

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LABOUR MARKET IN KENYA

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Abstract

The outbreak of the corona virus affected peoples' way of life hugely across the globe. The resulting effects shocked even the most advanced companies. The effect of the virus has not only affected the health and well-being of people, but also their economic well-being. Globally, various governments introduced mitigating measures including lockdowns, restrictions on movements, curfews, social distancing, mask wearing and, finally, vaccination programs. This study aimed to establish how COVID-19 affected the labor market in Kenya; how the pandemic affected workers differently; what new skills were required for workers to cope with the pandemic; and training programs that were initiated for workers during and after the pandemic. The study gathered information from a group of key stakeholders, totaling 20, both from the public and private sectors.

Keywords: *Impact, Covid-19, Kenya, Labor Market, Lockdown, Pandemic.*

JEL Classification: *J01; J19*

Introduction^[EG1]

The first Covid-19 case was reported on the 12th of December 2019 in Wuhan, China, prompting countries to institute drastic measures such as lockdown and social distancing. These measures translated to a paradigm shift for job performance, because in some instances working hours were reduced from the normal eight hours per day to less, whilst others resorted to working from home to reduce the risks of contracting the disease (Gupta et al. 2020). Cross-border workers were affected in two ways, as the reality of travel restrictions implied that they could not travel back to their workplaces or they could not leave their workplaces to visit their families, resulting in working from home and, in extreme instances, job losses were reported (Yasenov, 2020). The reality of restricted movement affected many entities in Kenya that relied on movement for labor supply. Restrictions also reduced the demand for certain services and products, leading to reduced workforces, as some entities were forced to cease operations completely, in both cases employees lost their jobs as a result (Gupta et al. 2020).

Problem Statement

Many countries across the globe are still experiencing economic crises associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Being a global pandemic, the effect on labour was expected. Redundancy in employment, reductions in incomes and increased poverty are eminent challenges that emerged. The results could have short, medium, and long-term effects that can be painful to the working class and businesses, at large. For instance, loss of earnings owing to job losses, loss of productivity, as well as on the job training and experience to build human capital in the nation.

Research questions

The main research question was:

- How has COVID-19 affected the labour market in Kenya?

The subsidiary research questions were:

- Which sectors were affected mostly during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How has the pandemic affected workers differently?
- What new skills were needed for workers to cope with the pandemic?
- What different work approaches were adopted during the Covid-19 period?

Research Objectives

The study's main objective was:

- To establish how COVID-19 affected the labour market in Kenya.

The subsidiary objectives were:

- To establish, which sectors were affected mostly during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To find out how the pandemic affected workers differently.
- To establish the new skills that workers needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To establish different approaches of working during the Covid-19 period.

Significance of the study

This study is significant for the Kenyan government because it highlights the impact of the pandemic on the economy, thereby informing policy direction for the government to rebuild the economy. The study will also be important for the country's Ministry of Health, as it provides guidance for mitigating measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the study is significant for labour suppliers, as it highlights areas that were highly affected and proffer solutions to bring operations back to normal, whilst establishing measures to reduce losses. The study is also important for workers and prospective workers, as it highlights required skills during the pandemic, giving workers an opportunity to pursue these skills that they can use in future. Finally, scholars should also benefit from the study, as it gives them an opportunity to expand upon unexplored areas of the study in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Theoretical foundation

Impact of Covid-19 on labour market in Kenya

Jobs that were most affected by the pandemic included those in unskilled labour, that is, those with little or no qualifications, which in turn increased disparities in the labour market. Workers in this category were not able to work remotely, as they had to present themselves physically at the workplace to execute their tasks (Yasenov, 2020). These workers were affected the most by the Covid-19 pandemic. They included workers in the hospitality industry, food industry and construction industry. Equally, owing to the nature of their work, they could not observe social distancing in the execution of their duties, and were, therefore, affected the most (Pouliakas and Branka, 2020).

