

versione italiana

The first trickling of the Covid-19 virus outbreak sounded like a distant thing to the average Kenyan going about his daily business. For one the nexus of the outbreak was very far away in a little known corner of the world. That was until it became apparent that Guangzhou in China was just a flight-hop away. That is when the reality of a global village hit home; the knowledge that it took less than a day for someone to arrive at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport from that city, walk through customs without a medical check, and board a taxi and be on the city streets in less than thirty minutes.

But perhaps the worst effect was on people's social lives. Suddenly you could no longer congregate at the pub in the evening to shoot the breeze as you discussed the days happenings on the seven o'clock news. This after-work hour is especially important to men in the Kangemi neighbourhood where I live. For one, most of the houses are one-roomed bedsitters where the urban male doesn't have the luxury of sitting either on the porch or under the tree in his yard when he comes home from work; privileges that are otherwise enjoyed by folks living upcountry. The enclosed setting of the urban ghettos thus forces men to be confined at home with their families in that single room as the sun gradually goes down. The pressures exerted by this enforced confinement in narrow spaces have already started to be felt, going by the comments I have heard on radio.

As the virus slowly started dominating the evening news a sense of panic set in. What everyone was asking was, would the transport system grind to a halt and the trucks that brought cabbages and fresh produce from the countryside stop turning up at the local vegetable market? The sense of urgency increased when the government announced that supermarkets would stop operating as normal, and that henceforth a limited number of shoppers would be allowed in at a time to avoid crowding. The supermarket in my neighbourhood made everything worse by putting up a notice that they would soon be closing down, and that shoppers were encouraged to take advantage of the time window still open to stock up on food.

Suddenly the queues at the till swelled, with everyone frantically taking out their savings to stock up on maize flour, sugar, cooking oil and other essentials. Within a matter of hours all these were getting wiped off the store shelves. The cereal stores were also rapidly getting emptied, and as the traders sensed the increasing panic they either started hiking prices to make a kill, or hoarding essential goods with the anticipation of a shortage in a few weeks, when they could sell at a bigger profit. All other projects were abandoned and the only concern for households was stocking up on dry foods. It was a country stocking up for a long siege that no one knew when it would last.



The poor living side by side with the rich in the Kangemi neighbourhood

I had borrowed some books at the library whose date was due, but when I turned up to return them I found the library closed, with the guards at the entrance telling me they could not even receive the books since someone needed to run them through the system at the counter. I was advised to keep the books and wait till the library reopened again . . . at a date that no one knew. That same evening on the news the Chief Justice told the country that all courts were closing down, and that only the most urgent cases would be heard under special court sittings. What the hell was going on? Would the banks close down next?, was what everyone was asking. And what would happen now if you got arrested by the Police? Would it mean rotting in the cells for eternity?

But the neighbourhood was quickly pieced together the situation. If you got arrested for a petty

offence there was no way the Police could throw you in the cells; given they had no idea if you had contracted the virus and was bringing it into the station. Furthermore they would be entitled to feed you the whole while you were detained in the cells waiting for the courts to start functioning again. This was clearly impossible. Which meant that right now, the best the cops could do - especially so if you refused to part with a bribe — was give you a couple of slaps and send you on your way with a kick in the backside. It was a strange scenario indeed. So, would this mean there would be a rise in petty crimes in the neighbourhood?

This fear of looming crime increased when companies in Nairobi started sending people home to wait out the virus, some receiving half pay. Even small business where people were likely to congregate were being ordered closed, rendering millions jobless and idle overnight. What were people going to eat in their homes if they didn't go out to work? How were they expected to pay rent if at all they weren't working? Even worse, what were they going to occupy themselves doing at home?

And even as I listened to all the conversations going on around me I started to realize that perhaps the city was not going to be the best place to be caught in when the looming shutdown finally happened. I was better off if I got out of the city while I still could and join my family upcountry. For one, the city with its 4 million residents crammed in that tiny area would a deadly place to be caught in if the virus struck with a vengeance; it would practically wipe us all out within no time. it was way safer in the countryside.



Free GOK hand sanitizers distribution in Kangemi

And I was not the only one thinking that way. The downtown country bus station together with all the private bus company offices in the River Road area of Nairobi were crammed with passengers desperate to get a ticket out of the city. Everyone was trying to leave all at once. I overheard some of these Nairobians who owned homes upcountry saying that it was better, if the inevitable finally happened, to die among your own people. At least that way you will be guaranteed a decent burial and spared the indecency of being bulldozed into a mass grave when the bodies finally started piling up in the city streets. There was a sense of comfort in this thinking; at least it was a straw to cling on to. And so I equally started making frantic efforts to get out of the city.

