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Tanzania's declining COVID-19 markets reflect the country's political messaging

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After presidential messages in Tanzania perpetuated ideas that COVID-19 has simply 'gone away', many Tanzanians no longer buy PPE and health-related business has contracted. Shauji Saidi Mpota explores how local markets reacted to national fears around COVID-19, drawing on shifting political messaging.

Compared to other areas, Tanzania's Lindi region has registered low rates of COVID-19 infections throughout the pandemic. Located on the country's periphery, Lindi is distant from Dar es salaam, Arusha and Mwanza where infection rates were reportedly higher, before the government stopped testing for the virus earlier in the year. While the region's low official rates could reflect the absence of testing facilities (tests administered were performed via the national laboratory in Dar es salaam), there is now a perception that COVID-19 poses a limited threat to Lindi's citizens.

The rise of COVID-19 businesses in Lindi

Earlier in 2020, the Tanzanian Ministry of Health emphasised that people should wear face masks and apply hand sanitisers to limit the spread of the virus, with no special emphasis placed on using any particular type of product. In Lindi, people often could not afford to buy surgical masks, instead using disposable surgical masks or ones locally sewn.

Despite bringing fears, COVID-19 thus presented new opportunities for businessmen to sell face masks and hand sanitisers, available in street pharmacies, mini supermarkets, small shops and from street hawkers in Lindi region. The latter have particularly taken to the trade, since their businesses continually adapt to changing market demands.

Many businessmen made profits from this new avenue for trade. Lindi's street hawkers could make 10,000-15,000 Tanzania shillings (£5) per day, and other businessmen made substantial profits. Many traders reported higher profits during the pandemic, because of this demand. According to a street hawker at Lindi bus terminal: 'At the apex of Coronavirus spread, especially from March to May, I was getting a good profit from selling face masks, known in Swahili as *Barakoa*, and hand sanitizers here. I could get as 10,000 Tanzania shillings and above per day as my profit.'

Declining fears and health protections

Since August, people in Lindi are less afraid of COVID-19. Speeches by president Magufuli and other government officials suggest that the rate of infection has declined nationally. In one of his speeches, **Magufuli announced**: 'we decided to face Coronavirus disease by putting God first, by so doing we have been able to solve this problem for large extent'. He then added, 'we have not only been able to reduce the spread of Coronavirus disease, but also to reduce its effects including economic ones.' Simultaneously, various government officials including Regional Commissioners such as the then Regional Commissioner of Dar es salaam, Paul Makonda, have emphasised that infection rates have declined, and that people should return to their usual activities. A saying in Swahili has been promoted by the government: 'Corona imepungua, tuchape kazi' ('Corona has declined, let us return to work').

Though there has yet to be an authoritative official statement on infections in Lindi, the messaging has had an effect on people's everyday lives. Despite some advice to the contrary, especially on social media, adherence to using protective measures has significantly declined. Many in Lindi have stopped using PPE, instead holding special prayers and using local medicines to prevent infection. Only few discuss the possibility of a second wave of COVID-19.

The fall of the face mask business

While declining perceptions of COVID-19 cases have come as a blessing to many Tanzanians, the aforementioned businessmen have lost valuable markets borne out of the state of emergency. Moreover, depending on an individual's investment, many are now unable to sell the stock they purchased during the early months. In Lindi town, one owner of big street pharmacy explained:

'During the height of Coronavirus spread it was difficult to travel frequently to Dar es salaam to buy medicines and other goods for my pharmacy. That being the case, I decided to buy enough face masks and hand sanitizers so that I could sell them for long. Unfortunately, the virus did not last longer. The decline of infection started at the time when I still had enough face masks and hand sanitizers that I have nowhere to sell today'.

The rise and fall of face masks and sanitiser business provides an interesting gauge to view local perceptions of risk and opportunity. As political messages have insisted that COVID-19 has gone away, so the adaptive sales of traders have changed.

Photo: President Magufuli. Credit: Paul Kagame, licensed under creative commons (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

About the author



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