. He further added that some were asking for tips so that they could include you in the list. Most youth stated that lack of accessible information of the government support programs has led to their exclusion. Kawira said that information was only circulated to a few people who knew each other hence enabling them to get the support while leaving majority of the youth unsupported.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research findings it is clear that the impact of the COVID-19 has had double effects to the youth with disability. Majority of them are struggling to make ends meet and the government has not offered sustainable solutions to them even at these difficult times. The researchers deduce that there is still a huge gap for government to empower youth with disability and therefore the researchers recommend the following actions to be undertaken by the duty bearers:

- The government should include youth with disability at grassroots level in key decision making that affect their lives or have representatives at the grassroots level in those decision-making forums.
- The government should continually review the policies that advocate for youth empowerment and ensure they are being followed up to the latter for example, the 5% jobs allocations for people living with disability should be fully implemented.
- The government should support the youth with disabilities with seed capital/grants to start up small businesses. This should be done through organizations of youth with disabilities or have a youth with disability in the offices which administer such support.
- The government should have one central body that should be tasked with airing the views of persons with disability, the body should be headed by persons living with disability. The National Council for Persons with Disabilities should work hand in hand to ensure the government support is administered equally.
- The government should loosen up some of the procedures put across in the cash transfer program to enable the youth acquire the money easily as safety nets.
- The support for persons with disability should be universal and not only considering those with severe disabilities only.
- Civic education should be administered throughout not just during pandemic periods.
- Government should set up inclusive mental health institutions at all levels to ensure youth with disabilities can access mental health services.
- The government should work hand in hand with Disability organizations working for youth with disabilities to disseminate information. The government should also make good use of the media where youth stated to receive information from, but invest in sign language interpreters throughout.

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