Poorest face dilemma in Africa's cities

January 14 2021, by Samuel Schlaefli

The PJS informal settlement in South Africa before Easter: a difficult place to adopt the kind of behaviours that reduce coronavirus transmission. Credit: Thabile Tsitsa, Development Economics Group in South Africa

A recent study in South Africa and Ghana shows people support government steps to combat COVID-19 but lack the infrastructure and financial security required to maintain social distancing.

When South Africa imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns on 27 March of this year, Antoinette van der Merwe was visiting her family in Pretoria. All outdoor activities were banned, aircraft were grounded,

and only those working in essential industries such as food and energy were allowed to go to work. "I only left the house once during the first three weeks, to buy some essentials," says Van der Merwe, a doctoral student at the Development Economics Group at ETH NADEL. Once she saw the impossibility of returning to Zurich any time soon, she decided to make the best of the situation: as a development economist, she realized she had a unique opportunity to examine the impact of the pandemic and a strict lockdown on South Africa's poorest urban households.

Together with her colleague Kathrin Durizzo and supervisor Professor Isabel Günther, she designed a study to compare the situation in South Africa with that in Ghana. Durizzo is conducting research into Ghana's health system for her thesis. With the help of research partners at the universities of Pretoria and Ghana, the researchers obtained access to phone numbers of people living in Johannesburg and Accra, the two African cities with the highest rate of COVID-19 infection in April. Van der Merwe and Durizzo focused on districts of each city that are known to have a high proportion of poor households.

Lack of infrastructure for social distancing

The study, which was based on 409 telephone interviews in Johannesburg and 1,034 in Accra, confirms the findings of research conducted in other countries: lockdowns aimed at curbing the COVID-19 pandemic have a particularly harsh impact on poverty-stricken families in the Global South. For many of those surveyed, the lockdown meant immediately losing their job while simultaneously facing higher prices for food. Sixty-seven percent of self-employed respondents in South Africa—and 86 percent in Ghana—were forced to close their business due to the lockdown without receiving any financial compensation. In order to survive, both they and day laborers that make their living in the informal economy need to be able to leave home and

commute to work by public transport, often in overcrowded minibuses. Despite this, most people complied with the strict lockdown rules. However, some 30 percent of those surveyed said they continued to mix with large groups of people, 20 percent continued to receive visitors at home, and 30 percent left home more than once a week. This wasn't due to a lack of information. Most people were able to put together a relatively clear picture of the situation, generally based on what they saw on television. What's more, the majority of people considered the measures taken by the government to be reasonable, so there was certainly a willingness to stick to the rules. Nevertheless, economic necessity and a lack of infrastructure in poor urban settlements, where multiple households often share sanitary facilities, made it impossible for many people to consistently maintain social distancing.

Some aspects of the study revealed distinct differences between the two countries. In Ghana, respondents said their biggest concerns were higher food prices and a lack of income, while South African respondents, especially women, also tended to express their fear of falling ill. This may be due to the fact that many poor households in South Africa continued to receive state benefits during lockdown. The situation hit children particularly hard: with schools closed, 37 percent of parents in South Africa said their school-age children had done no reading or any other kind of learning the day before the survey. And since most children in the households surveyed in South Africa, and almost half the children in those surveyed in Ghana, received meals at school, the decision to close schools had a financial impact on families as well as increasing the time spent on childcare.

Fears inspired by lockdown remain

The study also showed that the lockdown in South Africa, which was considerably stricter than that imposed in Ghana, did not necessarily cause people to adhere more closely to social distancing guidelines. Most

respondents said they were far more afraid of losing their job and being pushed further into poverty than they were of catching COVID-19, says Van der Merwe. "Should case numbers start going up again, our findings suggest the South African authorities should also consider different ways of responding to the pandemic that enable people to follow the regulations." She cites examples such as investing more in public transport and running additional information campaigns.

Van der Merwe and Durizzo are currently working on a follow-up study. Over July and August, they contacted some 80 percent of the original respondents to ask how their situation had changed since the lockdown was eased. "The results showed that people in Ghana are less worried than people in South Africa," says Durizzo. "The situation returned to normal more quickly in Ghana, in part because the lockdown wasn't as extreme for people there as it was in South Africa."

Provided by ETH Zurich