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## Citizens' Perception of Leadership during COVID-19 Times in Mombasa, Kenya

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### Introduction

Since the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, political leadership has been put under test all over the world. Mombasa in Kenya is not an exception, a county where leadership involves controlling the spread of the coronavirus while simultaneously reviving the economy. Mombasa County, situated in the Indian Ocean coastal strip, is a historical trade hub with a Swahili coastal history. Mombasa, the second-largest city in Kenya, depends on the tourism sector, the port, the coastal crop production, and the mineral economy. The partial lockdown of the county, border closures and suspension of international flights had drastic economic consequences. In this context, the county government and public agencies faced the dilemma of making decisions on critical issues where scarce resources have to be prioritized. In these crisis circumstances, the disparities between demand and supply of public resources are much bigger than usual as the situation remains unclear and volatile, and the time to think, act, consult, and gain acceptance for political decisions is highly restricted.<sup>1</sup> Decision-making skills during the pandemic entailed making hard decisions that involved value trade-offs and political risks as decisions were made along with the public health safety lens where the political risks entailed community dissent over the Mombasa

<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication, County Official, Mombasa.

County imposed mitigation measures (Muraya, 2020). Leadership and decision-making ended up tackling issues that were not faced previously, challenging governance in an unknown COVID-19 reality. The pandemic ushers the broader effects on governance by overburdening the country and the county's basic functions, with implications on socio-political communal cohesion, exacerbating corruption scandals, reinventing community activism and local leadership in communities. This article surveys this wide spectrum of effects on decision-making and leadership in Mombasa. It is written, taking into consideration the uncertain scope and severity of the crisis at a time—August 2020—when Kenya's counties opened up their borders to relieve socio-economic stresses engulfing them. As the pandemic penetrates lower-income cohorts and the fragile local economic structures, it will likely have even more profound and unpredictable effects on the social welfare of the Kenyan populace.

The article was shaped by semi-structured interviews conducted during the period of May to July 2020 in Mombasa. A wide spectrum of individuals was contacted based on their voluntariness to participate in the research. Research methods varied from direct meetings to online platforms. Key informants included community mobilizers, NGO personnel, youth leaders, women leaders, county officials, academics, and community members. Sixteen individuals were interviewed online with interview durations ranging from 45 minutes to one hour. Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants in their respective workplaces and homes, observing social distancing and wearing of masks as per the COVID-19 prevention regulations. Twelve questionnaires were administered with those who preferred to write their responses. Three focused group discussions were conducted online with university youth. Meanwhile, research assistants also updated on specific locations where the pandemic was on the rise using observations on community members and their responses during specific events such as the county food distributions towards the low-income households as well as everyday life during complete lockdowns in localities such as the Old Town neighbourhood in Mombasa. Secondary materials in terms of media accounts and organizational reports also shaped the study. A caveat of the study is that the responses were taken during the evolving stages of the pandemic, where rapid changes in the situation made it difficult to measure an overall impact such as decision-making during the lockdown of the county and after the lockdown.

## Navigating reactive, proactive and populist decision-making in the COVID-19 era

On 13 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in Kenya was reported from a Kenyan citizen who arrived from abroad. Consequently, cases were being reported from Nairobi and Mombasa. By 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Kenyan government imposed stringent measures to curb COVID-19 such as self-quarantines for people arriving from abroad, closure of schools, working from homes except for essential services, encouraged cashless transactions, emphasized regular washing of hands and sanitizers, measures for congressional meetings on places of worship, weddings, malls, and offices. Since its inception, the Mombasa County government has been versatile in responding to the outbreak, with effective coordination

