Diaspora communities in times of reduced mobility

Citation for published version (APA):

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester’s Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
Diaspora communities in times of reduced mobility: COVID-19 and community interactions among Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants in Nairobi

Prof Dr Tanja R. Müller, University of Manchester, UK
Tanja.mueller@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper analyses how COVID-19 and the resultant lock-down policies in Nairobi have impacted migrant community interactions. It is based on preliminary findings of a study that compares the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi, Kenya and Khartoum, Sudan. Drawing on initial interview data collected through virtual interviews with members from both diasporas in Nairobi, it demonstrates the following:

Lock down policies have greatly impacted migrants’ lives through loss of income and reduced remittances. Of the 14 interviewees, even though the majority were in work or employment, almost all relied on additional remittances from diaspora members in countries of the Global North to make a living in Nairobi.

More importantly, COVID-19 policies have reduced or eliminated the social spaces that determine diaspora lives to an often more important degree than material resources. Lock-down policies had the most profound implications in the inability to attend religious gatherings and/or come together over coffee ceremonies. Both are for many the most important social focal points from where other interactions within the diaspora community, but also with other residents in their neighbourhood or the wider city, are being created and maintained.

The above dynamics have severe implications for psychological and holistic well-being of Eritrean and Ethiopian migrant communities who in different ways draw strengths from these social encounters. Government responses have thus affected the livelihoods of these migrants in ways that are ill-understood or ignored. Findings from the paper aim to contribute to a better understanding of the complex dynamics that determine migrant livelihoods. This in turn is hoped to help inform public policy so that in mitigation of COVID-19 and/or outbreaks of similar pandemics in the future, the policy response takes holistic migrant well-being better into account.

Introduction

As was the case for past pandemics like the Spanish flu and HIV/AIDS, COVID-19 affects societies globally not only in relation to health sectors, but in all economic, social and political spheres. While at the time of writing hopes for universal vaccination, eventually leading to human herd immunity, are high, in the real world of entrenched global and national economic rules and supply chains this is likely to remain an imagination rather than reality in the nearer future (Sparke and Anguelov 2020). Conversely, COVID-19 will be here to stay in multiple ways.

In the globalized world we live in, any pandemic profoundly affects migration and mobility. At the same time, well-being of migrant population groups is hardly ever at the forefront of government policies, and much less so during times of
crises. This state of affairs is visible for example in global measures to contain
the spread of COVID-19 that largely centred on lock-downs and (border)
closures, measures regarded as successful to halt the spread of the pandemic
across a large amount of countries (Mueller et al. 2020; Zimmermann et al.
2020). These were also key features of the ‘quick and decisive response’ in
many African countries to the pandemic (Dzinamarira et al. 2020, 2466), and
have disproportionally impacted lives and well-being of migrants or those
dependent on remittances (Mobarak 2020). At the same time, many of the jobs
done by migrants in most societies exposed them to greater risk of COVID-19
infection and exacerbated existing inequalities between different population
groups (Maffioli 2020; Monzó 2020).

In this paper I engage with the impact of COVID-19 responses on diaspora
communities from Ethiopia and Eritrea who reside in Nairobi, Kenya. Based on
initial findings from qualitative interviews I analyse the different ways in which
COVID-19 has impacted migrants’ lives. A recent UN framing suggests that
COVID-19 has resulted in three crises: a health crisis; a socio-economic crisis;
and a protection crisis (UN 2020). I add to this a fourth dimension which I call a
well-being crisis, and this is the focus of my paper. This latter crisis arose as a
result of government policies that force people to be less sociable and intimate.
Such policies, in addition to economic repercussions, have little underst
pecific impacts on diaspora/migrant populations. From my analysis I will
suggest policy recommendations that pay specific attention to these.

COVID-19 and diaspora/migrant populations

While it is still early days in terms of evaluating the impact of COVID-19, the
first publications have started to think through if and potentially in what way
COVID-19 might affect the well-being of mobile populations (Papademetriou
and Hooper, 2020). Key examples here include the case of African migrants in
China (Castillo and Amoah 2020), or the case of internal migrants in India,
where early research on the effect of COVID-19 government lock-down policies
has exposed heightened vulnerability and lack of understanding of migrants’
livelihoods (Khanna 2020).

Looked at from the other side, a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic may
carry within it also the opportunity to re-define international solidarity and
transcend exclusionary nation state borders – not least as the pathogen itself
does ignore such borders (Büyum et al. 2020; Triandafyllidou 2020). It could
open space for a better understanding of migrants’ lives, and potentially lead to
transformative policies in the longer term, policies that acknowledge the
centrality of mobility to economic and social progress, and cater for migrants' health and economic and social well-being in a comprehensive way based on
a collective spirit of shared responsibility among international agencies and
nation-states (see also Igoye 2020; United Nations (UN) 2020).