Because most employees worked from home, their productivity was at a low level at the start of the pandemic since many employees were learning how to work from home. In addition, those who were affected or infected during lockdown, could not cope with working from home owing to complications to manage Covid-19 from home (Jones, 2020). Unlike previous pandemics, where the effects were felt more on men than women, Covid-19 was different, as more women experienced job losses compared to men because of a higher concentration of women in the hospitality and food industries that were highly affected. Additionally, women were required to pay more attention to children and were thus forced to concentrate more on childcare than their work (Desson *et al.*, 2020). The higher rate of job losses for female employees compared to their male counterparts exposed the economic disparity between men and women, as men had the most reduced working time (Kristal *et al.*, 2020).

The pandemic has affected the health sector, as well as other economic sectors in Kenya. Most companies closed owing to the effects of Covid-19 and, by extension, affected employee livelihoods since they lost their jobs as a result (Yasenov, 2020). The pandemic has affected several industries and prompted them to change their ways of doing things, while others were severely affected because of the changes and were forced to shut down (Jones, 2020). Consequently, other sectors and industries progressed by capitalizing on certain unexploited opportunities (Nordling, 2020). In Kenya, Covid-19 affected both rural and urban populations equally. The introduction of the vaccination helped to reduce the pandemic's impact, particularly in urban areas, as many in the rural areas were sceptical and afraid of taking the vaccination because of their cultural beliefs (Wesonga & Kulohoma, 2020). This meant that the pandemic affected informal sector employees more than those who worked in the formal sector, as they were mainly concentrated in the urban areas.

Covid-19 has had a negative as well as positive impact on the Kenyan labor market. While some jobs were created during the pandemic, other jobs were lost at the same time. Several employees were affected when companies ceased their operations owing to reduced production because of the economic downturn. Conversely, employees who were technologically inclined worked from home, especially those in the service industry, thus maintaining or, in some cases, boosting employment labor (Shaw, 2020). The situation also forced many companies to downsize and utilize only employees who could work from home as a way of cutting their operational costs, largely in the form of remunerations (Irura

& Bett, 2020). Kenya witnessed retrenchments both in the public and private sectors owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most affected companies were in the manufacturing sector, which relies more on non-technical workers to achieve their production targets. Most employees in this sector are manual laborers who cannot operate from home (Githinji, de Laurent & Said, 2020).

Workers from the affected companies experienced several challenges, including those in the public sector, as they could not secure other employment easily owing to the economy's poor performance (AMREF, 2020). Life in the capital cities, where the affected companies operate, became difficult for most of the downsized workers, as they were unable to afford basic needs to sustain their families. The workers have had no previous training in entrepreneurship and lacked capital to start small businesses that could provide basic needs for their families (Shaw, 2020). Those most affected were men who are the breadwinners of their families (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Most of the downsized male workers have families in the upcountry, who stay with their parents and who also depend on the earnings of their son for their daily upkeep (Anderson, Heesterbeek, Klinkenberg & Hollingsworth, 2020). In cases where both the husband and wife were employed, if the wife lost employment, the husband was left to shelter all responsibilities (Alon & Tertilt, 2020). Consequently, most of the Covid-19 affected male employees opted for informal business activities after losing their jobs to continue providing for their families, while most of the women became full-time housewives instead after experiencing downsizing at their companies, since they would not enjoy the same benefits that they received in the formal sector, and hence found it difficult to cope with life in the informal sector (Quaife, van Zandvoort & Gimma, 2020).

Effectsof Covid-19 on employment protection

In most African countries, specifically Kenya, the labor market is still in an infancy stage compared to developed countries, where employees have insurance, paid by employers to safeguard them in the case of job losses (Shaw, 2020). In Kenya's case, where several manufacturing companies shut down operations because of Covid-19, insurance policies could have assured employees of continued earnings through compensation while they search for other employment. This could have protected the families of the affected employees from their undue suffering.

