



Goats and Soda

THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

They Used To Give Their Kids 3 Meals A Day. Then Came Coronavirus

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THOMAS BWIRE



At a distribution of donated food in the Kibera community in Nairobi, there was a stampede as residents rushed for the limited supplies, with several injuries resulting.

Khalil Senosi/AP

"I am beginning to become a beggar," says Josephine Oguta.

Oguta, 40, lives in Nairobi. Before the pandemic, she and her husband did not have financial worries. She was the breadwinner of the family – a teacher at a private nursery school in Kibera, a sprawling poor community in Kenya's capital city. Her husband, Zedekiah Okindo, was studying at a local institution in the hope of landing a government job. Now she's no longer able to work because of a nationwide school shutdown. And she says her husband sleeps most of the time in the house and looks stressed.

With no source of income, Josephine and Zedekiah are struggling to feed their five daughters, ages 2, 8, 10, 20 and 22. The kids used to get three meals a day. Now, Oguta, says, she serves them porridge in the morning and a second meal of black tea and cooked rice.

For people around the world, in both wealthy and low-income countries, fear of coronavirus goes hand-in-hand with anxiety about where the next meal is coming from. Like Oguta, many people who once could afford to buy enough food now find themselves lining up for food bank giveaways, borrowing money and food from friends – and cutting back on the number of meals they provide to their children.

In Kenya, the government already has programs to transfer weekly cash payments to the needy via cellphones and is increasing this type of financial assistance for the newly unemployed; Agnes Kalibata, the U.N. Secretary General's Special Envoy for the 2021 Food Systems Summit, praises such efforts for "offering privacy and dignity in these tough times."

Organizations are offering food as well – Shining Hope For Communities, a local charity in Kibera, is dropping off food at homes and asking the delivery person to take a photo to show that the donation reached the family (and didn't get siphoned off by local leaders). But the fear is that these temporary measures can't go on indefinitely. "It's a massive food crisis," says Kijala Shako, head of advocacy for Save the Children, who is based in Nairobi.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of not only our health systems and economies but also our food systems," notes Kalibata. "My concern is that millions worldwide face months if not years of uncertainty over the next meal."

We spoke to Josephine Oguta and two other Kibera residents to see the lengths they're going through to put food on the table.

'I humbly request for some cash — but for how long?'

"I am a bit stressed up with how things are going, getting food is becoming an uphill task now that I am not earning any income from my teaching job," Oguta said in a telephone interview.

Finding food is a constant challenge. In recent weeks, a close friend told Oguta about a planned distribution of food at the District Administration offices, provided by a well-wisher. The next day, Friday, April 10, she was among thousands of citizens who thronged the offices in hope of getting food supplies to feed her family.



Josephine Oguta is an early childhood development teacher at a nursery school in Kibera, a poor community in Nairobi. She is currently out of work as schools in Kenya remain closed because of the pandemic.

Caroline Lusinde

"I was worried the previous night, I would oversleep and miss a chance to make it early enough with the hope of getting food donated to help ease the pangs of hunger at home," she says.

Local leaders issued a limited number of cards to people who they believed would be in need of food – a measure to try and minimize crowds. Josephine was one of many residents who did not hear about the card system.

"I was among the people who were locked out of the gate and a stampede followed as people became impatient for waiting for too long and not getting any access," says Josephine.

"I was very disappointed how the entire food distribution exercise was conducted, I got hurt in the process after being tightly squeezed among the pushing crowds," adds Josephine. She saw others who were injured – and got no food.

'People were shouting 'I am hungry, I am hungry give us food.' "

At one point, the police lobbed teargas canisters into the crowd to disperse the impatient throng.

The next day, she had to take another tactic: asking a friend for a loan – 200 Kenyan shillings, the equivalent of about \$2, to buy food for her family.

"I have to flash [beep] friends with my phone from my church. When they call back I humbly request for some cash – but for how long?" she wonders.

Her biggest worry is that her 2-year-old baby may end up being malnourished.

Her prayer is that food drives should involve proper research, perhaps by door-to-door inquiries, to identify families in need, with the help of local leaders and elders.

'I feel weary not knowing where my next meal will come from'

Steve Oludhe is another Kenyan who's new to the problem of hunger. The proud first-time father of a three-week-old baby girl, he usually works as a welder and earns about \$25 a week – enough to pay rent and feed his family. But the shop where he works

has been shut since mid-March. Since he stopped going to work, he's managed to make about \$8 doing odd electrical jobs in people's homes. And with that drop in income, he is concerned about how to get the next meal for his wife, who is breastfeeding, and himself.



Everlyne Akeyo (left), and her husband Steve Oludhe are residents of Kibera. Steve worked as an electrician while his wife, who gave birth to a baby girl three weeks ago, had previously worked at a salon. Now he's out of work because of the coronavirus lockdown.

Thomas Bwire

"Even as we speak now, it's not good at all, I feel bad about this that I have to struggle where my next meal will come from," says Oludhe. "I feel tired and weary not knowing where my next meal will come from," says Oludhe.

He missed out on a food distribution in Kibera, where he lives, because his wife had just been admitted to the hospital to give birth.

At the moment he and his wife are getting by with one meal a day – typically ugali, a cornmeal dish similar to polenta, and kale. If they can afford it, they'll add black tea and mandazi, or fried bread,

Before the pandemic, he says, he and his wife had three meals per day with meat, beans and fish. He dreams of working again – and mentions that he had a chance to earn money in a nearby county fixing a generator but couldn't go because of the total lockdown in Kenya.

'I was earning an income ... now I am not able to'

Swaleh Juma, a 33-year-old father of three, is also having a share of struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. His children, two boys, age 14 and 9, and a girl age 12, now only get two meals a day – rice, ugali and some cabbage or kale.

Juma is self-employed and works as a garbage man, collecting trash from people's homes in Kibera for a fee they pay him. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some residents asked him to stop collecting their litter fearing that he might infect them with the virus.

Swaleh Juma is a garbage worker who works a second job as a night security guard at a high school in Kibera.

Thomas Bwire

"I was earning an income from collecting garbage, but for now I am not able to, most people now throw their garbage out at night or early morning on their own in an irresponsible manner," says Juma during our phone conversation.

His other hustle is working as a night guard for a local organization that runs a secondary school. But with schools closed, he can no longer work that job.

His wife has lost the income she contributed to the family budget as well.

"My wife washes clothes for people [in middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods]but now she cannot get any job coming her way. Those people fear slum people, and they say we shall transmit coronavirus to them," says Juma during our phone interview.

His wish is that the government can be able to work out things to ensure people from low-income areas can get access to food during these tough times. And he hopes the pandemic ends soon: "If this continues, we may end up seeing an increase in crime-related activities, especially among the youth, who may be forced to seek other ways of survival."

Thomas Bwire is a co-founder and editor at Habari Kibera, a news hub that focuses on reporting stories from the Kibera community. He previously worked as a radio journalist at Pamoja FM, a community-based radio station in Kibera, and was the 2019 first prize winner of Media Monitoring Africa's journalism awards for his reporting on children

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