between the national and county governments in COVID-19 mitigation measures: refurbishing hospitals (Rahimtullah private, Lady Grigg Maternity Wing of Coast General Hospital, Technical University of Mombasa) as isolation facilities; and, the launch of mass contact free testing booths to protect health care workers (CoG Web, 2020). The Mombasa County government went along with difficult policies such as the county lockdowns and curfew regulations made at the national level in an attempt to flatten the COVID-19 curve (Kenya Subsidiary Legislation, 2020). However, delayed funding from the national government did force the county government to look for alternative budgeting from other funds and rely on donors and the private sector. Governor Hassan Ali Joho, the Executive Head of Mombasa County since 2013, earned nationwide praise for his proactive response to the pandemic and its effects (Otieno and Mudi, 2020). Dancan Sanya, a 23-year-old Nyali resident described Governor Joho's efforts as timely and worthwhile. Similarly, George Odhiambo, a resident from Tudor, appraised the governor's efforts in mobilizing the private sector for food distributions among the most vulnerable cohorts in Mombasa. Further county initiatives included increasing facilities to be used as isolation wards, and raising awareness on the outbreak, and distributing free masks to the public.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic raised tough policies embedded in questions such as 'what can the county forgo during this pandemic towards mitigating the spread of COVID-19'? A key decision was movement restrictions and mobility to minimize individual exposure to the virus. A good example is the implementation of the safe distancing policy of 1.5 meters in the ferry use, a crucial means of transport for Mombasa residents.<sup>3</sup> Dusk to dawn curfew was implemented from 16 May and extended again from 6 June 2020 by the Kenyan government. This curtailed movement for residents of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kwale, and Kilifi as COVID infections soared in these counties (CGTN, 2020). On 17 May, Mombasa recorded the highest numbers of 39 affected individuals in a day (Mueni, 2020). By the beginning of June, Mombasa had a caseload of 350 COVID-19 affected individuals while 22 individuals had lost their lives. The Port of Mombasa, Likoni, and Changanwe were emerging hotbeds for the virus in Mombasa where mass testing was rolled out (Mudi, 2020). In 2 July, the County recorded 1520 positive cases (Cece and Atieno, 2020) and 2230 positive cases by 24 August 2020 (KTN News, 2020), which resulted in the need for reactive and proactive measures towards the increasing COVID-19 numbers to reduce further spread of communal transmissions. As numbers increased, the human rights lobby group—the Commission for Human Rights and Justice—joined the call by the Governor to advocate for total lockdown due to the flouting of anti-corona virus mitigation measures (Otieno, 2020).

## Balancing the reality of extreme poverty *versus* COVID-19 transmissions

Existential concerns were tied to livelihood and unemployment, as restricting movement and forcing people to stay home challenged the livelihoods of many households. The real

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Communication, Mary Juma, Mombasa.

<sup>3</sup> Personal Communication, County Official, Mombasa.

dilemma was in balancing the reality of extreme poverty versus transmission control in Mombasa, where the stake was the heightened risk of hunger and starvation. The county government was the closest to the Mombasa *wananchi* (citizens in Swahili) hence had to navigate through the dilemma of balancing decisions, where measures should maximize benefit and minimize harm for the majority of their constituency,<sup>4</sup> as during the closure of the Kongowea Market (Mwangi, 2020) and the lockdown of the Old Town (BBC, 2020). Balancing COVID-19 responses in resource-limited settings in specific sub-counties in Mombasa against the underlying reality of poverty, unemployment, and poor health care systems was not easy. This was evidenced with burgeoning protests in the Old Town and Kisauni neighbourhoods asking for remedial action from the County Government (Mwangi, 2020). The inability to protect public services and individuals from the worst effects of the coronavirus in the struggling economy made the county dependent on development aid and loans. Major loans were granted from the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the European Union. These loans were aimed at the infected and the at-risk population, medical and emergency personnel, testing, tracking, and medical facilities. A ward<sup>5</sup> administrator explained that almost 60% of Mombasa population was either poor or near the poverty line, with looming unemployment and residents living in informal settlements. Most of the informal settlements are home to daily labourers in the *juakali* (informal) sector<sup>6</sup> with low or irregular pay. Thus, many inclined to joblessness and were further trapped within the vicious cycle of poverty. There were worrying concerns about the propensity of low incomes aiding young people to resort to violence such as joining gang activities or extremist networks in the coastal region. Hassan, a youth in Kisauni, explained that many breadwinners had lost their jobs or were on the verge of losing their jobs. Families living below the poverty line rarely prioritize COVID-19 protection measures over their already dwindling incomes. Hence reluctance and protests when the national government and the Mombasa Governor encouraged people to stay and work at home. Rehma Musa, a resident from Old Town, described the Old Town protests against COVID-19 measures as mainly an outcome of livelihood concerns. As she says, key sentiments during the protests were that 'it was better to die of the Coronavirus than hunger.' Ali, a 26-year-old resident from Old Town, explained that the daily waged earners feared they may no longer be able to feed their families during the lockdown:

When the Governor asked the residents of Old Town to go for testing, very few turned up for the testing. Some did not believe in the Coronavirus, or looked at the issue as another outbreak of common flu. Some also looked at the issue from a religious angle, where they considered it was an attack on their religion and culture as it was during the month of Ramadan, and it was cultural to pray and fast together. Hence, the push for social distancing, mosque closure and the lockdown of the Old Town due to the increasing number of cases made residents uneasy with the decisions, especially ascertained by their Governor on the COVID-19 safeguarding measures. The Governor had to start taking the test himself so that the residents will follow his example. However, the reception towards the safeguarding measures was highly resented with residents

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<sup>4</sup> Personal Communication, County Official, Mombasa.

