

Letter of Appeal from Amos Kipeen

Aitong, Kenya

April 2020

I am writing on behalf of Mara Community due to the impact of the current pandemic COVID-19 on Mara residents and the immediate communities. The Coronavirus pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time.

As people across the world struggle to adapt their way of life to the unfolding COVID-19, the Maasai people of East Africa, particularly the communities living around the great Maasai Mara game reserve and its environs, are already having to change ancient customs to minimize the impact of the disease.

There are over a million Maasai people in Kenya, and this great people risk getting largely impacted by the economic downfall caused by this pandemic.

As a pastoral community that is dependent on livestock, the government order to close the vibrant livestock and groceries' markets has taken our only means to buy food, as the community has to sell their animals to buy food. While the pastoral traditional production system has already been brought to a halt, the nutritional status of the local Maasai communities is often sustained through supplementary supply of vegetables and starch procured from the market.

On the other hand, being close to Maasai Mara, the community was largely dependent on tourism. The government order to close its border has deprived the community of a major source of revenue as many camps have closed. Hence many of the community members have been rendered jobless or others sent on compulsory unpaid leave. Due to high illiteracy in the community, the impact of this pandemic is not fully understood, increasing the risk of contracting the disease. Hence the need for a rapid response.

We continue with educating the community on the measures being taken to limit the spread of the disease through taking various drastic measures like immediate and indefinite dissolutions of cultural rites of passage such as the building of ceremonial structures (Manyattas), and of warrior's graduation and burial rites. The various rites of passage that are critical in identity formation and sustenance of cultural heritage have been disrupted prematurely and indefinitely. It remains to be seen how the community will respond and redefine such rites of passage post COVID-19.

While there are no confirmed COVID-19 positive cases yet within our Mara communities and even the larger Narok County, it's dreadful to imagine the likely repercussions of such a

scenario. Access to health services, clean water, let alone soap, sanitizers, and masks is constrained to say the least even under ordinary conditions.

Even before COVID-19 hit, 113 million people on the planet were already struggling with severe acute food insecurity due to pre-existing shocks or crises. This means they were already on the extreme end of the hunger spectrum-weak, and less well-equipped to fend off the virus. The vast majority live in rural areas, and in this particular case the Maasai Community, and depends on agricultural production, seasonal jobs in tourism, or pastoralism. If they become ill or constrained by restrictions on movement or activity, they will be prevented from caring for their animals, accessing markets to sell their animals, and buying food and supplies.

These people have very little to fall back on, materially speaking. They could find themselves forced to abandon their livelihoods. By that I mean they might have to sell off their animals. Once a rural farming family does that, getting to be self-reliant again becomes extremely difficult. Some might even have no other choice than to leave their farms and the little animals that remain in search of assistance. This in return will present a very dreadful impact on our wildlife as most of the people will have no option but to consume what is available like poaching activities!

As the crisis impacts on every aspect of Kenya's society today, the effects will continue to be felt long after the crisis is over. Its impact on the socioeconomic activities in the country will expose already vulnerable and marginalized communities to more suffering. The economic fallout in the country is likely to be severe and long-lasting, consequently undermining the country's prospects of achieving its long-term development aspirations, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- Amos Kipeen