COVID-19 and street vending in urban Papua New Guinea

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused havoc in almost all sectors in every economy of the world. This has notably put a strain on countries around the world to adjust and tighten up existing policies and strategies to help combat this pandemic in every possible way to restore normalcy. Countries around the world are struggling to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is no exception and has had to take drastic actions to prevent the spread of the virus.

Given our limited access to vital information especially the vast majority of our rural population, inadequate medical facilities and health care professionals and not to mention our struggling economy, if hits hard we are doomed for disaster. We applaud the government’s effort in doing its best in this time of crisis in containing the pandemic at the national level. We should remember the extent of social and economic burden placed upon the vast majority of vulnerable population relying heavily on the informal sector for a living in PNG. Unlike in rural areas where people have access to land for growing their own food, low income and unemployed households in urban areas depend entirely on informal jobs and street vending for their livelihoods.

Impact of COVID-19 on street vendors

It is important to note that street vending forms an integral part of the workforce in PNG and employs majority of our urban population in the country. Though it is not often acknowledged and accepted, street vending is virtually here to stay and will continue to be the source of income for most of our urban population over time. Merely, due to incursion of urban migration, lack of formal education and low level of employment opportunities available in the country.

As noticed after the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in PNG, the national government took a decisive step to declare a 14-day national State of Emergency (SoE) to lock down the country; the first of its kind in the country’s history. This resulted in limiting the movement of people, public transport and operations of various small to medium businesses.

The SoE allows for essential services like shops, healthcare, fuel stations and banking services to operate with strict observation of social distancing and other COVID-19 preventive measures. However, it is really a difficult time for those who rely on the informal sector to sustain their living. The further extension of the State of Emergency for another two months to detect and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country has left a hollow and bitter feeling for most urban dwellers that rely heavily on street vending and other informal economic activities for survival in the towns and cities of PNG.

We have now seen closure of roadside markets, sale of cooked food near office buildings and common spontaneous market sites in the suburbs that provide fresh produce to the working class in the urban areas. This has now placed an economic burden on many of the street vendors’
household income and their livelihood. If this is not adequately addressed with appropriate policies and mechanisms in place, it is more likely to lead to undesirable social unrest, vandalism and increase in criminal conducts.

For instance, as reported in The National newspaper by Clifford Faiparik indicated that a street vendor who normally makes around K700 daily by selling cooked food around Gordons industrial area in Port Moresby is now making K100 a day since the lock down was imposed. Another case was also reported in The National newspaper of a resident in Port Moresby who has been selling firewood for living since 2007 also expressed disappointment as the lock down has dramatically affected his daily earnings from K150 to K70 and he is unable to adequately cater for his family’s needs. More so, another case also reported in the National in Lae was of a dinghy carrying 70 bags of betelnuts worth K17,000 was seized by the Police and the contents disposed into the sea. Social media reports also affirm police brutality and displacement of many unfortunate street vendors who are trying to make their living during this time of crisis.

The mounting pressure has now left a huge financially burden for many vendors to meet the needs of their family and it is also affecting their psychological wellbeing in this time of crisis. As highlighted by Aaron Hayes reported in The National newspaper that mental health of low-income families is at risk. If the SoE continues to prolong with limited foresight and appropriate mechanisms in place to mitigate the impact on the welfare and wellbeing of the vast majority of our people surviving in the informal economy can result in an unprecedented social and public upheaval in the country.

**The way forward**

In adhering to the recent announcement of the National Government’s call to relax the SoE measures, it is important that the following measures are taken to ease the burden placed on the urban population relying on street vending for their livelihoods:

- Provide designated locations for street vendors to sell their products or services.

- Install portable water basin or supply appropriate kits to maintain hygiene in designated street markets.

- Impose strong measures on maintaining social distancing at popular street vending locations.

- Impose strong penalties for breaching of any COVID-19 preventive measures established in urban areas.

- The above interventions will allow everyone to work together in this time of crisis so that no one is left behind in this fight against the pandemic.
Conclusion

The actions taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has already affected the vast majority of people who depend on street vending for their livelihoods. Appropriate and realistic measures are needed to ensure that the welfare and well-being of these people is protected.