



GRADIF-KCOVID-19 SITUATIONAL UPDATE IN THARAKA NITHI COUNTY AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Kenya is among the 28 countries in Africa that have reported cases of the Covid-19. The Government of Kenya (GOK) has taken drastic measures to contain and prevent further spread/infections of COVID-19 in the country. These measures are being implemented at the county level. In Tharaka Nithi County, the County government has set up an isolation ward at the County level 4 hospitals. However, the county government has admitted that it's not adequately prepared as it's in the process of setting up systems to address any emergencies which may come up as the number of infections are raising by the day. The County government has indicated that it has a budget of Ksh10 million whereas they require around 78 million to mitigate the Covid -19 pandemic. The county government leadership has called upon stakeholders in the county to come out and join the county government in addressing the pandemic.

The government has ensured that all business premises have hand washing facilities, closed down entertainment centers such as bars and night clubs, scrapped designated market days, enforced public transport guidelines and ensured that citizens adhere to the curfew hours all in a bid to prevent Covid-19 transmissions.

Washing of hands in a few establishments is being practiced; social distancing has not been implemented to the later as depicted with public transport system as well as market centers. As a key measure to curb infections, the Government has directed all employees to work from home so as to keep the recommended distances except those providing essential services.

In GARDIF-Kenya organization, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the normal operations of programs as we have to adhere to government measures of ensuring that public gatherings are minimized. This has affected the sustained Civic Education outreaches in the field and Mass Civic Education Programme events since the activities have to bring together groups of people. Before this directive, the Civic Educators had carried out the outreaches for two weeks and have already submitted their reports for the two weeks. Other activities which have been affected are preparatory activities for the social accountability activities (score card). Physical monitoring of field activities also is not possible at the moment as it will involve travel and meetings.

Staff are still working from home and offering support to the Civic Educators when need be as well as undertaking the necessary project documentation activities.

With the current situation therefore which is limiting movement and encourages social distancing, there is need to align the project activities to comply as well as address the emerging issue of Covid -19 pandemic by sensitizing the citizens on disease and prevention measures. The government is sharing the information and it's important for other stakeholders to compliment the information sharing as there are gaps and some segments of the citizens are not getting the information. GRADIF K proposes to utilize the social media platform to distribute IEC materials already developed by Uraia, work with the local radio stations to translate the IEC materials and air the infomercials in Chuka/Kitharaka language.

Problem Statement:

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to negatively impact the health, economic and social status of populations in Kenya. The government has made some efforts which include:

- Provision of updates on the number of people affected through regular press briefings.
- Emphasis on preventive measures, directives such as social distancing, proper sanitation, limiting interactions.
- Provision of contact and hotline numbers for public access to information
- Implementation of fiscal and monetary policy measures to provide relief through tax reduction to ensure liquidity, among others.

Specific Problems/Challenges in Tharaka Nithi County in curb the Covid-19 spread

Health is a devolved function and counties lack of capacity and preparedness to adequately address the pandemic response due to capacity of health sectors of county government from personnel, inputs as well as resources. In the past 5 years, Tharaka Nithi County has witnessed various Health staff strikes and go slows due to lack of necessary equipment's/facilities and late salary payments. The state mode of enforcing the government directive on curfew has violated human rights by meting a lot of force on citizens to the extent of causing fatalities. There are gaps in the information shared and contained in the public domain. The public needs transparent, accurate and comprehensive updates that relay the state of preparedness and the precautionary measures being taken to curb the spread of Covid-19. Comprehensive information is not only a constitutional right to access information but also helps alleviate public fear, anxiety, and hysteria around the pandemic. Accurate information will enable Kenyans to comply to and adopt measures willingly alleviating a possibility of state enforcing measures through security forces which is detrimental. Some segment of Tharaka Nithi population has not believed that there is such a disease and others think that such diseases are a preserve of big towns and urban centres. Traditions also do not allow mature men to be in the house early with children and women, they are expected to stay out consulting with other men and learn from them. Further the public needs information on how resources allocated to the response are being utilized bearing in mind that corruption cases are common.