In order to arrive at such an outcome, an in-depths understanding of migrants’
lives is a key prerequisite. This paper aims to provide some empirical
observations to this end for inter-regional migrants/diasporas, using the
concrete example of members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in Nairobi, Kenya.

Theoretical framework

Conceptually, the literature on lived citizenship combined with the resource profile approach is used to make sense of their experiences under conditions of COVID-19 and the lock-down measures the pandemic has triggered in Nairobi.

The concept of lived citizenship has expanded the understanding of citizenship beyond legal status. It conceives of citizenship as relational and affective practices grounded in multiple forms of interconnectedness (Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Wood and Black, 2018). In focusing on citizenship as practiced in everyday encounters, it allows to analyse the lives of mobile populations regardless of official status or papers, but with respect to acts aimed at securing rights and well-being that may disrupt social-historical patterns of subjugation (for examples see McNevin, 2006; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Müller, 2016; Ticktin, 2006).

The resource profile approach (RPA) has emerged as a critique of the various livelihood frameworks and their focus on capitals or assets (for an overview of these frameworks see Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Moser, 1998; Scoones, 1998). The RPA is related to holistic concepts of well-being, defined as ‘a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals, and where one is able to enjoy a satisfactory quality of life’ (ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD), 2007).

At the centre of the RPA thus is, similarly to the lived citizenship literature, the assertion of agency in the face of structural limitations (McGregor, 2003). The subjective dimensions of individual lives in the process of social reproduction come to the fore, with a focus not on capital assets people possess, but on how resources at peoples’ disposal are used to achieve well-being (White and Ellison, 2007). The wider literature around the RPA has demonstrated that the links between material resources and well-being are often weak (McGregor, 2007:335), but interventions are still predominately geared towards shoring up material assets. Applying a lens that focuses on lived citizenship and immaterial resources may in turn point to holistic interventions that take the intangible aspects of people’s well-being better into account.

Methodology

This paper is based on the analysis of interviews conducted with 14 members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi, Kenya. Six participants were Ethiopian (3 men and 3 women), eight were Eritrean (5 men and 3 women). Some were long-term residents of Nairobi with relevant papers like work permits, some were recognised refugees, others were non-status refugees – but even the latter had lived for a number of years in Nairobi.

The interviews were conducted for a broader comparative study on transnational lived citizenship and belonging among regional diasporas in urban centres of the Horn of Africa (with the cities Nairobi; Khartoum and Addis
Ababa as the key sites). Face-to-face fieldwork was to commence in Nairobi in March 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic had to be delayed. Instead of sampling based on participant observation of diaspora community activities on the ground, snowball sampling starting from informal personal networks was used to conduct virtual interviews via zoom of WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted by the postdoctoral researcher of the project, Mesghina Abraha, and specific questions on the effect of COVID-19 on diaspora lives were added, questions that were not part of the original research design. Answers to those questions form the empirical base for this paper.

Participants have been anonymised and any markers that could help identify them have been removed from the paper. The project received all required ethical approvals. All participants agreed to the usage of anonymised content and quotations from their interviews in publications.

‘The corona pandemic has affected every inch of our lives’: Analysis and results

The analysis of the interview data on the one hand confirms much of what the early literature on the impact of COVID-19 has outlined, but it also adds additional dimensions that are of particular relevance to diaspora populations or migrants more generally. For everyday lived citizenship and holistic well-being, material and immaterial dimensions are of key importance, and in both spheres, in the words of one participant, ‘the corona pandemic has affected every inch of our lives’ (virtual interview with ‘A’, 8 October 2020).

In relation to material well-being or economic impacts, many diaspora community members work in sectors particularly affected by the pandemic, namely the hospitality industry or as drivers. One respondent estimated that around 60-70% of the workforce in those sectors have lost their jobs – an impression that cannot easily be verified but that gives some indication of the subjective, felt effect of COVID-19 within the diaspora communities.