<sup>5</sup> A ward is the smallest electoral division in Kenya, many wards forming one constituency.

<sup>6</sup> Notably informal groups of artisanal, small scale crafts, textiles, etc.

protesting as it affected their livelihoods as well. Some residents also sneaked from the area using porous channels to carry out their daily businesses.

The Old Town protests revealed how leadership and governance faced the hurdle of community resentment in trying to adjust with the evolving COVID-19's empirically driven process. Execution of such policy implementation in the field often faced resentment as responses stepped into the private-public dichotomy of the lives of the people. This was mainly due to the lack of communication between the county and the general public in making decisions, the hasty decision making with regard to ordinary people's daily constraints and capacity to adjust, lack of consultation of the civil society, and immediate use of police force rather than information and education in the early steps of the measure. Hamad Abu, a 46-year-old daily ferry user, explained the difficulties encountered during the initial phase of the curfew as the result of a hasty decision by the policymakers:

The ferry is the only option for people like us who commute from work in Mombasa to home in Ukunda on a daily basis. When the curfew was imposed at 7 pm with no proper guidelines and understanding of our lives, it made it difficult for us to adjust to the changes. The ferry users protested and it ended miserably as some of us were beaten by the police. All this is because of the lack of awareness and planning. People should have been made aware of the Coronavirus, and measures need to be imposed gradually as we also need time to change our work timings. We don't have many ferries. So we have to queue here before the onset of the curfew times.

A ward administrator insisted on the need for the voice of the poor to be given more weight in the negotiation to prevent slippage into impoverishment and vulnerability in the already depleted health care services. The Emergency Household Relief and Nutrition Project<sup>7</sup> was set to ensure residents were cushioned during the lockdown. While the food relief support was commendable, Rehma Musa, a resident in Old Town, explained that the food relief did not reach the right people, as those assisted were not the real poor who were actually the most affected. There were very critical opinions, such as Samuel Mwai for who blamed the county food distributions—also referred to as the 'Governor Joho food packs' by residents—were biased and only for the favoured people based on kinships. This was ascertained by those involved in the food distribution programme. Hamed, a young volunteer from the food distribution programme, explained that the response towards the poor was an immediate need, hence the lack of time in selecting households and the limited distributing food packages. As the selections were done by local administrators, there was the possibility of favouritism in adding known people to the food distribution lists. Episodes of corruption clouded the real effectiveness of the relief provisions (Capital News, 2020a).

## Cascading Policy Decisions

Robert Otieno, a 30-year-old finance professional, explained how residents were expecting policymakers to reduce uncertainty and provide a straightforward and authoritative

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<sup>7</sup> The County Emergency Household Relief and Nutrition Support Programme aimed to cushion vulnerable households from COVID-19 effects. In phase I, the Mombasa County distributed food to 55,000 households. The phase II of the programme were targeting more than 55,000 households and were to reach sub-counties: Jomvu, Mvita, Nyali, Changamwe, Kisauni and Likoni. The programme is implemented in conjunction with civil rights groups and the Kenya Red Cross (Mghenyi, 2020).

account of what was going on, why it was happening, and what needed to be done in the COVID-19 context. First, according to him, the policymakers need to make sense of this new outbreak and formulate a strategy of communication for different sections of the communities in their constituency. Next, the policymakers must negotiate with their constituencies and their voters to define the new situation. In terms of an outbreak, this means both addressing the situation to mitigate its negative outputs (for both the disease and the non-disease) and reducing the leadership's exposure to public criticism within the county as well as nationally. If they are not successful, their decisions may not be understood nor respected. Unfortunate incidents such as the clashes between the ferry users and the police revealed how hasty decisions led to outraged criticism by some users (Capital News, 2020b).



Wall Paintings in Buxton, Mombasa. Source: *Daily Nation*, 27 April 2020.

