

Nigerian government's plan to tackle COVID-19 leaves urban poor further disadvantaged

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The Nigerian government [has adopted a range of strategies](#) to manage the spread of COVID-19. However, as desirable as the strategies may seem, the urban poor are disproportionately negatively affected. Lagos city is a case in point.

The Lagos state government [introduced a food relief package](#) to cushion the effects of lockdown. But the distribution of the relief package has been hampered by [governance challenges](#). The situation, to a large extent, reflects the opposite of good governance. Good governance is about relationships and interactions between citizens and government based on the principles of equity, efficient service delivery and sustainability.

This points to a larger problem that's been highlighted by the impact of the COVID-19 interventions—the disconnect between urban development policies, housing, slums and the livelihood realities of the majority.

The state government must see this pandemic as an opportunity to address this disconnect. In particular, it needs to develop inclusive action plans aimed at building the capacity of poor people to accumulate livelihood assets—known as [asset accumulation](#) – that they can draw on to cope with future shocks. This will involve urban development policies supporting the initiatives of the urban poor to accumulate assets and, in turn, reduce dependence on palliative measures.

It will also require the state government to change its approaches of neglect, demolition and forced eviction of slums to participatory slum upgrading and urban regeneration. This will also help stimulate economic growth after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Multiple vulnerabilities and limited assets

A significant number of people who live in Lagos are poor and are accommodated in slums. Their lives are precarious. Housing conditions are poor and there's overcrowding and a lack of basic services. For example, [in my research](#) I found that about 80% of the residents of Sari-Iganmu live in one room with an average of seven people. An average of

seven households share toilet and bathroom facilities with no running water.

Research has shown that [assets are the bedrock](#) on which livelihoods are built. They are essential to coping with shocks.

To cope with shocks a combination of assets is required. They include social networks and physical and financial assets. All are required to adequately meet [basic needs and cope with shocks](#). The reality, however, is that the majority of slum residents in Lagos have a limited ability to accumulate a portfolio of assets to fall back on.

Financial assets—such as earnings, savings, investment returns and credits—are essential for daily living and for accessing adequate housing, sanitation facilities and food. A typical slum resident lives on an irregular income with limited capacity to save for future needs. Saving can only be a dream for someone earning an [inadequate and irregular daily income](#). As one resident of Oko-Baba, a slum community, noted in my research: "How do I save when I don't even have enough money to put food on the table... What could be worse in life than that? All we earn in this house is not enough. It is of no use, even impossible to save when one is still struggling to eat."

In the absence of adequate income, the urban poor turn to social networks for social security in terms of food, finance and credit. These sources, particularly from friends and relatives, have become more unreliable during the pandemic.

Unsupportive urban development policies

Over the years, the Lagos state government's approach to slums has been a mixture of neglect, minimal upgrading and [demolition and forced eviction](#). As a result there is now inadequate infrastructure such as

sanitation facilities and housing.

Forced eviction from slums, particularly in prime locations with better access to livelihood opportunities, has become prevalent across Lagos. In some cases, intended beneficiaries of slum upgrading have become victims of displacement, loss of social networks and livelihood opportunities.

This is exemplified by the case of Badia East community. Between 2013 and 2017, the community suffered [multiple forced evictions](#). This resulted in the displacement of more than 3,000 households, with little or no compensation.

Badia East is part of the larger Badia community, one of the nine beneficiary communities targeted for slum upgrading under the World Bank loan for the Lagos metropolitan development and governance project. The [forced eviction](#) of Badia East residents was clearly at variance with the reason the loan was secured—to upgrade low income communities.

These kinds of interventions have further hindered people from accumulating asset portfolios.

Recommendations

Lagos's urban poor continue to try to make ends meet in the context of multiple vulnerabilities and unsupportive urban development policies.

The challenge of coping with economic shocks is a reflection of poor political, economic and governance systems. Good governance is a necessary condition if poor people are going to be able to begin accumulating assets.

Good governance will encourage co-production of slum regeneration programs, and the equitable delivery of public goods and services. It will also create an enabling and supportive environment for individuals, particularly in the informal sector, to accumulate livelihood assets.

Only then will the current unsupportive institutional context be changed to one that enables the poor.

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