

Christiane Stephan

Postdoctoral researcher at

Department of Geography, University of Bonn, Germany

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E32 - Slums as places of innovations, ingenuity and creativity

Title of the paper [changed]: **Navigating uncertainty amidst Covid-19 in slums of Nakuru, Kenya**

**** This paper contains text fragments which are part of a publication currently under review for a chapter in the edited volume "Global Reflections on COVID-19 and Cities: Urban inequalities in the age of pandemic" edited by Brian Doucet, Rianne van Melik, Pierre Fillion. Co-authors of the book chapter are Christiane Stephan (University of Bonn), Mario Schmidt (University of Cologne) and Eric Mutisya Kioko (Kenyatta University)****

Keywords: *slums, innovation, art, Covid-19, relational geographies*

Abstract: This paper discusses people's everyday experiences and practices in dealing with Covid-19 through a conceptual perspective of dealing with uncertainty and aspiring alternative futures. This Kenyan-German research collaboration with empirical field research in Nakuru (and Nairobi) slums, this paper wants to contribute to African knowledge production on the everyday realities of Covid-19 and other crises.

Biographical information: Christiane Stephan is a postdoctoral researcher in human geography at the Department of Geography at University Bonn, Germany. Moreover, she is an associate researcher in the Collaborative Research Centre (DFG) "Future rural Africa" and carries out research on "future visions" among Kenyan civil society. She tweets at @ChrisSteph9.

Picture:



1. Introduction

Together with the Covid-19 pandemic, the containment measures installed in Kenya starting in March 2020, have produced severe challenges to economic and social life within Kenyan society. As dealing with "Corona" has strongly impacted the informal economy, lives in the poorer estates of urban centres are immediately affected. Whereas much attention is given to slums in African capitals like Accra, Cape Town or Nairobi, this research looks into the everyday lives of slum dwellers in Nakuru, an uprising city in Kenya's Rift Valley. Nakuru and especially its urban dynamics have not been in the focus of many research projects up to date. We therefore want to take a chance to share knowledge gained from qualitative research carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic 2020 in three of Nakuru's estates which are often denominated as slums.

Everyday life in Nakuru has been transforming following the COVID-19 containment measures enforced by the national government and city councils in March 2020. In the immediate aftermath of Kenya's first case reported on 13th March, President Uhuru Kenyatta shut down air travel, introduced a nationwide night curfew, restricted movement, introduced a mask requirement, reduced passenger numbers in public transport, closed schools and institutions of higher learning and restricted social gathering. These measures set in motion transformations that span across various networks and scales of the urban. They involve e.g., landlords-tenants and intra-household relationships, but also a large range of other socio-economic arrangements like *saccos* (savings and credit co-operatives) and friendship groups. Moreover, they affect multiple social gathering and caring localities shut down temporarily such as sport bars, betting shops, private daycare centers, liquor stores and churches among others.

Reconfigurations have also been noted on the level of the household and nuclear family. This multifaceted reconfiguration process involves the physical structure and composition of the household, gender and other social identities as well as child-parent relationships and intimate relationships between couples. While we cannot repeat critical debates in social anthropology about the analytical value of the "household" concept (see Guyer 1981, Wilk 1991), we want to highlight that COVID-19 related changes in urban social arrangements (family, kinship groups, etc.) need to be looked at in light of longer-term social changes in contemporary urban Kenya. We want to explore urban uncertainties and innovations in COVID-19 Kenya by engaging with perspectives on the post-colonial city and postcolonial feminist citizenship that allow to "disarticulate the city as the site of masculinist and colonial publics" (Varma 2012: 2).

It is through an ethnographic perspective on people's everyday experiences and practices in a Kenyan-German research collaboration, that this paper wants to contribute to African knowledge production on the everyday realities of Covid-19. The following section introduces a conceptual perspective on dealing with uncertainty and aspiring alternative futures by briefly introducing Appadurai's (2015) term "capacity to aspire". This is followed by in-depth empirical insight from Nakuru, where we carried out qualitative research in July and August 2020. Weaving together the threads of empirical work and conceptual ideas allows us to present – in our last section - a preliminary conclusion on practices of navigating uncertainty, of aspiring and innovating amidst crises (*plural!*) in Nakuru.

Note of the author:

As data analysis for the Nakuru empirical research is still ongoing in November and December 2020, we will only be able to provide the empirical sections of this paper announced in the above introduction in January 2021. Thanks for your understanding. For first insight into our work with empirical data produced with people from urban settlements in Nairobi, please check out the two following blog posts:

<https://developingeconomics.org/2020/11/13/life-on-these-stones-is-very-hard-house-helps-in-covid-19-nairobi/>

<https://developingeconomics.org/2020/10/01/there-is-a-lot-of-pressure-on-me-its-like-the-distance-between-heaven-and-earth-landscapes-of-debt-poverty-in-people-and-social-atomization-in-covid-19-nairobi/>