



□ Palae community, Insein township

□ Tadar Oud community, Hlaingtharyar township

□ Kamar Kasit community, Dala township



Covid-19 co-creation action series

Co-Create City Yangon, Myanmar

Authors: Marina Kolovou-Kouri

Research team: Kaung myat, Aung zaw moe, Hein htet aung, Kyi kyk khaing kyaw, Phyo thura han



A sign that reminds people to look after each other: "Wear your mask", in Kamar Kasit community.

The impact of Covid-19 on informal communities in Yangon, Myanmar

Even though Myanmar had a very low number of confirmed COVID-19 cases until mid-August 2020, many measures have been enforced since April 2020, including the imposition of lockdowns, and the closure of factories, businesses, and schools. By the end of the year, the number of cases climbed to more than 120,000, meaning that such restrictions have been prolonged and sharpened time and again, disproportionately affecting the urban poor in social, economic, and psychological terms.

This article presents the impact of these restrictions as well as the coping mechanisms of dwellers in three informal communities in Yangon; Palae in Insein township, Tadar Oud in Hlaingtharyar township, and Kamar Kasit in Dala township.

Challenges in the new normal

The most significant impact on the urban poor has been the loss of income, as most people work in the informal sector, in construction and factories. Workers have endured the irregular closure and re-opening of factories, receiving roughly half the money they used to. Also, the imposition of curfew has prevented them from working night-shifts

— something they often rely on to complement their income. Many daily laborers have become completely jobless for longer periods. Near the Tadar Oud settlement, people gather as early as 5 am and wait at a certain spot to be called for odd jobs. Even those who normally do home-based activities have seen a significant decrease in their income (at times up to 70%), as they cannot go out to sell their products. Some shop owners struggle because of the accumulation of ‘buy now, pay later’ arrangements.

People living in informal settlements suffer in many ways also a greater health risk, given that informal communities have very limited access to water and sanitation facilities, and practicing physical distancing is pretty impossible, considering the density of some settlements and the sizes of typical housing units. This is further compounded by their limited access to healthcare in case of injuries or disease. Because of the low capacity of clinics during the pandemic, and because they often lack the money to visit a doctor, people who are sick are left to their own devices, with whatever support they can get from their family and community.



In Kamar Kasit community, people rely on the ponds for domestic and, in some cases, drinking water.



Many households have elaborate designs to collect rainwater during the rainy season.

While in early interviews, during the first lockdown, people overwhelmingly gave the impression that the pandemic has barely any impact on them because even in ‘normal’ times they are facing many challenges, the second wave and prolonged restrictions have led to feelings of exasperation. Their biggest concern, by far, is food insecurity. Especially during the second wave, some people have reported that on ‘bad’ days, they cut their food consumption by half, and they try to feed their children and elder people before they get any food. Also, access to water has been increasingly a concern, since the monsoon season is over and the dry period is approaching. In Kamar Kasit, the community leaders restricted the access to the water pond to certain hours in the day, to stretch the water availability for weeks to come. On the already existing challenges of unstable livelihood, absent services, and insecure tenure, the pandemic brought a significant mental burden to the people because of the uncertainty of their living conditions and the pronounced feeling of invisibility in times of crisis.

Government's response

The government has responded to the crisis with sporadic food and cash assistance initiatives, particularly targeting low-income households. However, the fact that there is no accurate data about the populations of these settlements—both because they are not recognized and captured in the official enumeration and because they have relatively high mobility—has often meant that aid distribution has been unjust. Next to that, the support has been anyway relatively modest.



In Tadar Oud community, waste surrounds the settlement because there is no collection system in place.

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Most residents received a one-time food donation, which could support a small family of three people for a couple of weeks, but would not last for more than a few days for a larger family. People have also received up to four batches of cash assistance, ranging between 15,000 and 40,000 Kyat (10-30 USD). Micro-corruptions are not uncommon in these distribution schemes. One household leader from the Palae settlement mentioned that the authorities insist on leading the distribution, even though the local leaders know the communities much better and can avoid leaving people behind. He added that they face discrimination as informal dwellers, and people often assume they are 'illiterate' and not capable of managing this process. In the meantime, some gaps have been filled in by local charity groups, religious organizations, and individual donations. Some people have commented that the aid distribution has stopped after the national elections took place, hinting that there is an underlying opportunistic rationale behind many of these responses.