Previously, the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) created several employments for Kenyans, especially women. Hence, the government must protect the operations of the Export Processing Zones to safeguard jobs in those sectors. Mechanisms such as tax incentives and regulated importation can help in this regard (Wesonga & Kulohoma, 2020). However, the Kenyan government seems to have failed to protect employees in this sector through progressive legislation. Instead, the government has established legislation that favors investors at the expense of employees (Irura & Bett, 2020). This sector was also heavily affected by the pandemic, as most of the employees who lost their jobs were from the Export Processing Zones. The effect of Covid-19 on employees in the Export Processing Zones could have been minimized if they were allowed to join trade unions to agitate for their welfare (Jones, 2020). While foreign investors were allowed to enjoy tax holidays and the government provided free land during the Covid-19 pandemic, the employees were sent packing owing to business downturn as a direct result of the restrictions on movement locally, as well as internationally, which affected manufacturing and sales, as most products were for exporting (Githinji, de Laurent & Said, 2020).

Covid-19 forced most organizations to change their initial objectives and targets because of changes that occurred in the market, both locally and internationally. The current situation prompted firms to decrease their operational costs by adopting modern technologies to increase their revenue streams to remain competitively afloat. The adoption of modern technology was meant to reduce employment costs through job cuts, as employment costs are one of the major operational costs of any organization. This resulted in the firm's reducing jobs, whilst engaging employees in atypical employment as opposed to decent job employment (WHO, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, Covid-19 contributed to an increased informal sector in Kenya. Many of the retrenched employees in the formal sectors found solace in the informal sectors to cater for their families (Yue, Clapham & Cook, 2020). In fact, urban centers witnessed mushrooming of informal employments, as most people converted their private companies to mobile shops that traded in all types of items, ranging from fruit, vegetables, and eggs at strategic positions in the urban centers. The informal employment was fueled by the fact that most formal supermarkets had scaled down their operations and the high demand for food products forced households to purchase from the new informal markets.

Research methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, guided by the research questions. The researcher targeted top management from the ministry of labour, labour market consultants, as well as employees from both the formal and informal sectors. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and the respondents were free to expound on specific guided questions. During the interviews, data collection was guided by the responses; where the researcher felt that the research questions had been adequately answered, the interview ended, especially when further interviews merely repeated similar previous answers to questions posed (Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020). The study targeted participants for the interviews, totalling 20 key stakeholders. The collected data was mainly primary data, as the key stakeholders shared first-hand information from their lived experiences of the impact of Covid-19 on Kenyan labour markets.

Sampling

The study utilised purposive sampling, involving a total of 20 key stakeholders who were interviewed. These participants comprised three top managers from the Ministry of Labour, two labour market consultants, five employees from the Export Processing Zones in the Athi River, five employees from government ministries and from informal sector employees from Jogoo Road in Nairobi. The researcher assured the participants about confidentiality of the information that they share. The 20 sampled population participants were given unique coded names, for example respondent 1 to 20, to protect their identity.

Data analysis

The collected data was reviewed and compared to eliminate duplication and repetitions. In other words, data collection is presumed to be optimum when saturation level is reached (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The collected data from the interviews was grouped into contents for analysis purposes. The data was analysed systematically in terms of derived groupings from data, while the findings were then discussed to give meaningfulness to the data (Bogner, Litting & Menz, 2009). Furthermore, the data was discussed based on the research questions and research study's objectives.

Results and discussion

The Kenyan government took measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 that resulted in job losses, both in the formal and informal sectors for casual workers

and daily wage earners, where most of the employees are women (Ahmed, Abu & Saboor, 2020). The introduction of lockdowns and restrictions in movement from one town and areas to others resulted in job losses, mostly for workers who could not access their workplaces, thereby leading to losses of livelihoods.

Most workers earn little income and cannot save. Thus, a loss of income means a slip into poverty, as there is no other means to keep the family going. This simply means that this category of workers has been struggling to regain life as they knew it prior to the pandemic. In May 2020, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) conducted a survey and established that the labour force participation rate had significantly decreased owing to the pandemic. World Bank statistics indicate that Kenya had 75% labour force participation rate in 2019, but the rate fell to 56.8% in April 2020 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The report established that the number of workers, both informal and formal, had plunged to 65.3% for men and 48.8% for women. Unemployment experienced in both the informal and formal sectors contributed to the decline. Covid-19 interrupted income streams and cut supply and demand for goods and services, compelling companies to engage in numerous survival tactics to continue in business. Organizations have been forced to reduce their respective workforces, offer unpaid leave, or reduce working hours and only pay for the time worked.

