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The rise and fall of sanitiser and face mask business in Tanzania from COVID-19

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Measures by the Tanzanian government to control the COVID-19 epidemic in early 2020 led to large-scale economic disruption, and a proliferation of new business around safety and hygiene. Reporting from Dar es Salaam, Halfan Hashim Magani describes the rise and fall of such enterprise in response to government announcements.

This blog is part of the series [Shifting Spaces](#), an emerging timeline of COVID-19 responses from Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda from the [LEAD research project](#) at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

The emergence of COVID-19 in Tanzania on 16 March 2020 marked the beginning of economic changes throughout the country. While some were deeply impacted by a loss of profit in marketplaces, others saw business opportunities in new areas: selling face masks and sanitisers. I chart the rise

and fall of this business in response to events, looking specifically at the ways in which this unfolded in the capital Dar es Salaam.

On the one hand, the new mask and sanitiser business exposed the dynamism, adaptability and indeed resilience of the city and its inhabitants. On the other, it reveals the sheer hard work and responsiveness that urban dwellers must practice to make a living – often without much choice. Moreover, it exposes the city's income differentials, shaping who is able to access high quality protective equipment and who is not.

A call for hygiene and personal protection

Following the official announcement by the Tanzanian government that one person had contracted COVID-19 in the city of Arusha, statements and campaigns on how to control the disease from spreading began. On 23 March the Chief Physician of the state, **Professor Abel Makubi**, insisted that people should **take precautions** such as washing their hands, using sanitisers, avoiding overcrowding, observing social distancing and wearing face masks, especially those locally made by pieces of cloth. The same campaign was echoed by the Regional Commissioner of Kigoma, the retired Brigadier General **Emanuel Maganga**, who urged all people of the region, both rural and urban dwellers, to wear face masks. The Ilala Municipal Mayor, **Omary Kumbilamoto**, said that people should wear the masks and carry hand sanitiser: whoever goes against the order will be arrested.

The emergence of new business

The use of face masks and sanitiser has proliferated **across the globe**, supported by the World Health Organization, among other public health institutions.

The mask and sanitiser business spread rapidly across Dar es Salaam from late March 2020 and gained momentum from April to May. Business flourished in areas such as markets (Kariakoo, Tandale, Kisutu, Temeke Sterio, Mbagala), bus stops, small shops and hospital entrances. In many bus stops, such as Ubungu, Makumbusho, Gerezani Kariakoo and Mbagala, one could find street hawkers, famously known as '*wamachinga*' in Swahili, selling locally-produced

masks. With no long-term specific goods to sell, the *wamachinga* respond closely to changing demands in the market. For example, around December and January – the preparatory months for primary and secondary students – they engage in selling school uniforms, exercise books and other necessary school equipment. The emergence of COVID-19 posed an opportunity. As one street hawker said:

‘We look at what the market needs and then we get into the business. That’s how we always operate. COVID-19 gave us another business to deal with by then.’

Apart from street hawkers, small business owners were also drawn to these items. Unlike the *wamachinga*, who have no specific goods for sale, these businesspersons own permanent small shops known as ‘kiosks’, which often sell domestic and consumable goods, such as cooking oil, cigarettes, soft drinks, bites, tissues, match boxes and water, to mention a few. This group added masks and sanitisers to their selection. One informant at Posta Mpya bus stop said:

‘I have been here selling small things to the passengers like water, chewing gum, handkerchief, sweets, and biscuits. When COVID-19 emerged I have to add face masks to my business. At that time I was selling up to 50 face masks per day.’

Most of these face masks were locally made by tailors who, scattered everywhere throughout the city, sew clothes, dresses, skirts and suits. Some of the cloth was sourced from textiles industries within the country, while others were sourced outside Tanzania. Pharmacies, on other hand, have sold imported face masks – mostly surgical masks from India and China.

