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COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS PERCEIVED BY RESIDENTS OF INFORMAL-BUILT AREAS SEGMENT OF PORT MORESBY

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Key Points

- Lockdown measure was implemented in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to minimise the spread of COVID-19.
- The lockdown resulted in the loss of livelihoods of residents of informal-built areas (settlements) and rendered some of them homeless.
- Most residents of settlements interviewed perceived COVID-19 as a hoax, response team was not well organised and some members of the police force were too aggressive.
- The residents interviewed had lost a total of more than K5.6 million in six months following the first lockdown.
- Most residents have not been able to cope with the new normal way of life that was triggered by COVID-19.
- Lockdown can work well if suitable communication strategy is used, program that reduces the impact of lockdown on livelihoods is implemented and members of the police handles civilians with more dignity.

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS PERCEIVED BY RESIDENTS OF INFORMAL-BUILT AREAS SEGMENT OF PORT MORESBY

By Eugene E. Ezebilo

This paper focuses on findings from the recent research conducted by Eugene Ezebilo of Papua New Guinea National Research Institute (PNG NRI) on sustainable upgrade of informal-built areas, known as settlements, and COVID-19 pandemic coping strategy. The research is based on interviews with 195 residents of 10 settlements in Port Moresby. In this paper, emphasis is placed on how the residents perceive COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on their livelihoods and whether they have coped with the new normal way of life. Most of the residents that were interviewed perceived the pandemic as a malicious deception created for some dubious government officials to divert public funds for their own use. Some reported that COVID-19 pandemic was poorly managed by the response team and others claimed that police brutality mar the already tensed situation. A few residents claimed that the pandemic was well managed. Concerning the impact of lockdown on the residents' livelihoods, most lost 50 percent of their income, some lost their jobs and others were rendered homeless because they could not pay their house rents.

Ninety-five percent of the residents interviewed have not been able to cope with the new normal way of life created by COVID-19 pandemic and only five percent have coped. They reported that they have not benefited in any way from the Government of Papua New Guinea (GoPNG) economic stimulus package. Most health workers do not have adequate personal protective equipment. In order for the management of COVID-19 pandemic to work well in settlements, it is necessary to boost the pandemic awareness campaign by using suitable communication strategy. The delivery of COVID-19 intervention programs such as loans to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) being implemented by GoPNG as stimulus package should be based on proven mechanisms. There is a need for an assessment of COVID-19 pandemic awareness that was conducted by the Department of Health to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. The distribution of funds meant for economic stimulus package should be monitored strictly and an effective evaluation mechanism adopted.

What is informal-built areas?

Informal-built areas, often known as settlements in PNG, are areas where inhabitants do not often have security of tenure for land (proper land titles) or houses where they live (UN-Habitat, 2015). Houses are constructed without proper building plans and the areas often lack basic social infrastructure such as potable piped-borne water, electricity, sewerage and good road networks. The areas may

also lack services such as healthcare facilities, schools and police stations. In some cases, houses are constructed in geographically and environmentally sensitive areas. Driving forces behind the proliferation of settlements include population growth, rural-urban migration, inadequate affordable housing, weak planning and urban management, displacement caused by conflicts, natural disasters and climate change (UN-Habitat, 2015). Governments of some countries often find it difficult to acknowledge the presence of settlements. Upgrading settlements through land tenure regularisation and provision of infrastructure is widely accepted as preferable to relocation because it helps to sustain social and economic networks which are vital for livelihoods (Devas et al., 2004). There have been discussions by the National Capital District Commission (NCDC) concerning upgrading some settlements in Port Moresby.

COVID-19 pandemic response strategy in Papua New Guinea

Several potential measures that can be taken to tackle COVID-19 pandemic exist (Regalado, 2020). These include the lockdown that aims at restricting freedom of movement of people to limit the spread of COVID-19; vaccinate people to protect everyone, however, it takes time to develop a vaccine; and wait until nearly everyone is infected and immunity developed (herd immunity method). However, PNG adopted the lockdown strategy, which has also been implemented in most countries.

Following the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in PNG on 20 March 2020, GoPNG through the National Executive Council declared a 14-day State Of Emergency (SOE) and to lockdown the country from 24 March to 7 April 2020. The primary reason for the lockdown measure was to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 in the country. However, the Parliament approved the extension of the SOE by two months in its Special Session that was held on 2nd April 2020. At the end of the two months, the SOE was extended for another two weeks before it was lifted.

