



**Adapting research projects to the
COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences from
the Nairobi Risk Hub**

By Victoria Chengo & Joanes Atela

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges to the research community beyond the devastating impacts to livelihoods and economies across the globe. Most researchers are currently struggling to develop adaptive measures to facilitate the continuity of ongoing research activities, and at the same time identify the relatable opportunities from the pandemic.

The [Nairobi Risk Hub](#), part of the broader [Tomorrow's Cities](#) research project, is one of numerous donor funded research projects experiencing this adjustment. The UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) funded project is expected to undertake interdisciplinary research and inform disaster management in rapidly developing cities: Nairobi, Kathmandu, Istanbul and Quito. The vision of the Nairobi Risk Hub is specifically to generate research evidence geared towards helping the city of Nairobi move from crisis/emergency response to integrated, proactive urban planning to enhance disaster risk preparedness and management. The research puts specific focus on floods and fires as the most prevalent hazards in Nairobi, especially within the informal settlements, as

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well as other cascading hazards that affect the wellbeing of the residents. The COVID-19 pandemic thus becomes a research opportunity for the hub, as well as a bottleneck to the planned research activities designed to be achieved through the application of multidisciplinary research to establish an integrated evidence base on the city's leading risks and hazards, their drivers, institutional structures, and feasible disaster reduction measures that support pro-poor action planning.

The Nairobi Risk Hub plans involve a very ambitious research and policy action plan and learning agenda. More specifically, the critical path for the hub is premised on locally grounded research involving community engagements, ground measurements, and leveraging key insights to the Nairobi city-wide policy planning. This critical path enables the hub's work to directly and indirectly interact with the COVID-19 management processes including the impacts on research plans, but also presents new opportunities to inform strategic policy responses to the pandemic. Nairobi is one of Africa's main economic hubs with a large attraction of international trade and activities, but faced with numerous social, economic, environmental, and urban risk-related challenges that constrain the city's growth and resilience. Ultimately, understanding how the hub is reorganising itself and adopting to the ensuing COVID-19 related challenges and opportunities is an important element in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework. This article outlines the experiences of the Nairobi Risk Hub in this regard. The article also draws from the ongoing COVID-19 discussions and communications taking place at the overall Hub level on [mapping out the entry points for working within the context of COVID-19](#).

The COVID-19 situation in Nairobi

The first COVID-19 case in Kenya emerged from Nairobi on 13 March. Approximately two months since then, the city remains the country's epicentre for the disease, followed closely by the city of Mombasa (As of 9 May 2020, the number of confirmed cases in the country stood at 649, with 30 resultant deaths and 207 recoveries). Within these two cities, hotspot areas have already been identified and locked down as a policy strategy to prevent further spread of the disease. Of much interest to our research is how the pandemic is likely to impact the urban poor, and the policy response mechanisms that will best be applicable to alleviate these impacts.

Nairobi harbours a number of informal settlement areas which are known to shelter the poor and fragile communities who co-exist within dehumanizing conditions such as water,

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health and sanitation issues among many other problems. These areas are usually exposed to a large scale of risks and hazards that further constrain the livelihoods of many, and as it is already being reported, [life in the capital city's slums has become unbearable in light of COVID-19](#). One of the identified hotspot areas in Nairobi is an informal settlement area, Kawangware. However, the overall COVID-19 scenario in Kenya is still unfolding and at a relatively slow rate, presenting a large extent of uncertainty in a number of aspects.

What are the implications of COVID-19 to our research plans and capacity?

The impacts of COVID-19 on the Nairobi Risk Hub plans can be seen from four dimensions: i) thought re-orientation in assessing the COVID-19 impacts on work plans; ii) impacts on activity plans and sequencing; iii) impacts on personal and institutional capacity including psychological impacts; and iv) impacts on research quality.

The first perspective involves an impact assessment of the COVID-19 situation. The Nairobi research team, as well as the broader Tomorrow's Cities Hub has already embarked on an impact assessment process for the proposed work plan, drawing out a line between the pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 work plans. The teams are also defining the activities and deliverables that are; likely to be achieved, rearranged with minimal and significant impacts, or cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation. The time and human resources for undertaking the impact assessment draws additional budget and thought re-orientation beyond the initial research plans. For the Nairobi Risk Hub, more time and thought process has already been directed to re-planning the activities, re-adjusting the MEL framework and Gantt chart to reflect the changes, through continuous discussions and consultations with Hub management and partners. Ultimately, this directly translates to consequent deviations from the project budget as well as timelines, with additional research management costs.