In the first week of the lockdown I heard a number of women calling in on live radio celebrating the fact that they now had more luxury with their menfolk confined at home. There's a lady from Western Kenya who said that she was happy that now her husband will be able to know the kids better, given he had made a habit of coming home in the wee hours when the kids were already in bed.

But at the same time the radio comedians - who are a regular feature of FM stations in Kenya - also poked fun at what these men would be occupying themselves doing during their enforced stay at home. One of the things that came up on most of the FM stations I tuned into was the fact that there would be increased sex due to the idle hours spent at home, given that people would now be

retiring to bed early. Which means that one of the possible outcomes of this crisis, if at all we get out of it, may be a notable spike in the population.

At the village pub I frequented before the total lockdown I heard the mostly male patrons express their concern about what their teenaged children who were currently at home doing nothing were engaging in. There was the fear that they were dating more and having more sex in their idle time at home, something that would have been avoided if they were otherwise occupied with their studies in school. There was the fear that when schools eventually reopened there would be a notable rise in teenage pregnancies. And in my casual strolls around the village I noted this as well; there certainly was a lot more dating going on.



Kenyatta Avenue, Nairobi, during the lockdown

But perhaps the most deeply felt effect in the villages and urban slums was the ban on church services. Ordinary Kenyans are a very religious lot, and Sunday is especially reserved for their special appointment with God. For the first time since I was born I failed to be roused by fervent drumbeats on Sunday mornings and the familiar calls of the church soloist calling the villagers out

to prayer in loudhailers fashioned out of tin. Soon after, if you stepped outside your gate, you would see the familiar sight of villagers festooned in colourful flowing gowns and skull caps for the African Pentecostal churches, or well-pressed European-style suits and white dresses for the Western churches, an occasional rosebud or carnation adorning the lapels of the more noteworthy church leaders. This was a most eerie feeling that made it difficult to distinguish Sundays from other days.

In the initial days in my Kangemi neighbourhood the church goers defined the government ban on large groups congregating for mass and urged their followers to turn up in large numbers in their tin-walled churches that had little ventilation. Plastic jerricans and soap were placed strategically at the entrance for their faithful to wash their hands, before they filed into the church hall and made a loud noise for God. I took a quick stroll around the slum on my last Sunday in the city and noted the deafening music issuing out of the public address systems set up by these churches, accompanied by fervent prayers to God to save the congregants from this frightening new disease. It was clear to me that God was never needed most, given everyone was frightened about what would happen next.



It therefore came as an utter shock to the congregants when even this last resort was taken away

from them when the government decided that church services had to stop.

But there was even worse to come. Soon even funeral gatherings were outlawed. In most Kenyan villages funerals form a very important social function in that often relatives of the deceased will travel from distant towns and even abroad to congregate on the homestead to give the departed a decent send-off. It is perhaps the one event left where long-lost relatives come together, especially if it involves a notable patriarch. And they don't just congregate to mourn the departed, but there is a lot of feasting and drinking as well, often a bull or even more being slaughtered to feed the mourners, depending on how wealthy the family is. Suddenly even these were banned.

A couple of village pastors I know attempted to defy the ban and go ahead with the deeply entrenched rite, only for the police to turn up in full force and violently disperse the mourners, whipping those who defied. And not even the men of the collar were spared. It was a novelty in the village.

The drinkers also put up a little resistance, accepting to be sneaked into the pubs from the back entrance and be locked in, sipping their drink in conspiratorial silence as they listened out for the police. A special code was required in order for the pub owner to let you in. but even that was short-lived, for soon the police started squirrelling out even these hide-outs, with heavy fines being imposed on the pub owners. Soon it became apparent that the only way to enjoy your drink was to buy a bottle at a Wines & Spirits joint and carry it home.

The early sense of freedom that the school kids had enjoyed when schools were closed soon turned to long idle hours with nothing to occupy them, and even TV and video games ceased being interesting. Suddenly they could be seen idling around wearing long faces and wondering when they would be able to go back to school to see their friends again. That routine of catching the bus to school in the morning and commuting back in the evening toting bags stuffed with the loathsome homework suddenly became something to long for. The virus had suddenly turned their lives upside down.



This is the first of five Coronavirus reportage texts (one per continent, symbolically) commissioned by the [Center for the Humanities and Social Change](#) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice to prominent international writers.