In order to boost aggregate demand for goods and services, GoPNG announced an economic stimulus package of K5.7 billion or US\$1.63 billion (Ling-Stuckey, 2020). Of the K5.7 billion, 10.5 percent (K600 million) was meant as relief for businesses and households in the form of a three-month loan repayment holiday; 8.8 percent (K500 million) was earmarked as superannuation measures aimed at allowing members to access their savings. There was also K600 million (10.5 percent) extra budget support for agriculture, businesses, households, health and security.

In terms of payment of tax associated with businesses, the Internal Revenue Commission (IRC) provided opportunity for potential extension for lodgement of corporate income tax (KMPG, 2020). There was also the opportunity for business owners to pay corporate income tax and personal income tax in instalments until 30 June 2020.

The National Pandemic Act 2020 (ACT No. 8) which was aimed at responding to pandemic, pestilence or public health emergency was adopted on 12 June 2020. Several pandemic measures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 were issued by Commissioner David Manning, the Controller of the National Pandemic Response. However, as people in the country adopted the new way of life such as use of face-mask and social distancing, confirmed cases of COVID-19 went up in Port Moresby. A 14-day lockdown starting from 28 July 2020 was declared in the city by the Controller of the National Pandemic Response to curtail further spread of the virus.

As the COVID-19 confirmed cases dropped to the barest minimum, the pandemic measures were revoked by the Controller on 3rd October 2020. However, people were advised to take responsibility of their actions by adopting the new normal way of life created by COVID-19.

At the time of writing this paper, there were more than 40.5 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 all over the world, more than 1.1 million deaths and more than 30.3 million recovered (Worldometers, 2020). For the case of PNG, there were 588 confirmed cases, seven deaths and 546 patients recovered.

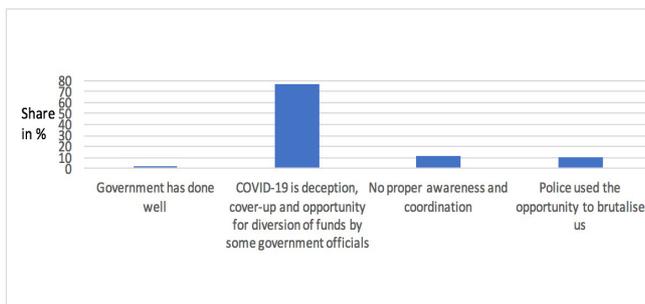
COVID-19 pandemic and response by GoPNG as perceived by settlement residents

Of the 195 settlement residents who were interviewed in 10 settlements (Bush Wara, 8-Mile, Joyce Bay, Kipo, Mautana, Ogoniva, Ranuguri, Talai, Taurama and Vanagi), 77 percent of the respondents perceived COVID-19 pandemic as a hoax and an opportunity created by some government officials to divert public funds for their own use (Figure 1):

COVID-19 is fake, a scam by some government officials who used it to get more money for themselves and make us suffer using the police to control us.

COVID-19 was a cover-up for the government to access money and it has affected our livelihoods.

Figure 1: Perception of COVID-19 and GoPNG response in relation to share of respondents in %



Only 13.3 percent of the people interviewed tend to perceive COVID-19 pandemic as real, of which only 1.5 percent reported that GoPNG did well in tackling the pandemic. However, 11.8 percent reported that there were no proper COVID-19 awareness and that the Government's response to the pandemic was poorly coordinated:

Government did a good job in handling the COVID-19 and in having testing sites. Well done GoPNG for how the pandemic is being managed.

Government response to COVID-19 was not coordinated properly. A lot of funds was provided to tackle the disease but there was not enough personal protection equipment for health workers.

Some of the respondents (9.7 percent) complained bitterly about police brutality during the SOE:

The government failed to manage the police and they destroyed our markets and stole our money.

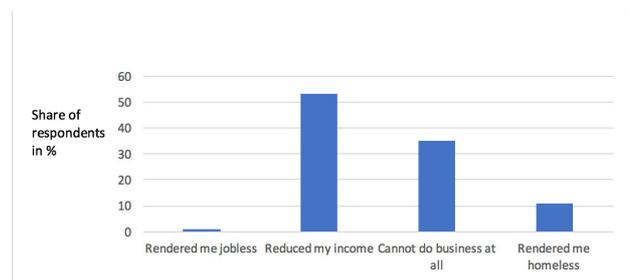
No proper coordination and police is abusing everyone.

The concerns raised by the respondents suggest that settlement residents might have been left behind in the course of conducting COVID-19 pandemic awareness campaign. COVID-19 response measures appear not to have considered the interest of settlement residents properly when it was being developed.