There are gaps in the information provided and gaps in the methods of communication which may disadvantage certain populations. The ministry of health should utilize a neutral SMS platform that will extend to users outside of safaricom. Prioritise the information and communication needs of children and adolescents as well as people with disabilities. Children at this time because of being out of school, many be unable to access timely and lifesaving information, they may be unable to express fears and anxiety having an impact on their emotional wellbeing. Timely, accurate and transparent information/communication on our risks as a country and how we are managing it is essential, this will determine if the public will trust the government or turn to rumours and misinformation.

The media has done a commendable job of informing the public of the signs and symptoms of the virus as well as the preventive measures people can take to curb its spread. In addition, the media should play a role of providing a multi-sector analysis on the impact if Covid-19 on people and beyond their health, playing a monitoring and accountability role and practicing responsible and ethical reporting that does not cause stigma, Media can play a significant role in ensuring accurate and timely information is availed to the citizens as well as provide an avenue of building rapport between the government and its citizens. Irresponsible media use can impact

negatively in driving communities underground, hampering access to quality of healthcare this increasing the spread of the disease. State the challenges identified, the rationale/need to address these challenges and the conditions to be changed by the project.

It's against this backdrop that such information and communication gaps could be addressed to cater for different segments of the society as well as build rapport between the government and citizens to promote health seeking behaviour and mitigate the spread of the pandemic. Uraia Trust has developed IEC materials on Covid-19 and we have circulated them throughout social platforms. However, some segments of the society cannot access social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. This means they are missing out on the appropriate and updated information, language barrier is also an issue for the elderly who do not understand Kiswahili or English. Illiteracy rate in the county is at 38% as a result this population is not able to absorb some of the information on Covid-19 disseminated on radio as its being disseminated in English and Kiswahili. Therefore, there is need to translate the available IEC materials in the local language e.i Chuka/Tharaka both in print media and audio as well as carry out campaigns in the remote areas through vehicle campaigns mounted with public address system for the masses can get information. The information needs also to be child friendly so that it can also cater for the needs of children.

KEY MITIGATION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES;

1. Provision of sanitizers and hand washing facilities in the office.
2. Social distancing in the office with flexibilities of work from home as well as advising the communities we work with to observe the same.
3. Suspension of sustained civic education outreaches at the community level.
4. Keeping Our Social Media active and other lines of communication open for discussing project issues and support for our all stakeholders and collaborators seeking clarifications and related programme support from GRADIF-Kenya staff.
5. Requesting the Civic Educators (CEs) and other Volunteers to submit reports and other related project information through soft copies e.g. emails or WhatsApp.
6. Rethinking on the importance of putting in place a clear contract disengagement (Contract Cancellation due to failure to deliver) clause in all assignments with external consultants and Service providers including the CEs in the event where a National catastrophe of the current magnitude happens.
7. Helping the County and National Government to disseminate critical health messages to the public through our networks platforms and other social media platforms.

OPPORTUNITIES AND FUTURE ADVOCACY ISSUES TO DUTY BEARERS INCLUDING THE NATIONAL AND THE COUNTY GOVERNMENTS.

As Kenya grapples with the COVID -19 challenge, this has awakened us to critically think on some aspects as enshrined in our constitution.

- The government should critically think on the need for implementing a sustainable social protection policy that provides for access to health (Big four agenda) and other public services as a human right.
- The government should access and start planning for critical partnership toward cost effective dissemination of information to all citizens so that they can be able to make informed decisions.
- An opportunity for the government to evaluate on how it plans ie in terms of budgeting for eventualities or disasters e.g. the COVID 19 and locusts
- Need to plan for vulnerable groups of Kenyans such as older people, people with disabilities, pregnant mother and people with preexisting medical conditions. Their needs should be accounted in the policies and strategies to adequately protect such people in case of another pandemic.
- Need to sustain other structures which can come in handy in helping mitigate such a pandemic like supporting the Community Health workers to help in the prevention, preparedness and referral.
- Need for the government to address the health workers' welfare for them to undertake their duties effectively, this has been a bone of contention for quite a while in Kenya.
- Need for GRADIF-K to ensure effective application of technology that supports staff to work from anywhere.