In light of the general overwhelmingness of authorities to cope with this crisis, services like waste collection, drainage cleaning, etc. have fallen behind in the past months. Even when action is taken, it persistently fails to address the real needs of the residents of these settlements: For example, in the Tadar Oud settlement, the Yangon City Development Committee proceeded recently to clean a swampy area next to the settlement by removing the waste and 'redefining' its boundary. In the course of this action, they removed all the watercress that was growing in the water and constituted a significant source of food for the dwellers.



They decided on the spot to accept only half the amount of rice, and share the rest with over 1,000 people from neighboring communities.

Coping mechanisms / Individual & collective action

Against this backdrop, people in informal settlements are often left to cope with the challenges that the restrictions brought about. Many of the strategies they employ are illustrative of their desperate condition. In the Tadar Oud settlement, the poorest out of the three sites, some women cut their hair as soon as the second lockdown was announced and tried to sell it. Many have pawned any valuable belongings they may have had, however, pawn shops are accepting less and less anything that is not gold. For some people, the prospect of continued lockdowns brings distress: “We will sell whatever we own; I cannot think of anything else”.



The residents of Tadar Oud community received basic food items from a donation in October.

But there is also a silver lining to this crisis. People have employed their solidarity and creativity to cope with the situation and demonstrate a lot of versatility, both in individual and collective strategies. In October 2020, we channeled a grant for emergency food assistance to the Tadar Oud community and saw the residents decide on the spot to accept only half the amount of rice and redistribute the rest in smaller portions to over 1,000 people that had gathered from neighboring communities. In Kamar Kasit, one 10-household leader recently started a weekly food donation: each Sunday, he distributes warm soup to around 500 households, the cost of which is just under 100,000 Kyat (75 USD). In Palae, the community leaders collect donations from the dwellers to rent disinfecting equipment and spray across the settlement once or twice per week. In all three communities, households with confirmed COVID-19 cases are supported during their quarantine through collective food donations.

Many people have turned to planting—some to complement their food needs, and others to spend their time more productively and creatively under the stay-home orders. Some people started growing plants with medicinal properties, to boost their health. One man in Palae thought to expand his farming activities since he had been without a job for over 4 months.

“Farming can get you some income already after 15-20 days” he mentions.

He spent around 16,000 Kyat (12 USD) for seedlings, and he got several pineapple heads for free from market leftovers. His family also started raising chickens and ducks since the pandemic started. One woman started growing vegetables from cooking leftovers, and recently harvested the first batch of her produce, including Indian almond, tamarind, and bitter gourd. In Tadar Oud settlement, a father and son also made their first attempts at farming, after clearing some space from waste, and planted tamarind and gourd. This has helped to solve their food problem a bit, and they are welcoming their neighbors to pick up greens as well. They sell the remaining produce to neighboring communities to have some income.



INS_Plants with medicinal properties

In Tadar Oud community, waste surrounds the settlement because there is no collection system in place. A father and son cleared some land from waste and started growing greens in the last couple of months.



A father and son cleared some land from waste and started growing greens in the last couple of months.
Tadar, Hlaingtharyar township.

In Palae, some women reached out to the elderly to learn how to weave mats out of rattan. Although their initiative did not really bring them much income, they were very enthusiastic to try out different ways and pass on the knowledge to the younger generation. Others have tried their luck preparing different foods and selling them on the street, and some have started collecting plastic bottles and selling them to recycling shops. One man started fishing in the nearby pond and selling the fish to nearby houses for substitute income. The money from all these activities goes mostly towards food.



Despite challenges, many people are very actively trying to figure out ways to adapt to the conditions. There is an overwhelming sense that people look out for one another, sharing knowledge, resources, and time to fill in the gaps and leave no one behind.