Many of these jobs are done on an informal or semi-formal basis, which makes it easy for employers to reduce working hours and wages. The albeit limited interview sample points to a notable difference here between Eritrean and Ethiopian employers that might be followed up more systematically in future interviews: among Eritreans little to no effort has been reported by business owners to help their struggling compatriots. Respondent ‘D’ says in this respect that for Eritrean-run businesses it is good ‘to have cheap labour’, in fact often by qualified Eritrean employees who they pay meagre wages as they lack official papers, while ‘for us [Eritreans] it is an earning, we have to chase those

1 Lockdown measure were implemented in Nairobi in late March and eased on 28 September as the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to slow. When the pandemic situation worsened again a little more than a month later, on 4th November new restrictions were announced to last until early January 2021. In the second quarter of 2020, Kenyan gross domestic product reportedly shrank by 5.7%, and at least 1.7m people lost their employment. According to data from the Central Bank of Kenya, while diaspora remittances fell on a months-by-months basis lately, they are still higher than one year ago – reflecting the fact that diaspora remittances in particular from the US and Europe have grown constantly over the past few decades to become Kenya’s single biggest source of foreign exchange.
jobs and if we are lucky we get one’ (virtual interview with ‘D’, 6 October 2020).
Job insecurity is also a feature for Ethiopian diaspora members, the Ethiopian business community seems more sympathetic, on an individual basis but also, as will be discussed further below, as a collective.

In relation to individual experiences respondent ‘B’, who works for an Ethiopian compatriot, explains: ‘Our wages and job is not guaranteed by law, we are casual workers […]. I entirely depend on the mercy of the owner, if she wants, she can fire me anytime […]. I want to thank her for letting me work when possible. I owe her a lot for the help she gave me during that difficult time (virtual interview with ‘B’, 31 October 2020).

Perhaps even more difficult was the situation for those who are self-employed and/or have a business that caters for their local community, including taxi drivers or the owners of hairdresser shops or small restaurants. Many of these businesses had to close when lockdown measures started, and hardly anybody had insurance or was entitled to some form of compensation, nor did alternative means to earn an income exist. Many Eritreans only survived through ad-hoc support measures in their neighbourhoods or through friends, leaving those who lived in areas of the city without a substantial diaspora community at a distinct disadvantage.

In addition, many Eritreans in particular partly rely on remittances from abroad at the best of times, 80% of Eritreans in Nairobi respondent ‘C’ estimates, and cannot make ends meet otherwise. But remittances for many have decreased in the times of COVID-19, as also discussed in the wider literature, and they struggle to make ends meet. At the same time, those who still get remittances often share those with others, as reflected upon by respondent ‘C’ in drawing a comparison with wider Eritrean history: ‘It reminds me of the time in 1990 when Massawa was liberated and people in Asmara were struggling to get some food, our mothers then shared what they had with their neighbours to get through that difficult time” (virtual interview with ‘C’, 28 September 2020).

Taken together, for members of the Eritrean diaspora, mutual support largely emerged from informal networks of peer-to-peer support or local community groups, also involving local faith-based organisations. In contrast, Ethiopian participants reported a coordinated response by business owners and other wealthy members of the Ethiopian diaspora. Reportedly partly coordinated through the Ethiopian embassy, immediate support was provided and additional funds were raised to buy necessities like flour and sugar for those who lost their work, but also monthly stipends to those affected by lock-down policies and closures (virtual interview with ‘E’, 8 September 2020).^2

Many of the challenges raised by members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi in relation to employment and economic security are similar to those of migrant workers more generally, be they internal or external

---

^2 The postdoctoral researcher was tasked with following up on these networks, but this has proven impossible virtually. We thus hope to gather more information on these activities through face-to-face conversations with relevant people involved once COVID-19 makes actual research in Nairobi possible again. Thus the discussion provided here is very much tentative.
migrants. But for both diasporas particular challenges arose, related to their networks and cultural habits within their communities.

Two social activities are of prime importance within both communities to similar degrees: gathering for daily coffee ceremonies to exchange news but also develop helping networks and strategies; and attendance at religious gatherings, predominately Christian churches ranging from Orthodox, Catholic to Pentecostal churches for Eritreans, and Christian and Muslim places of worship for Ethiopians. Religious bodies were in addition to different degrees involved in the provision of services. With lock down measures, both social activities became severely curtailed, albeit to different degrees.

Many churches were closed during the lock-down periods, or had visiting numbers curtailed. For many Eritreans and Ethiopian, especially those who live on their own, church gatherings are the most important means to meet others, in terms of social connections as well as in relation to ask for actual help with any emerging problems. Some churches organised prayer sessions via zoom, as respondent ‘A’ elaborates: ‘One good thing was the church had organised daily prayer time using Zoom. That felt like we were together because we can see each other’s faces on the screen. That was great […] for people to comfort one another. We were spending more than one hour chatting after the prayer time to talk about how people were doing during lockdown […] Some people did not have the opportunity to join and were suffering psychologically [as a result]. Some Eritreans were meeting up with their Eritrean neighbours in small numbers, to overcome that’ (virtual interview with ‘A’, 8 October 2020).