Institutions such as the University of Dar es Salaam, through the college of Engineering and Technology (CoET), also manufactured face masks, retailing at Tsh. 3,5000/= [GBP £1.16]. The University entered into this business in support of government efforts to combat COVID-19. Some masks were distributed to the University of Dar es Salaam staff freely and others were sold to other government institutions. The National Museum of Tanzania made an order of face masks for their staff.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the sanitisers were made in the country, with few imported. A medical doctor working in a private hospital in Dar es Salaam revealed to me that in the months from March to June there was a scarcity of imported sanitiser, because exporting countries had high demands of sanitisers internally. The locally made sanitisers, made by companies and individuals in their homes, dominated those used in the hospitals, health centres and pharmacies.

Differing quality, differing access

The quality of these products differed significantly. In most cases, the imported face masks were of good quality, verified by the Tanzania Bureau of Standards (TBS) to meet international standards, as were those produced by the University of Dar es Salaam. But face masks made locally, especially by individuals, were of low quality and went unverified, lacking the three layers of required filter, as regarded as necessary according to Winthrop Wong, the Director of Wellchem Pharmaceuticals. The quality of hand sanitisers also varied, some verified by the Tanzania Medicines & Medical Devices Authority (TMMDA), while others were not.

The prices of face masks and sanitisers varied depending on the originality of its design and quality. For example, most of the face masks locally made by individual tailors were sold at 1,000/= Tanzanian Shillings. Those manufactured by the University of Dar es salaam were sold at 3,500/= while for imported masks the price ranged from 2,500/= to 15,000/= Tsh.

Many people in the city preferred to buy locally made masks due to their low income. Indeed, an interview with three informants at Makumbusho Bus stop revealed that, due to high prices, many local communities who sustain their livelihood through a hand-to-mouth economy could not afford to buy imported products. Instead, they opted to buy those produced locally which, by contrast, were reusable.

Imported masks were bought by those who have permanent employment in the government or private sectors, as well as businesspersons with large capital. One of the informants said:

'The imported face masks are for those who have money. For people like me, we will continue to use the locally made masks because that the only thing we can do.'

The government also allowed the individuals to engage in the manufacturing of hand sanitisers, although some **abused the opportunity**, creating low quality hand sanitisers and others sold them at higher prices.

The prices of hand sanitisers also differed depending on the size of the bottle. Prices ranged from 1,000/= [GBP £0.30] for small bottles to 20,000/= [GBP £6.69] for large bottles, making some products affordable for all groups.

The rise and fall of business

The masks and sanitiser business peaked from March to May 2020 and started to decline from June following government announcements that the number of cases was decreasing, alongside encouragement to return to normal daily activities. Speaking to workers and the general public at Nkonze Health Centre in Dodoma on 9 June 2020, the Minister of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children, **Ummu Mwalimu**, said that the 15 regions affected by COVID-19 were virus free. Since then, people returned to normal activities, without taking precautions. I learnt from a conversation with tailors at Mwenge shopping centre that the decreased demand meant they no longer produced the masks, returning to sewing the clothes popular before the virus' emergence.

In June I observed at Kariakoo market that very few people were wearing face masks. One informant at the market explained:

'Currently the business has perished. No one is asking for masks anymore. We have switched to another business.'

Street hawkers and small shop owners have also abandoned the mask and sanitiser business. Moreover, there is no longer water nor sanitisers for washing hands at shop entrances, as in previous months.

Insights and the near future

While short-lived, the mask and sanitiser business has reinforced in the city the importance of daily hygiene measures. However, the most compelling insight, we might argue, is the reality of a city marked by significant inequalities in access to health care and facilities.

The government has not released official statistics on COVID-19 since May 2010. However, during the opening of the general election campaign on 29 August 2020, President John Magufuli, standing again as the presidential candidate for the dominant ruling CCM party, declared the country **free from the virus**. This is in **contrast to nearby Kenya** where by September 2020 the cumulative number of COVID-19 patients reached 36,500. In the absence of official or reliable data in Tanzania, it becomes difficult to gauge the status of the pandemic in the country. Nevertheless, the decline of face mask and sanitiser business indicates a shift in public perception. Given the expected general election on 28 October 2020, electoral campaigns will bring together thousands of people, and the coming two months may offer new challenges for Dar es Salaam and the country at large.

Photo: A busy street in front of Kariakoo Market in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Credit: Mitchell Maher / International Food Policy Institute (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

About the author



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