Impact of lockdown measures on the livelihoods of settlement residents

Though lockdown measures were implemented as a way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in PNG, it had adverse impact on the livelihood of settlement residents. More than 50 percent of the respondents lost portion of their income (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Impact of lockdown on settlements residents in relation to share of respondents in %

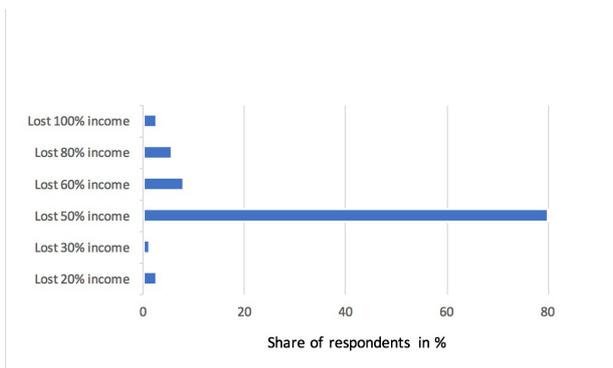


As some settlement residents' livelihoods are strongly linked to informal business activities, the lockdown has restricted them from doing their normal businesses. Of the 195 respondents, 35 percent could not do their businesses at all, which must have restricted their households access to basic necessities such as food, housing and clothing. In fact, some of the respondents could not pay their house rents and were rendered homeless. Approximately 11 percent of the respondents reported that they were rendered homeless as

a result of the lockdown. Only one percent was rendered jobless. This indicates that settlement residents are resilient and that, with appropriate support they can adapt to various situations they may find themselves in.

In terms of income lost by settlement residents, 80 percent of the respondents reported that they lost 50 percent of their income (Figure 3). Considering that most people who reside in settlements are often seen as the poor and disadvantaged, the result revealed that settlement residents must have been hit harder by the lockdowns.

Figure 3: Impact of lockdown measures on income of settlement residents in relation to share of respondents in %

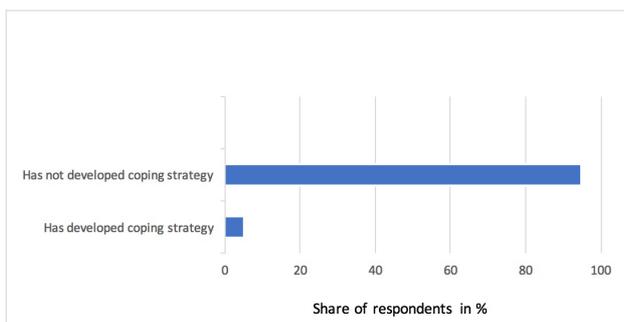


Eight percent of the respondents lost 60 percent of their income while two and half percent lost all their income (Figure 3). In terms of the total value of money that the households of the 195 respondents lost as a result of the impact of the lockdown measures, they lost an average of K435,825 (US\$124,521) each fortnight. This corresponds to K5,665,725 (US\$1,618,779) for six months starting from when the first lockdown was implemented on 24 March 2020 to September 2020 when the research reported in this paper was conducted.

Settlement residents' coping strategy for new normal way of life

In terms of coping strategy being adapted to cope with the new normal way of life created by COVID-19, approximately 95 percent of the respondents reported that they have not been able to cope with the current situation (Figure 4). Five percent reported that they have adapted to the new normal by using face-mask, maintaining social distancing and personal hygiene.

Figure 4: Coping strategy in relation to share of respondents in %



Considering that some of the settlement residents live in a congested environment and that some are unemployed, they may find it difficult to maintain social distancing and afford face-mask:

Most of us who live in settlements have not been able to adapt to the new normal way of life triggered by COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot afford face-mask and at the same time we live in a congested environment which makes it difficult to practise social distancing.

Lessons learnt from GoPNG response to COVID-19 pandemic

Several lessons that can be drawn from the handling of COVID-19 pandemic in settlements segment of Port Moresby include the following:

- Most settlement residents think that COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax. This indicates that the extent of awareness about COVID-19 pandemic in settlements appear to be inadequate. It may be that the mode of awareness campaign that was used in settlements was not appropriate.
- Response to COVID-19 pandemic in the settlements appear not to be well coordinated. Considering that settlements segment of a city has its own specific characteristics, it appears that the design and implementation of COVID-19 response in the settlements did not reflect these characteristics.
- Most settlement residents whose livelihoods are strongly linked to informal activities were hit harder by lockdown measures. Some of the residents are traders, transporters and handyman who depend on daily income for livelihood. However, the lockdown which restricted the movement of people and the shutdown of some open markets robbed these group of people their source of livelihoods.
- Some settlement residents appear to have been brutalised by some members of our good disciplined Police Force whose mandate is to protect the public. It was expected that members of the Police Force should consider the already lamentable situation in carrying out their duties. However, some of the respondents raised concerns of brutality of some members of the Police Force. This is supported by the findings of Kopel (2020) in her study of the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods in the informal economy.
- The COVID-19 pandemic Response Team require an effective and efficient monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanism that can be used to assess activities of all key stakeholders of the team. It appears that the monitoring and feedback mechanisms have not work well in the settlement segment of Port Moresby. This may be that the design of the mechanisms does not reflect the characteristics of settlements.
- Most settlement residents may find it difficult to adapt to the new normal way of life such as wearing a face-mask, maintaining social distancing and personal hygiene. This is because some of the residents lost their jobs or their income have been reduced which might make it difficult for them to