Sectors mostly affected

Kenya has experienced serious economic drawbacks owing to the impact of Covid-19 since 13 March 2020, when the country's first case was discovered. The Kenyan government initiated several measures to mitigate the rapid spread of the virus. Among them was suspension of international flights, albeit cargo flights, effective 25th of March 2020. Travellers to Kenya were subjected to a mandatory quarantine of 14 days at their own cost and anybody who violated the mandatory quarantine was arrested at the end of the 14 days and charged in accordance with the country's Public Health Act. Effective from the 27th of March 2020, the government introduced a curfew from 19:00-05:00, and besides the disciplined forces, health workers and essential service providers, everybody else was expected to be adhere to the curfew and not be outdoors during the stipulated timeframe.

All eateries and entertainment facilities were closed, and restaurants were only allowed to offer takeaways. The government further imposed suspension on prayer houses, as well as learning institutions, including elementary schools and universities. Affected families who lost loved ones during the period were forced to

arrange funerals that were limited to immediate family members only. Public sector transport operators were limited to admitting only half of their vehicle capacities. All the above measures severely affected the country's economy.

The government-imposed restrictions on movement in the following counties for 21 days, namely the Nairobi metropolitan (effective 06 April 2020), Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale (effective 08 April 2020). Further restrictions were imposed in Nairobi's Eastleigh and Old Town in Mombasa, effective 06 May 2020, for 15 days. Eateries and marketplaces were closed in the affected areas, but were later opened on 01 May 2020, with the condition to obtain new certification issued by the Ministry of Health. These directives affected the Kenyan labour market severely (Alsulami, Bashir, Rizwan, Elnahas, Bawareth, Noorelahi, & Kamrani, 2019). In line with the above, respondent 2 remarked: *"The government-imposed restrictions on movement of people in order to protect their lives, even though the government was well aware that restrictions limited the employees from accessing the workplaces and thus leading to job losses, but that was the best decision to be undertaken at the moment"*

The above response was corroborated by respondent 6 who stated: *"I used to work in a manufacturing company in industrial area and unfortunately by the time the lock down was imposed, I had taken a one week off and travelled to see my family in Eldoret, I could not travel back to resume my duties and my plea to the management fell on deaf ears, by the time I came back after the lock down, I had been replaced and I was told to go home that I will be contacted, however, till date, no communication has been made and my dues has never been paid"*.

Kenya has been counting on the manufacturing sector as a key pillar to spur its economic growth. The sector accounted for 7.7% of the GDP in 2019 before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, the sector experienced mixed reactions, as some companies witnessed growth, as they had to manufacture foodstuffs to meet ever-growing demands (Ahmed, Abu & Saboor, 2020).

Likewise, the construction industry was affected by the pandemic, as casual workers who dominate this industry, lost their jobs owing to continuous lockdown measures and the introduction of curfews. In addition, there was a reduction in construction projects because of less funding brought about by the uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

In line with the above, respondent 11 said: *"Before Covid-19 came, I was a supervisor at a construction site in Lavington, the contractor was putting up an apartment and we had both day and night shifts, due to restriction on curfews,*

the night shift was discontinued and the number of day shift drastically reduced, we were told to stay at home that we would be contacted when the normalcy resumes. However, we were never recalled.”

The stock market was also affected significantly by the pandemic. When the first virus case was reported in Kenya on 13 March 2020, the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE) activities were stopped when the NSE index share price dropped by more than 5%, with prominent companies like Safaricom and Kenya Commercial Bank experiencing a trading decline of 5.4% and 7.0%, respectively. Investors avoided trading at the Nairobi Securities Exchange owing to the market’s instability (Badu, Thorn & Goonoo, 2020).

