



Ghida Ismail

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Uganda's street vendors need a working regulatory framework

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Street vending provides many Ugandans a livelihood, but the long-standing marginalisation of these workers in Kampala has led to a lack of government support during the country's lockdown. A COVID-19 recovery programme in Uganda must include a new regulatory framework for street vendors, says Ghida Ismail, to include this large workforce in development processes.

Irene, a 56-year-old Ugandan, sat on the side of the road in a colourful dress, attempting to sell biscuits and candies to the empty street in Kampala. In efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19, people in the Ugandan capital have been confined to their homes since March 2020,

rendering streets deserted and street vendors without customers. 'But I can't stay home, how will we eat?' she said.

Irene's situation mirrors that of millions of street vendors worldwide, reliant on day-to-day commerce for survival. Losing daily wages as a result of COVID-19 health measures has severely threatened their ability to feed their families.

'We haven't received sufficient support from the government, but this is not surprising, the government is good at international affairs, but never cared about us [street vendors]. We always need to fight hard to secure our needs,' said Irene.

While the current focus has been on emergency measures for vulnerable populations, the crisis has highlighted the urgency to consider a longer term regulatory framework to improve these vendors' livelihoods and, in so doing, strengthen their resilience to economic shocks.

COVID-19 relief measures

A substantial proportion of Ugandans resort to informal work to escape extreme poverty, despite its limited social, political and legal support. The lack of a safety net means a sustainable pull away from poverty is difficult, rendering these workers vulnerable to shocks such as COVID-19.

The virus has simultaneously exposed i) informal workers' vulnerabilities, especially how easily they can fall back into destitution and ii) their systematic exclusion from urban processes, such as registries, social schemes and dialogues on policy.

The government rolled out food packages to support vulnerable groups affected by the lockdown, including for taxi drivers and street vendors. However, the high rate of exclusion from databases means authorities

have been unable to grasp the number of people impacted, their exact locations and their level of vulnerability and needs, which hinders the ability and efficiency of targeting relief measures.

For those who have received packages, many have complained of slow distribution. Kampala residents, in particular, have protested the government's failure to **provide them with food**. 'The lockdown was imposed two weeks ago, and we still haven't received food,' said Margaret, a vegetable seller. The vendors' associations were not consulted when devising relief schemes, and those who received food aid reported that packages failed to properly account for their needs to stay at home. 'The packages don't include sugar or charcoal, how are we supposed to cook without these? Our only option is to keep working to get money for those,' said Irene.

Dissatisfaction with the relief packages reflects the persisting disconnect between authorities, their schemes and poorer workers' realities. Workers in the informal economy, particularly street vendors, have been forced to defy stay-at-home orders, face police threats and risk their health to keep working.

The marginalisation of street vendors

Street vendors work informally in public spaces such as sidewalks, streets and parking lots. Historically, street vendors have been perceived as unproductive, an impediment to countries' development, often blamed for vehicle and pedestrian traffic obstruction.

However, Marie, a vendor who had not received food aid and needed to sell bananas to feed her family, describes street vending as 'a good and flexible business' and a way for her to enrol her children in schools. 'If I can have more capital, I can even buy more bananas to sell and make more money,' she said. Usually street vendors buy their stocks from market vendors using previous days' earnings.

Marie also recognises that it has not been easy to work on the streets of Kampala, even before the virus hit. 'We need to hide from the KCCA [Kampala Capital City Authority] officers as they don't allow us to work on the streets. We wish they could be nicer since we buy our goods from market vendors who pay fees to them,' she added. The market vendors who street vendors purchase their goods from pay fees and/or taxes to authorities.

Nonetheless, street vendors have historically been deemed illegal and the KCCA, the governmental entity responsible for Kampala, has cracked down on vendors, confiscated their goods and evicted them from the streets. 'A few days ago, KCCA officers took all my goods and those of other vendors on the streets claiming we were not respecting social distancing. Before the virus, they would do the same under the pretext that we're not respecting sanitation standards,' said Peace, a fruit vendor. 'We understand it's their duty to enforce regulations, however, instead of treating us violently, why don't they give us clearer steps to follow?'

Regulations should create dialogue between informal workers and authorities

Authorities should acknowledge that the value of street vending lies in its ability to generate for residents economic opportunities. Rather than hindering these workers' professions, the recovery from COVID-19 and resilience in the face of future crises will instead require them to be supported. The current situation should offer an opportunity to bridge the gap between unprotected informal workers' needs and authorities' actions, and to rethink support and inclusion mechanisms.

In July 2019, the KCCA proposed the Regulation of Street Trade Ordinance aimed at **regulating street vendors** by registering and providing them with licenses, identification numbers and uniforms.

However, street vendors were not involved in the drafting of the ordinance and it failed to properly account for their interests. It proposed annual license fees that most vendors cannot afford, granted the KCCA the authority to deny issuing a license without reason and failed to outline the benefits to vendors.

'I haven't heard of a proposed registration, however it might be useful if it will facilitate our work and we could face less problems,' said Margaret. While potentially beneficial for unprotected informal workers, registration should not be focused on generating revenues for cities, but rather on protecting workers' conditions and earnings, lowering the risk of losing their source of livelihood and ensuring they can be efficiently reached with information and health measures, particularly important during a pandemic.

Registration should crucially allow workers to operate freely in public spaces, ensuring they receive legal protection in cases of harassment and exploitation. License fees must be guaranteed as reasonable, particularly considering the existing fees to which vendors indirectly contribute, with an application process that is simple and transparent.

Moreover, to design effective schemes and overcome the disconnect between workers in the informal economy and authorities it will also be essential to i) involve vendors in the drafting process and ii) establish channels of communication between workers and the KCCA which would enable workers to relay grievances, and the KCCA to share with workers information and guidelines.

In cities where unprotected informal workers form a large workforce, development processes should prioritise efforts that secure their livelihoods. Guaranteeing their social, political and economic rights and involving them in dialogues should be central to a COVID-19 recovery strategy. For Irene, lessons are the most important outcome of the

crisis: 'People should learn to save and invest, but government should also support poor self-employed people.'

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About the author



Ghida Ismail

Ghida Ismail is a researcher in development economics currently based in Uganda. She works with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the World Bank on impact evaluations to better inform policy on effective poverty reduction approaches. Her research has covered diverse social and economic issues in East Africa, South Asia and the Middle East.

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