Some were members of small congregations that were still allowed to meet in person. ‘Luckily our congregation is less than the maximum number allowed to congregate in church. Therefore, we are still having church services as usual following the government guidance of social distancing and face masks. For example, we had beautiful Qudus Yohannes (Geez New Year’s Day) and Meskel (Holy Cross) celebrations in church. Entire families were able to take part’ (virtual interview, ‘G’, 29 September 2020).

But especially for those who live in neighbourhoods without a substantive diaspora community and/or those living on their own, without family or relatives, isolation was a constant struggle. Eritreans [and Ethiopians] are social animals, ‘people cannot handle the loneliness’ (virtual interview with F’, 9 September 2020). That fact makes the daily coffee ceremony so relevant.

Apart from or in addition to church/mosque gathering, the coffee ceremony is often the only social outlet for many, and a key feature of everyday life including also in their home country, a feature even more important in a diasporic setting. It is the glue that holds society together. But coffee ceremonies have in some areas ceased almost completely with lock-down policies, according to some informants. ‘People started to monitor neighbourhoods for COVID-19 symptoms, and if they see somebody breaking the rules, they pass it on to the authorities to safeguard the neighbourhood health […] people are very active in that respect to ensure government guidelines are followed’. This has resulted in a state of affairs where ‘we refrain from going into other people’s houses and have coffee as we used to, this has created pressures on our lives’ (virtual
Interview with ‘E’, 8 September 2020). This pressure is more devastating for single men, who not only often lack the equipment necessary for a proper coffee ceremony and who in the past would have been invited by women living in their neighbourhood or connections further away, as travel and visiting were now constrained while coffee houses they would otherwise go to also remained closed.

Others were lucky in relation to their personal living conditions, one example here is ‘C’ who says: ‘If I see it from my building’s perspective, I can say we are lucky. I personally did not go out for two months at the beginning of the pandemic, I used my time to finalise some project. But in this neighbourhood in general and my building in particular I always hear people laughing. People were trying to forget their problems by congregating in small groups inside their houses and chat, having fun and laughter while having traditional coffee, eating what they had together, doing most of the things together with their neighbours. That encouraged me to be optimistic that this problem will go away and the community will overcome it together’ (virtual interview with ‘C’, 28 September 2020).

Having a profession that lends itself to upgrading via online resources often also helped in particular those living on their own, as ‘H’, who works in accounting explains: ‘I try to upgrade myself doing online tutorials regarding my profession’ (virtual interview, ‘H’, 28 September 2020).

Taken together, those who could continue to draw on faith-based networks and/or the solidarity of friends, neighbours or communities were navigating the challenges of COVID-19 in a much better way, even if the economic repercussions remain a key concern. For some, who live quiet lives, little might have changed as a result of COVID-19 with respect to social dynamics. ‘I’ explains in this regard: ‘For me the lockdown did not make any difference, because I do not go out that much. I only go to visit friends and go to the mosque, and both were not much affected. The only thing is wearing a mask while in buses and taxis. I also have friends that visit me. That has not changed throughout the pandemic. Therefore, socially I was OK’ (virtual interview with ‘I’, 31 October 2020; ‘I’ manages financially because her partner lives in the UK and supports her).

Ultimately, how well participants dealt with COVID-19 repercussions and in particular the lock-down depended strongly on their networks, be they partly abroad as in the case of ‘I’ above or in the city, as ‘B’, who shares a flat with a friend from the same diaspora community sums up well: ‘We were able to survive the lockdown because I shared my expenses and my life with my friend. We were and are still supporting one another in all aspects, financially, emotionally and socially. That is a blessing for me’ (virtual interview with ‘B’, 31 October 2020).

Linking these findings back to lived citizenship and resource profiles, it is clear that lock-down policies have not had the worst repercussions in terms of material deprivation. While loss of income and economic insecurity was a constant threat, this threat is actually always present also in non-COVID times. What lock down policies have however undermined for many were
opportunities to gather in circles that are vital for well-being, most pronounced in relation to faith-based gatherings and coffee ceremonies. But such social and cultural practices feature little in policy discussions on mitigating the impact of COVID-19.