A Mombasa County official explained that for the public authorities to provide correct information on the pandemic was a Herculean task. Public officers struggled with the mountains of raw data in the form of reports, rumours, and events that are quickly amassed when something extraordinary happens, all the more so as the COVID-19 happens to be a highly versatile and changing virus, with striking different symptoms on people. Articulating this empirically ascertained information of the situation requires a major public relation effort, yet often hindered by confusion, mythological beliefs, and panic by the audience. People whose lives are deeply affected tend to be anxious or stressed. Moreover, they do not necessarily see the national government as their ally and preexisting distrust of government rooted in the postcolonial history of Kenya does not evaporate in times of the COVID-19 crisis. Apart from public leaders, activists and those of positions and

interests are likely to espouse various alternative definitions of the situation and advocate different courses of action for the pandemic. This makes leaders maneuver difficult positions in trying to frame the pandemic and its outcomes, sometimes conflicting with the others. Patrick, a youth from Tudor, explained that awareness-raising efforts and activities such as wall painting, media briefing and posters were viewed by some residents in Mombasa as a populist stance on a personal publicity campaign by the Governor. Yet others viewed it as a worthwhile attempt by a proactive Governor striving to mitigate the COVID-19 virus spread (Otieno and Mudi, 2020).

Furthermore, awareness of the epidemic should be tied to the socio-cultural context, for a response towards COVID-19 operates within the socially constructed conceptions of disasters or epidemics and culturally appropriate ways to deal with them. An academic from the Technical University of Mombasa, Ndenyele Omalenge, considered the COVID-19 responses as emulating copy-paste methods from East Asia. According to him, contact tracing did assist in the prevention, however the need for awareness and applicability of the process necessitated cultural and social compatible traditional knowledge. For example, communication systems on awareness raising on the pandemic can utilize community engagement efforts with community elders, and community opinion leaders such as traditional leaders, religious leaders in local structures, where they take responsibilities for their communities. The West African examples from epidemics such as Ebola prevention measures via community engagement (Health Communication Capacity Collaborative, 2017) are lessons that can be emulated in the present COVID-19 response.

## Community Mobilization and Local Leadership

Local level leadership and civil society organization responses were seen by residents as the silver linings of the frontline pandemic mitigation especially in deprived isolated communities. Mobilization efforts by community-based organizations, health activists, women and youth groups, and civic groups working on the frontline against the pandemic reinforce democratic vitality at the local levels.<sup>8</sup> Their vitality has given hope for marginalized citizens, activating informal support networks in the community, raising awareness, resources, finances, and advocating for prompt and effective government responses towards the pandemic. In Mombasa County, women leaders such as Shamsa Fadhil carried out many awareness-raising campaigns for COVID-19 on the use of masks, hand washing as well as distributions for needy communities, working hard to reach vulnerable communities, for instance in Kwanoti village and Muoroto slums in Jomvu.

There is a strong vigor for community activism and Hadija Salim, a community mobilizer, put it right saying: 'It's time for reinventing activism for change' during the pandemic. Individual and community efforts were paramount as residents took responsibility in their neighbourhoods towards raising awareness. Some members contributed money to buy soap, sanitizers, masks and building additional water points for hand washings for poorer

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Rajab Salim, Artist, Likoni.



members of the community.<sup>9</sup> Mama Hafsa Mohamed, a housewife, explained how she asked members in the estate to practice safety measures like washing hands, distancing daily greetings physically rather than hugging or holding hands, and even asking parents to confine kids to their home: 'I went door to door in my neighbourhood. I felt my kids can only be safe if the entire estate is safe. This is a community responsibility. Efforts were needed from everyone in the estate.' Social media also provided an innovative platform for dissemination of information. As a resident of Mvita in Mombasa, Gloria Juma explained that many neighbourhoods had their own WhatsApp groups through which they spread awareness on COVID-19, and even directly influenced behaviours by, for instance, asking parents to have a watch over their kids, and to maintain safe distancing in water pick up points. Individuals and neighbourhood groups became overnight activists to mitigate Covid-19 spread. The lack of County assistance in the expansive Kisauni area made residents look forth for COVID-19 relief aid from civil society networks and community members. CSOs were seen to play a proactive role in COVID-19 mitigation measures as well as relief support in areas where County assistance was at a minimum.<sup>10</sup>

