



The People vs 4G internet and other corona stories from Kenya

BY

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■n February 28, two weeks after Nigeria confirmed its first COVID-19 case, and one week after South Africa did the same, our Cabinet Secretary for Health, Mutahi Kagwe, appeared on TV to announce Kenya's first confirmed patient with the virus on March 13. Since then, barely two weeks later, we are at 31 cases with one recovery and one fatality.

From the outset, the government's response was seemingly very uncoordinated, and committed what the economist David Ndiir refers to as "fatal errors." That there appeared to be no quarantine plans for those who came from abroad (returnees are taken to either Mbagathi hospital, another government facility, or can pay up to US\$125 a day for two weeks to "self-quarantine" in a hotel where they are not separated from other travelers), the fact that there are not enough ICU beds, or that the national Corona hotlines don't work consistently, are evidence for the bungled nature of the formal COVID-19 response locally.

Since March 13, the most common statements from the government are: “stay at home” “work from home” and “social distance.” Coupled with the much PR-hyped declaration by the President on March 23 that Kenya has allowed Google loon balloons to provide 4G internet at this time that we should all be working from home (and it is not even free!), these interventions have (re)emphasized to many that Uhuru Kenyatta is just the “president for the rich.”

First, very few Kenyans have the kind of jobs where they can “work from home”: many are workers in the sectors that pay wages daily — what we call mjengo (construction), food sellers, hawkers, industrial zone workers, etc. And, in addition, principally in urban areas, many are unable to engage in social distancing since they live in densely populated settlements. What’s more, the enduring neoliberal governance of our country has privatized the provision of water, effectively denying this basic right to many. Therefore, the appeals to “wash hands often” or “buy sanitizers” don’t sit well with the majority of folks who don’t have and can’t afford either water or sanitizers.

On these accounts, forcing people to “stay at home” without delivering people-centred economic initiatives is only going to propel what the Social Justice Centre Working Group (SJCWG), a collective of 30 community centres in Kenya, called “financial disability and starvation.” This is why activists like Gacheke Gachihi, speaking on a Daraja Press podcast, called for a rethinking of the impending lockdown, and the innovation of corona interventions locally so that we are not just “copy pasting solutions from Europe.”

Following the 4G internet announcement on March 23, Kenyans, not known to hide when they have taken offense, started a hashtag called #WaterAndFoodFirst on Twitter. And Boda Boda motorbike transport operators, firmly supported by the majority, stated that “we wanted Uhuru to tell us about food and coronavirus and not about balloons.”

But, though the 500 hand washing stations that were set up around Nairobi on March 21, and a number of which were vandalized and had taps stolen two days later, may make us question how worried Kenyans are, rest assured, that from Eldoret to Nairobi the restrictions brought about by COVID-19 have caused pain.

Basic commodity prices still remain the same, and the cost of public transport has doubled as operators have sought to make up the deficit rendered by the directive that only a minimal amount of passengers should be allowed to be on board at any one time.

Ultimately, the economic conditions of Kenyans is in sharp decline, and, perhaps, in a small bid to hear their plea, two days after the 4G internet announcement, Kenyatta announced a “stimulus package,” which, among other interventions cut value added tax (VAT) from 16% to 14% effective

April 1. This package also implements tax cuts for people earning up to 24,000 Kenya Shillings (roughly \$240) a month, and facilitates the recruitment of additional health workers.

Uhuru, his Deputy and other public servants have also subsequently announced that they will take pay cuts.

Though the package will bring some reprieve, the proposed tax cuts, for example, target those who have fixed employment contracts, while a large section of Kenyans earn daily wages, if at all, with no fixed terms. It also does not help those who have lost their jobs, nor recognize the real cost of food for every Kenyan who is dealing with a drop in the value of the shilling.

The government has not yet imposed a total lockdown, though it says this is “an option.” Some commentators, including former governor William Kabogo, call for a lockdown with sufficient rent and wage support for all. Currently, all but essential movement is restricted, and a 7 pm – 5 am curfew was put in place effective Friday, March 27. Implementing this curfew, however, proved more of a public health hazard than COVID-19 as the police used “excessive force” to get Kenyans to go home. Ironically, the death count on day two of the curfew is four killed by the police, and one death by Corona.

Beyond these government interventions, unsatisfactory to many, Kenyans are seeking to help each other where they can, and as they have always done: communities have come together to make sure the most vulnerable, like the sick and elderly, have access to food and water. And even in spaces where water has to be bought, activists have ensured that hand washing posts have been established in as many places as possible.

Though Africa is behind the curve of infections at the moment, will these everyday forms of solidarity cushion us when infections peak? In the same Daraja Press podcast, Gacheke Gachihi argues that this crisis has further emphasized the neglect of the poor by the government, and is therefore “a wake up call that we are on our own.” For those who “cannot just stay at home and use Google” he says, we need to continue building “a social justice movement.”

Certainly, that may be all that is possible, the only option, for the Kenyans who can't enjoy Google loon internet balloons.”