Impact on different categories of workers

The study revealed that workers in different categories have been affected differently by Covid-19 in Kenya.

Table 1: Effect of COVID-19 on different categories of workers

Employee category	Score	Ranking
Casual workers	1	Very Low
Artisans	2	Low
Diploma and certificate graduates	3	Moderate
Diploma and certificate graduates with special training	4	High
University graduates	5	Very High

Source: Researchers’ fieldwork (2022).

The researcher selected key stakeholders from both the public and private sectors who deliberated on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected workers in different categories. The team agreed on scoring criteria to determine how the employees were affected. The categories that were able to cope with the pandemic were given the highest score of 5, while those affected seriously were given the lowest score of 1, thus the score ranged from 5 to 1.

Throughout the rankings, the results relating to the individual category of workers’ capability to manage the uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic were

scrutinized before agreeing on the respective scores that were awarded. The findings established that most casual workers were impacted the worst by the pandemic, scoring the lowest score of 1. They were followed by artisan workers who scored a 2, implying low coping levels to deal with the pandemic, and the third category was workers with diplomas and certificates who were ranked 3, depicting moderate coping levels to deal with the Covid-19 impact. The fourth category was diploma and certificate holders, but with additional specialized skills, who were awarded a score of 4, depicting high capabilities of coping with the impact of Covid-19, while the last category comprised university graduates who were given a score of 5, which implied high capability levels to cope with the impact of Covid-19.

To illustrate the above, respondent 15 declared: *“I work as clerical officer, during the pandemic the employer reduced the workforce and instructed employees to work from home only essential workers were allowed in the office. After one month we received a short code communication through the phone that the salary will be capped at half for the next three months, on the expiry of the three months, the salary was discontinued with further communication and only those who could execute their duties from home continued being paid the half salary”.*

It is clear from the findings that there were employment losses across different categories of workers who possessed different educational backgrounds, but those who were most affected were workers who had little, or no skills compared to those with an advanced educational background. The loss of employment resulted in reduced income, which contributed to poverty.

In this respect, respondent 2 mentioned: *“Advanced training improves intellectual capacities, which in turn increases labour market results, comprising efficiency and pay checks. This is because workers in this category can change with the changing mode of operations, as they can utilise technology to achieve results and not necessarily use physical efforts as applicable to workers with no or little education. In case of job losses, this category of workers can search and secure other jobs more easily”.* Throughout the pandemic, earnings for less educated workers were reduced owing to greater redundancy. This led to joblessness for workers with little or no skills, which impacted their incomes negatively.

New skills required for workers

The stakeholders were subjected to several identified skills and were required to score the skills individually, namely from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest and 1

being the lowest. The scores were then averaged to obtain a final score for each of the skills. Table 2 below shows the scores for each skill.

Table 2: New skills required for workers

SKILLS	SCORE	RANKING
Teamwork	2	Low
Technical skills	3	Moderate
Emotional intelligence	3	Moderate
Autonomous working	4	High
Creativity	4	High
Effective communication	4	High
Virtual skills	5	Very High
Thinking skills	5	Very High

Source: Researcher’s fieldwork (2022).

The study revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the most required skills were virtual and thinking skills, which scored 5, respectively, depicting a very high ranking. These were followed by autonomous working, creativity, and effective communication, which scored 4, respectively, implying a high ranking. Emotional intelligence and technical skills scored 3, respectively, which was a moderate ranking, while teamwork scored 2, which was low.

In line with the above, respondent 18 observed: *“At our workplace the people who were lucky are the ICT, Communication and Finance departments as they were able to work from home and send reports, the other employees in marketing and packaging we could not work from home, and we were dismissed from work”*.

The above sentiments were corroborated by respondent 3 who stated: *“In Kenya and the world at large, the employees who applied technology at work were advantaged as they could work from home and still meet the targets, further those who were more creative could innovate a different thinking perspective to achieve the employers’ objectives. The employers realised that the same amount of work*

could be achieved by a smaller number of people working from home and this gave the high-tech employees an upper hand”.