Community surveillance made community members highly observant of new visitors or of health concerns, which facilitated fast reporting on new cases to health officials. Eric, a youth leader, considered this as a new trend where community surveillance on COVID-19 revealed community responsibilities in prevention. According to him, 'the emerging community COVID-19 surveillance is a good trend, and this effort needs to be appreciated.' There were also community misleading cases, due to delays and errors in tests which often led to blaming the government authorities. While community surveillance is appreciated, Yahya Waleed, a youth from Mombasa, explained that health officials were taking time to respond or did not respond promptly even when COVID-19 cases were notified in due time. In some cases, sick individuals had to find their own means to go to the isolation ward. As they are unable to afford private vehicles, they end up using public transport, making other passengers vulnerable to the transmissible disease. Stigma further limits individuals going for testing. A county official explained that health workers were overwhelmed with phone calls to respond as the numbers of infected persons were increasing. The lack of vehicles and resources to assist individuals also made it difficult for them to respond promptly. However, according to the county official, the Mombasa County government had tried hard to find the best fit to respond to individual calls amidst the little resources available, while also working to generate fundraising via the private sector.

Until now, youth leadership incorporated in local level awareness-raising campaigns has generated positive results. Evan Omondi, a youth involved in awareness raising efforts in the community, felt that the government and non-governmental organizations reached out to youth as friends and collaborators for COVID-19 prevention efforts so as to spread accurate information on the Coronavirus in the community. The strategy viewed youth as responsible individuals in the community rather than as troublemakers. Social organizations funded youth initiatives to reach out widely through creative means using Swahili cultural products.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Khifa Hassan, Majengo.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Communication, Abdul Rahuman, Old Town.



Youth Leader, Abdalla Suleiman Habib Assam from Mombasa used poetry to create hope during COVID-19 awareness raising for his community. Photo: Gedion Otula. With the author's permission.

For example, youth leader Gedion Otula<sup>11</sup> used photography and theatre for awareness-raising and giving hope to the community during the pandemic. According to him, this photo depicts the need to mobilize the community efforts to mitigate the pandemic and the resulting poverty. He said: 'We have the power to change everything during these pandemic times, rather than rely on blinded promises by politicians.'

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<sup>11</sup> Personal Communication with Gedion Otula, Changamwe, Mombasa.

## Yatapita—All Will Be Well

*Ukiona kiza, kimetapakaa,  
Kuna muangaza, sikate tamaa,  
Kesho yapendeza, tena itang'aa,  
Usihuzunike, yote yatapita,  
Siku inakuja, kama naiyona,  
Kesi hata moja, na iwe hakuna,  
Na kila mmoja, awe huru tena,  
Usihuzunike, yote yatapita,*

When darkness, is spread out,  
there is brightness (awaiting), do not despair,  
tomorrow will be pleasing, and bright,  
do not grieve, all will be well,  
A day is coming, I can foresee it,  
when not a single case (of COVID 19), will be reported  
and each one of us, will be free again,  
do not grieve, all will be well

*Tutatangamana, kwenye ibada,  
Wazee vijana, turudishe ada,  
Siku ya bayana, ziondoke shida,  
Usihuzunike, yote yatapita,  
Naona ishara, hatuko mbali,  
Zetu biashara, na mashughuli,  
Zitatia fora, iwe ni sahali,  
Usihuzunike, yote yatapita,*

We shall again congregate, in places of worship,  
the elderly and the youths, will resume their daily activities  
on a certain day, all this problems will be gone,  
do not grieve, all will be well  
I can see the signs, the day is not afar,  
when our businesses, and all ventures,  
will once again blossom, and life will be at ease,  
do not grieve, all will be well

*Written and translated by Adballa Suleiman Habib Assam*

Finally, very poor neighbourhoods forged community leadership in prevention, as they were well organized during the pandemic; it shows the power of individuals when they take the responsibility to their hands rather than wait for external interventions. Local initiative revealed that communities had their own networks which they tapped in, reinventing their own activism during the pandemic,<sup>12</sup> trying to fill in the gaps which the state has been unable to provide. Leadership at all levels during the COVID-19 crisis has been an opportunity to shed light on leaders' competency as their performance and success during the crisis will resonate until after the crisis. After all, the 2022 electoral year for Kenya is not very far, and the current health situation is a platform for versatile members for community nominations at the county and national levels. Yet, as some are trying to misuse this pandemic context for their political gains, it is time for people to realize the need for effective leadership over token driven leadership candidates. Communities and local leaders need to harp on youth and women who had proven their leadership skills in crisis times for future leadership opportunities beyond the COVID-19 context.<sup>13</sup>

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