



UNDERSTANDING THE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF COVID-19 TO INFORM RESPONSE IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 has infected over 30,000 Kenyans and has resulted in adverse health and economic outcomes in the country, with the poorest and vulnerable most affected.¹ While Meru County has 71 confirmed cases,² the Government of Meru County is concerned about widespread adverse effects of the pandemic and its response measures on the health and economic wellbeing of residents. However, the county does not have data to support these concerns and does not know the extent of any negative effects. Whereas the county has implemented some measures to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic and protect residents from COVID-19, it is unclear whether residents are aware of these measures or have benefitted from them.

METHODOLOGY

IDinsight and the County Government of Meru surveyed a total of 2,001 residents between 9 July to 4 Aug 2020 to understand more about COVID-19's health and economic effects on the community. These findings will inform a data-driven and context-specific approach for supporting residents. We administered three different surveys with each survey targeting one of three priority groups: community health workers (CHWs), vulnerable community members,³ and owners of small businesses.⁴ Specifically, we surveyed 333 community health workers (CHWs), 961 community members, and 707 owners of small businesses that operate within Meru County to understand:

- Effects of COVID-19 on household well-being, income generation, and health seeking behaviour
- COVID-19 knowledge, attitudes, and practices
- Reach of initial Meru County COVID-19 initiatives and areas for future support

KEY FINDINGS

COVID-19 ECONOMIC IMPACT

Residents experienced declines in income generating activity and food insecurity



- 95% (n=916) of community members reported experiencing a decline in income
- 33% (n=315) of community members had lost their jobs, and 31% (n=297) had closed their businesses
- 81% (n=780) reported being unable to buy food due to high prices whereas 84% (n=809) reported being unable to buy food due to reduced household income

¹ <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/coronavirus>, cited 25 August 2020

² <https://www.health.go.ke/>, cited 25 August 2020

³ We focused on community members who would likely develop serious illness if infected with COVID-19, who would likely suffer from any disruptions in health services, and who are likely to suffer from any negative economic impacts of the pandemic. These community members were identified by community health workers

⁴ IDinsight and the County Government of Meru worked together to identify business sectors that have been or are likely to experience adverse economic effects due to the pandemic. Business members were identified by community health workers

Farmers expected crop prices and demand to be lower in 2020



- 74% (n=173) of smallholder farmers expected crop prices to be lower in 2020 compared to 2019
- 65% (n=153) expected demand to be lower in 2020 compared to 2019

HEALTH SERVICES

Community members who needed health services were receiving them



- Over 92% (n=1,294) of community members who needed health facility visits received them⁵

CHWs were still visiting households. However, they had insufficient PPE and would like additional monetary compensation from the county



- 83% (n=277) of CHWs reported that they are still visiting households
- 93% (n=310) reported that they have insufficient PPE such as masks, gloves, and hand sanitiser to feel protected in their work as a CHW
- Among CHWs who would like additional support, 69% (n=231) requested monetary compensation and 56% (n=188) requested PPE

COVID-19 KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES

Meru residents generally knew the symptoms of COVID-19 and how to protect themselves



- Over 70% of CHWs, community members, and business owners knew that fever and cough are common symptoms of COVID-19
- Over 75% knew key preventive measures: washing hands, wearing masks, and keeping a distance from others while outside
- Over 70% of community members reported that they wear a mask or have seen others wear a mask when they are outside their home

Business owners reported putting in some COVID-19 prevention measures, with physical distancing being the least enforced




- 31% (n=147) of businesses reported enforcing physical distancing
- 59% (n=279) of businesses reported requiring clients to wear masks
- 64% (n = 303) of businesses reported having handwashing stations/handing out hand sanitiser

⁵ 88% (n=293) of CHWs reported a decline in health facility visits. This may reflect what happened early in the pandemic, may reflect non-essential health services, or may be CHWs' perception.





MERU COUNTY SUPPORT

Community members and business owners were aware of Meru County initiatives; however, only a small proportion had received benefits at the time of the survey in July and August 2020

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 59% (n=986) of community members and business owners were aware that the county has implemented COVID-19 initiatives
- Only 14% (n=228) had received a face mask, 10% (n= 160) had received hand sanitiser, and 3% (n=42) had received relief food from the county

RECOMMENDATIONS

Solutions to support residents should be: 1) in line with existing county funds, 2) targeted at residents who most need them, and 3) easy to implement. We encourage county officials to conduct an internal review to investigate what would be feasible for the county to implement. **Overall, the county should consider implementing accountability, monitoring, and tracking mechanisms to understand the reach and effectiveness of initiatives, get access to real time information, and ensure support reaches the most vulnerable.** Below are recommended ways forward to address the challenges identified in the study.

Theme	Recommendations
 COVID-19 economic impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore targeted county-led food distribution and cash transfers for vulnerable residents and no-interest loans to businesses Set up a monitoring and rapid response system to better understand food prices and food supply chains Explore novel initiatives to protect farmers during COVID-19 (e.g. PICS bags)
 Health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to implement and communicate infection control procedures at public health facilities Continue to provide CHWs with PPE such as face masks, gloves, and hand sanitiser Explore partnerships with organisations who can provide in-kind support to CHWs and technical advisory services on effective CHW operationalisation
 COVID-19 knowledge, attitudes, and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore low-effort communication initiatives (e.g. posters, SMS, using local networks such as CHWs) to remind business owners to implement physical distancing and mask wearing
 Meru County support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore communication initiatives to ensure residents are aware of county initiatives and seek them to improve their wellbeing (e.g. posters, sensitisation through local media, using local networks such as CHWs)