What was also notable among all respondents was the lack of support they received from international actors like the UNHCR, including those registered with the agency and/or awaiting status outcomes or outcomes on potential resettlement, for which many had applied often a long time ago. In some cases, UNHCR rather augmented fears and anxiety instead of being helpful, according to some respondents: ‘UNHCR is sending text messages asking refugees to verify themselves. Nobody knows the purpose of this. The majority of people here wait for resettlement and people do not know if the text is good news or bad. Some have optimism that their process got a positive result and that the text is sent to such people. Others think it is for the purpose of checking up on them. This has a psychological impact or puts pressure on people who have received such text messages’ (virtual interview with ‘G’, 29 September 2020).

**Conclusion and policy recommendations**

In this paper I have provided empirical evidence of the effects of COVID-19 lock-down measures on members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora communities in Nairobi, Kenya. Making use of the RPA and conceiving of citizenship as a practice enacted in daily encounters, I have shown that key social and cultural practices were undermined by those policies, which has affected holistic well-being among participants to different degrees. These preliminary findings, even if based on a small sample, lend themselves to a number of policy recommendations in relation to migrant/diaspora communities:

Firstly, a neglected arena are the vital social contacts migrants have within their communities. While the impact of COVID-19 on mental health has been acknowledged in the wider literature, including for distinct population groups such as children; elders; people with disabilities; as well as health workers (see for example Javed at al., 2020), systematic studies on how to address lost community connections are lacking – and little concern is given specifically to mobile populations. Rather, even though COVID-19 has actually put to the fore the interconnectedness of human life, the global response to the pandemic, also in Kenya, has focused on measures that are likely to increase isolation and trauma when people do not find safe ways to navigate those measures in ways that ensure survival as a community (see also Watson et al., 2020). Participants in this study who feared reporting of potential rule-breaking by neighbours to the authorities are a case in point here.

Secondly, calls for community-centred approaches to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, in relation to health care but also beyond, have great scope to become more innovative. Important physical practices of affection can be replaced in innovative was with verbal and/or virtual ways to convene the same or similar closeness and caring (see for example Falicov et al., 2020). An example from my data are the zoom church prayers, and there is ample room to consider the creation of community groups in new ways that can provide help
and support. Diaspora communities here are in a good position to lead by example, as diaspora lives unfold in a transnational social field that requires innovative ways to sustain identities and belonging. In addition, UNHCR could potentially have an important role here, as could other UN or international agencies.

In addition, much has been said about the important role of Civil Society Organisations (CBOs) in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Indeed, civil society in its organised form has played and continues to play a vital role here (a good summary on a global scale is given by Civicus, 2020). But here the focus is predominately on organised parts within the NGO sector, whereas diaspora networks are often informal, all the more so in settings where diaspora members may not have the right residency papers for their place of residence (as was also the case with some informants for this paper). Thus a better recognition of informal networks and an effort to link those with state or non-state actors, but also across wider regional and international networks would be useful. Diaspora groups are often only recognised as vital contributors when they are based in the Global North and provide help to their country of origin or people from their country of origin in the Global South. Such an approach fails to make use of the many connections that determine transnational lived citizenship across such imagined geographies of power and resources.

Lastly, diaspora populations, through the interconnectedness of their lives between their country of origin, their country of residence and the wider transnational social field, could become key actors in imagining different ways to ensure people’s well-being in a holistic way, beyond material resources, as envisaged by a RPA and a focus on laying activist claim to citizenship. Such visions have been formulated as a tentative agenda for certain regions of the world in light of COVID-19 (see for example Kabutaulaka, 2020) – based largely on nation states as crucial actors, and diasporas could be a way to move beyond the state here. From the interview data presented, the tentative effort by wealthy members of the Ethiopian business community to provide monthly stipends to those in need, a move not dissimilar in approach to that propagated by supporters of a Universal Basic Income, is a case in point: If a coalition of diaspora, state and non-state actors and international organisations would pool resources in a way to provide such an income, holistic well-being among mobile populations would be greatly advanced.

Funding: This paper came out of a study entitled: Transnational Lived Citizenship: Practices of Citizenship as political belonging among emerging diasporas in the Horn of Africa (2020-2023), funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, Grant number: ES/S016589/1. This support is gratefully acknowledged.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank all interviewees for their time and engagement with the project. I also thank the postdoctoral researchers Mesghina Abraha for conducting the interviews and translating the interview data into English.
About the Author: Tanja R. Müller is Professor of Political Sociology at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. She has worked and published on political development in the Horn of Africa for three decades. She has also published on refugee rights and conceptions of citizenship in leading journals and is the Principal Investigator of an ESRC-funded project on Transnational Lived Citizenship among diaspora populations in the Horn of Africa (2020-2023).

References