afford face-masks for themselves and members of their families. Some of them live in an already crowded environment, which makes it difficult for them to practice social distancing.

Potential ways to address concerns raised by settlement residents

- Settlements have specific characteristics which is different from that of formal-built areas. For monitoring and feedback mechanisms to work well in settlements, they must reflect the characteristics of settlements. A well-developed feedback mechanism will assist a group such the COVID-19 Response Team in identifying the areas that the team has done well and areas that require more efforts. In this case, the feedback mechanism would have captured most the concerns raised by settlement residents, which would have been addressed by the Team.
- The adverse impacts of lockdown especially on people whose livelihoods are strongly linked to informal activities and non-essential services should be considered before implementation. An initiative or a program that can minimise the adverse impact of lockdown measure should have been put in place to alleviate the sufferings of informal operators. In some countries which have well-developed social welfare system, citizens received food stamps and unemployment benefits to sustain them during lockdowns. Some countries that does not have a well-developed social welfare systems distributed food to disadvantaged and less privileged people. Some of the foods that were distributed by the governments of these countries were provided by the private sector as their own contribution.
- Awareness campaign meant for settlements must be conducted using the modes that are suitable for settlements. It is important for leaders of settlements to be involved in the planning and implementation of awareness. This will help in legitimising the awareness campaign by the leaders, which should increase the acceptance of the messages associated with the awareness by settlement residents.
- Members of the Disciplined Police Force should always undergo training and briefings on how to improve human relations in effective and efficient manner when keeping law and order especially when handling an already aggravated situation. For instance, before police officers move to the settlements, they should be thoroughly briefed and reminded of the need to handle civilians with respect.
- The government should consider providing face-masks for free or at subsidised rates to less privileged and the disadvantaged people. Though all the COVID-19 pandemic measures have been revoked in PNG, people still need to adapt to the new normal way of life. As some settlement residents cannot afford face-masks for themselves and their families, government should consider collaborating with the private sector to provide face-masks to the less privileged and disadvantaged

people.

- It is acknowledged that GoPNG did a good job by earmarking K5.7 billion as economic stimulus packages to boost the economy and portion of the package is meant for SMEs. It is important to establish initiatives that can be used to assist informal business operators with the aim of migrating them to micro enterprises in the long-term.

Concluding remarks

This paper provides highlights for the need to consider the potential impacts of a measure aimed at minimising the spread of a public health disease on livelihoods of people before implementation. Lockdown measure was implemented in PNG to minimise the spread of COVID-19. However, it crippled most activities of informal business operators and consequently destroyed the source of livelihoods of some settlement residents. In fact, some settlements residents were rendered homeless because they could not afford house rent. Settlement residents that were interviewed during our research raised several concerns that are worth noting. The concerns include that they think that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax; the management of response to the COVID-19 including awareness were not well coordinated; and that they have not been able to cope with the new normal way of life. This raises question on whether Department of Health and other agencies responsible for conducting COVID-19 awareness considered the characteristics of settlements in the design of communication strategy for the pandemic. It also raises question concerning whether the COVID-19 Response Team considered the adverse impact of lockdown on the livelihoods of informal business and other business operators before implementing it.

Though GoPNG provided economic stimulus packages to revamp the economy, it is not clear whether informal business operators were also considered in the packages. In the course of implementing a measure that promote public health, we should also consider how to minimise its impacts on the economy, especially on the livelihoods of the less privileged and the disadvantaged. A program that has the potential to reduce the impacts can be implemented and an effective awareness campaign which is more suitable for the settlements should be adopted. It is necessary to provide effective feedbacks, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms so that improvement can be made in the areas that the Response Team are lagging behind. Considering that some people lost their jobs and the business of others have not been stable, it is necessary to support them so that they can be able to adapt to the new normal by providing them face-masks either for free or at subsidised rates. Findings from this paper will assist public health planners and managers in the development of effective communication strategy by considering strategy most suitable for residents of settlements. It will also assist decision makers in the allocation of resources by considering people that are hit harder by a pandemic in developing intervention strategy.

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