

Organising under curfew: perspectives from Kenya

Angela Chukunzira (9th June 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic has at best exposed the sham of neoliberal capitalism. All the inequalities that existed before the pandemic have actually been exacerbated. The Kenyan state, as is, has inherited the colonial legacies of marginalization and exclusion and this has been highlighted in several ways in the midst of the pandemic. Governments across the globe have restricted movements in forms of curfews and lockdowns and this has had varying effects. In Kenya, there is a curfew that was imposed on 27th March 2020 from dusk to dawn to contain the spread of the virus. In practice, it means that from 7pm to 5 am all public spaces are off limits. On the 6th of June, the curfew hours were shifted from 9pm to 4am.

Social movements have then emerged as an essential service. The hunger and the devastation that is experienced more so by the poor has called for mutual solidarity and aid amongst communities. Social movements have then in turn broadened their communicative practices and new and old ways of organising have merged. And although this brings in new challenges such as the immediacy of the issues being faced versus the importance of ideological change that is required for systemic transformation, the new social movements that are emerging and the relevance of the existing ones is being reinforced by the pandemic.

The intensified war on the poor

The curfew was unfortunately accompanied by atrocities in its reinforcement. The brutality of the state once again reared its ugly head. Mostly the poor working class were the ones caught up while trying to rush home to beat the hours. In the counties of Nairobi and Mombasa specifically the violence meted out on the people saw crowds being teargassed, and beatings for being outside during curfew hours. For most, it was unrealistic to leave work and walk home without being outside the bounds of the curfew. Furthermore, there were even deaths reported such as the 13-year-old boy, Yassin Moyo, who was standing outside the balcony of their home in Kiamaiiko, Nairobi when a stray bullet ended his life. This underpinned the call for justice of social movements that advocate against police brutality.

In at least two other incidents, residents of Nairobi have been left homeless the midst of the pandemic. On the 4th May 2020, at least 5000 people were rendered homeless in Kariobangi. There were demolitions which were justified on the basis that the land on which the houses were built is public land and went ahead despite there being a court order on the contrary. In a similarly devastating incident, on 16th May 2020, at least 200 people were left homeless in Ruai, yet again and these demolitions took place in the dead of night leaving the victims with no place to shelter. The victims of the tragedy were mostly

Internally Displaced Persons from the post-election violence that took place in 2007/8, a double tragedy for the victims. They were allocated that land on which they had settled after the violence and that have been there for the past 12 years. All these demolitions are taking place not only in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also in the middle of the rainy season in Kenya when the infrastructure and hygiene in informal settlements become even more deplorable.

Communication practices of social movements

Movements have been at the core in ensuring that social justice prevails despite the novelty of Covid-19. Old and newer innovative methods have (e)merged in organising practices and communication repertoires and this has allowed movements to be producers of information that is consumed and take a more pro-active role in the narration of their own narratives. The bigger question of digital inequality has obviously emerged. While this has seen hierarchies being replicated in the online space in terms of which types of movements are visible and arguably what type of activists are on the online public sphere, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a unique situation. This is because of the physical distancing that is required, movements and activists have been compelled at least in ways that are possible to them, to engage in the online public sphere. This has of course been extremely unequal but in some ways has broadened the communicative practices of some social movements. In the case of the extreme brutality by the police, a lot of the discussions that were led by social movements were on social media. Hashtags, along with photographs and videos that were taken on smart phones were being used for information. This was also an opportunity for public education and more importantly, give a deeper understanding on the systemic issue over the immediacy of the problem at hand. What was remarkably outstanding was a picture that was shared on social media that compared the brutality of the colonial state to the current police brutality and how the two were parallel to each other.

On the other hand, there was a vigil held in Kiamako, Nairobi for the young boy who fell victim to the stray bullet while maintaining physical distancing. In Kariobangi where the demolitions had taken place, a protest followed. The protest did not necessarily adhere to physical distancing and neither were the protesters in protective gear. The protest was characterized by a blocked road and burning of barricades. Police used teargas and water cannons on the protesters and disrupted the protests. Protestors used the only means at their disposal to express their discontent at the brutality of the state. The reasons given for the disruption of the protests were allegedly being disruptive and they should use the correct channels to air their grievances. This tactic is often used to delegitimize community struggles. However, even within the protest, some video footage taken on smartphones that was shared on social media platforms showing the hybridity of communication repertoires.

In terms of public education around Covid-19 one of the more creative ways in which movements are engaging the public has been the use of graffiti on the walls and the spoken word artistes have also been using poetry. Musicians have also composed songs.

Gradual progressive change

It has been remarkable the solidarity that has been experienced by activists coming together. The neoliberal crisis has further pushed the poor and the vulnerable communities to the brink of mere survival. The pre-occupation of social movements with overcoming daily challenges because of the immediacy of the issues at hand such as distributing food and mutual aid and solidarity for the evicted families may, in some ways obscure the vision for radical transformation in the process. This is to say, the crisis within the crisis is a hinderance for a vision of radical transformation. It remains difficult for social movements to answer because they must practically deal with the immediate problems of communities.

More optimistically however, is how the crisis has also shown that all the crises that are being faced today are intersecting: Patriarchy, climate change, racism among others have been highlighted more deeply with the spread of the virus. This makes the voices of social movements to be even more amplified and giving them more relevance. Although the pandemic may not see the death of capitalism, more people will be convinced of more human-centric models of production furthering the call for change.

Hope for the future

Crises always allow room for new social movements to emerge. In the pandemic era, new ideas are already being formulated. What makes me hopeful is that most of the people calling for transformation are young. This is in part because they are more affected by the neoliberal order, having experienced the deceit of meritocracy and aspiration that they have been taught to believe over the years as a way of escaping the pangs of poverty, rather than eliminating it.

The immediate hunger that is experienced by many, exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic has then made budding movements in Kenya be able to link it directly to the climate catastrophe in which we find ourselves. A movement that is budding around issues of ecological justice has made a radical approach to plant their own food. Using indigenous seeds that are banked by other small peasant farmers as a way to escape the modern agricultural model that is built on multinational corporations destroying the planet and biodiversity. They draw their inspiration from the Arusha Declaration, as articulated by Nyerere. Self-reliance then is seen as an alternative to capitalism. Food directly informs our consciousness and if people can produce and consume their own food, and the social movements that are emerging globally as a direct result of the pandemic can be a source of hope, then not all is bleak. We shall rebuild. We shall restore.

About the author

Angela Chukunzira is a scholar-activist from Nairobi. She is currently based at the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg. Her research examines the link between technology and communication practices of social movements.