



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South

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Informal settlements in Sub-Saharan Africa

Informal settlements are defined according to *UN Habitat* program as residential areas where housing has been built irregularly and does not meet current planning and construction standards. Therefore, informal settlements are intrinsically part of a country's informal economy as they are outside of government's regulation and consequently not protected or controlled by it. In most cases, informal settlements also lack access to public services such as drinking water, sanitation, electricity, gas or waste collection.

The lack of access to basic infrastructure, which is often also due to the high concentration of people in a small space, makes the inhabitants of informal settlements more vulnerable to natural phenomena such as floods, extreme heat and the spread of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis or the current covid-19. This large concentration of people and the lack of sanitation infrastructure makes it impossible to comply with the preventive measures for the SARS-CoV-2 spread recommended by the *World Health Organization (WHO)*: keep one meter distance between people and wash the hands often (WHO, 2020).

Due to the informal nature of the settlements, it is difficult to estimate its number or the number of inhabitants living there. However, the *University of Chicago* through the GIS database open source *OpenStreetMap* carries out the *Million Neighborhoods* project where it locates the inhabited areas that have more (blue) or less (red) access to urban infrastructure such as streets and roads. In this way it estimates that the areas with more limited access to urban infrastructures are those with a higher density of informal settlements.

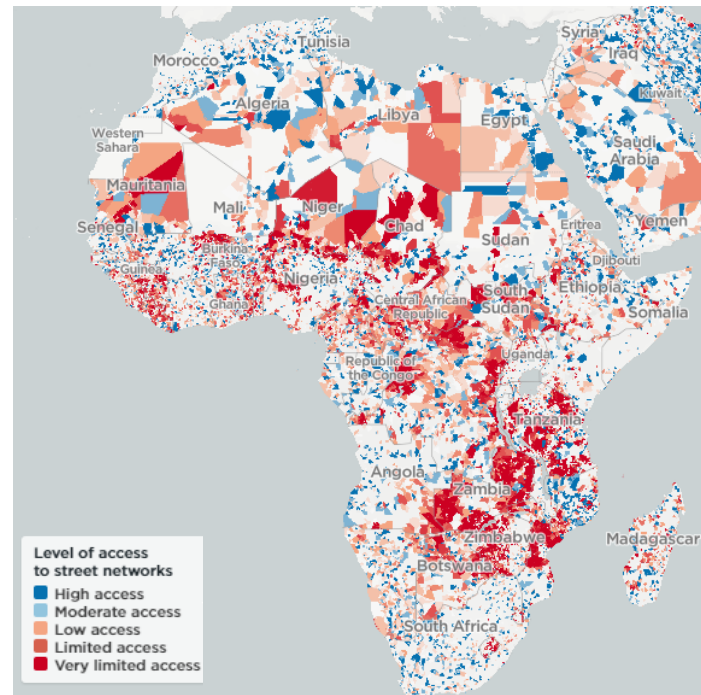


Figure 1. Access to urban infrastructures in Africa. Source: University of Chicago

The urban and housing characteristics of informal settlements and their population are contextually very different. In sub-Saharan Africa, according to the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)*, half the population lives in informal settlements (OECD, 2020). These are inhabited by local citizens with low socio-economic status, internally displaced persons or refugees and asylum seekers. For example, according to the *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)* the political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo has generated a total of 5.5 million internally displaced persons since 1990. Even in north-eastern Nigeria, due to violence by the jihadist group *Boko Haram* and tensions between different ethnic groups, 2.5 million people are currently internally displaced.

During the months of confinement the inhabitants of informal settlements have on the one hand not been able to comply with the recommended prevention measures. On the other hand, although differently depending on the country and the legal situation of the people, they have seen their socio-economic situation becoming increasingly vulnerable.

In mid-April in Gabon, days after the imposition of the confinement measures, the inhabitants of an informal settlement based neighbourhood in Libreville, the capital, carried out several sit-in protest at military checkpoints. They demanded from the government that the aid measures agreed during the confinement reach everyone, as many are not registered anywhere and would therefore not have access to the expected support.

In Ethiopia, different economic migrants living in informal settlements express, through the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation*, that they feel unprotected and defenceless against the virus because they live together and have to share toilets and showers among many. Also, they are afraid that if they were infected, they would not have the means to treat themselves as many are in an irregular situation in the country.

In Madagascar, the newspaper *Midi Madagasikara* denounces the strong stigmatization caused by the fact that the government made public the areas where there were more covid-19 cases. This is the case of an informal settlement based neighbourhood of the capital Antananarivo, where the inhabitants complain that for being from this suburb they are losing their jobs and their children are being temporarily expelled from school.

The Republic of Uganda, after Turkey and Pakistan, is the country that hosts more refugees in the world, 1.2 million. They live in refugee camps managed by the *UNHCR*, as urban refugees in cities and in informal settlements (IOM, 2020). Due to the closure of schools in the country, many refugee children have been left without access to education as it has become through radio or television and in many cases they do not have access to it. Moreover, these educational programs are broadcast in the main language of each area of the country (Bantu, Nilotic, Central Sudanese or Kuliak languages) which refugees do not know and therefore cannot benefit from.

In the province of West Darfur, in the west of Sudan, the *West Darfur Network for the Protection of Displaced Women* carries out awareness campaigns on prevention measures for the spread of covid-19 in the informal settlements of the region since the majority of them have no access to radio, television or internet. The *Network* also calls on the regional government to distribute food and hygiene kits to a population that can no longer leave the settlement in order to do work informally nor have the means to comply with prevention measures.

The composition and situation of informal settlements in sub-Saharan Africa is diverse and varied. However, high population density, lack of urban and sanitation infrastructure and irregular living conditions are shared factors that make it difficult to comply with covid-19 prevention measures and worsen the socio-economic consequences of the confinement and the pandemic.

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The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>