Direct impacts on the activity plan and sequencing have also been identified. The Nairobi Risk Hub research aims to support partnership development, capacity building, participatory planning, and risk communication, which will involve fieldwork interactions through community & stakeholder engagement - workshops, focus group discussions, key informant interview and policy dialogues. The majority of these activities will be affected due to the apparent but necessary COVID-19 response interventions that the Kenyan government has put in place. Such restrictions include partial lock-downs, workplace closures, cancellation and restrictions of public gatherings and events, and restrictions on

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international and domestic travel. More direct implications of these measures include the cancellation/postponement of all field work activities, workshops and events. Overseas-based research partners will also be unable to travel to the country to carry out field visits. This necessitates the research teams to review and improvise alternative research methods away from the primary sources of data and information. Conducting remote research and desk study therefore becomes the explicitly viable methods at the moment. But then again, concerns on the quality and effectiveness of these remote research methods have also been raised. The development of baseline institutional, policy and risk management data inventories will however be achievable at the moment through archival research and utilization of previous studies.

The personal and ethical implications relate mainly to the psychological disorientation for both researchers and target communities. For the Hub researchers, working from home could potentially result in loss of momentum and disorientation, added pressure on communication (increased frequency of online meetings), concerns on team management and supervision that calls for regular monitoring and communication - not to mention having to induct new staff in these circumstances, and of course care responsibilities within family set-ups. These added pressures as well as the overall devastating COVID-19 circumstances could also have mental health implications on researchers. For the research communities, especially those within informal settlements, there is a wider ethical concern around psychological stability for engaging in research activities. While there is hope that research activities will immediately resume once the pandemic subsides, this might not be advisable and practical. It will be ethical to give the communities some time, at least three months post-pandemic, before engaging them in research activities to allow for psychological healing and preparedness necessary for objective participation in research. This again means that the research plan needs to be adaptive as possible to account for these ethical issues. Priorities have also shifted among individuals and institutions as well. For instance, one key impact and policy uptake partner, the Nairobi County Council Government team from the Department of Disaster Management and Coordination has had to redirect focus towards COVID-19 emergency response.

In terms of research quality, our experience appears to show some positive outcomes. The resultant cancellation of travel, workshops and field activities has meant that both senior and early career researchers spend more time reviewing existing research on various disaster management issues and the interlinkages across disciplines, as well as COVID-19.

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This is more strategic for the Nairobi Hub where research activities were just kicking off. Our team continues to learn more on research methods and insights that will strategically inform the post-COVID-19 activities. Linked to research progress, the local research team has utilized the lock-down opportunity to steer research discussions across the Hub researchers and the other researchers within the wider institution (ACTS), Universities and other Think Tanks across Africa. Through a platform dubbed the Africa Research and Impact Network (ARIN), coordinated by the Nairobi City Lead, researchers engage in weekly research discussions focussing on research methods, conceptual frameworks and policy linkages. Through the platform, we also invite various Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), climate change and sustainability experts to make presentations and also critique the Hub's research work. Ultimately, this discussion will continue beyond the pandemic and will help a great deal strengthening the attention to research, in a continent where issues such as fundraising and other institutional challenges easily deter research excellence.

Lessons and next steps

Even though COVID-19 presents both challenges and opportunities, the former outweighs the latter, but with useful lessons to be learned. Having to develop and take ongoing research forward amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has opened up new ideas in which researchers can adapt to varied realities and uncertainties. Most researchers did not see this experience coming. There is a critical need therefore for researchers to incorporate contingency planning into the research development processes, in order to adequately prepare for similar occurrences in the future. This entails adaptive measures that evaluate and influence pathways to the intended impacts of research projects. Capacity building techniques for engaging, motivating and supporting research teams as well as study participants and stakeholders in the event of such realities could also be given a closer look. Ultimately, it is not business as usual for the research community across the globe, and more efforts and resources will certainly be required to start back up into the post COVID-19 phase.