The findings show that during the Covid-19 period, workers were forced to work remotely and not physically at their workplaces, thus they required virtual skills to be able to work and communicate with the other workers. In other words, they needed to have high thinking skills. Since workers were working from home, they needed to develop individual working abilities as opposed to teamwork.

Delivery methodology

The stakeholders were required to score different methodologies of working during the pandemic period.

The following scale was used in this regard: 1- Low preference; 2- Medium preference; 3- High preference; and 4- Very High preference. The findings are presented in the table below.

Table 3: Delivery methodology

DELIVERY METHODOLOGY	SCORE	RANKING
Normal programme	1	Low Preference
Flexible patterns	2	Medium Preference
Mixed (Working from home/remote working and flexible patterns)	3	High Preference
Working from home/remote working	4	Very High Preference

Source: Researcher (2022)

The above findings illustrate that working from home or engaging in remote working had a very high preference amongst companies, followed by mixed (working from home/remote working and flexible patterns), which had a high preference. Flexible schedules had a medium preference and the least considered was the normal programme, which had a low preference.

Respondent 19 affirmed: “During the Covid-19 period, my supervisor assigned me duties to work from home and report to him through the email, since I used to have a desktop computer, they bought me a laptop and gave me weekly airtime to buy bundles, at first I was hesitant but after a month, I was extremely comfortable

as I could achieve what I used to deliver in 8 hours within 3 hours, I could also work at my convenient, mostly at late night and early morning, giving me enough time to engage in other activities at home”.

Many companies that adopted working from home (telecommuting/teleworking/remote work) experienced some challenges; amongst these was that workers had no skills to work from home and were forced to be oriented or simply embrace it. Secondly, companies had to incur extra costs to enable staff to work from home, including purchasing equipment such as laptops, internet connectivity and communication infrastructure.

Limitations of the study and future research

The study established how COVID-19 affected the Kenyan labour market, but concentrated only in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. There is a need to establish how the economies of other regions in the country were affected. The study sampled 20 key stakeholders whose views might be limited. The sample should be expanded to obtain the views of more stakeholders regarding the effects of Covid-19 on Kenya’s labour market. The study focused on the effects of Covid-19 on the economy; however, there is a need to narrow-down the study to specific areas that were affected to establish the broader impact. For example, there is a need to establish how Covid-19 specifically affected the educational sector.

Conclusion

The pandemic has brought mixed feelings to the labour market with the introduction of government measures to control the virus. The lockdowns and restrictions on the movement of people from one region to another, coupled with the introduction of curfews resulted in companies improvising new ways to achieve their targets. While most companies introduced working from home as an option, others decided to reduce the number of their staff members and adopted fewer working hours for their employees. Thus, only essential staff were allowed in the office, working for less hours to avoid curfew restrictions. However, other companies chose to close completely, especially those who relied on physical activities and who employed less skilled or casual workers. This category of companies was the hardest hit by the pandemic, as the restrictions implied that workers could not access their workplaces, while the introduction of social distancing implied that fewer employees could be accommodated in the workplace.

University graduates and workers with specialized skills were less affected as they could afford to work from home. They could utilise technology and owing to the nature of their work, they were able to deliver in spite of not being at work physically. Despite this, this category of employees still faced some challenges, as some had no prior experience working from home, and thus needed some orientation to do so. Most of them also required tools to work from home. Working from home further resulted in a reduction in the number of employees needed to deliver certain tasks. Hence, some companies decided to scale down the number of workers working from home in addition to a reduction of pay packages by half, which affected the workers' economic stability hugely. Most of the unskilled workers' jobs were terminated as most companies closed. Some of them were sent on indefinite unpaid leave, which made it difficult for most of them to provide for their families as their main source of income was cut off. Therefore, the government should establish policy measures to rebuild the most affected sectors within the economy. Additionally, the government, through its Ministry of Education, should use the current findings to design a fit-for-purpose educational curriculum to deliver much-needed skills that can be applied during crises such as the current Covid-19 pandemic to mitigate its negative impacts on people, particularly the Kenyan labour force.

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