



July 2021

# Targeting Covid-19 relief in Uganda: The role of data, statistics and evidence

event summary

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# Introduction

When the world adopted the Sustainable Development Goals agenda in 2015, the role that good data and evidence would play in the goal of leaving no one behind, and ending poverty by 2030 was unanimously understood to be critical. A global pandemic has made the role of data even more important as it has become apparent that the devastating health and social impacts of Covid-19 are starkly different across geographical, economic, and racial divides around the world.

Issues such as what role data would play in addressing these inequalities, how inclusion would be executed across the data value chains and the concerns of data access and privacy have been debated since the pandemic hit in early 2020.

Since May 2021, Uganda, alongside several other African countries, has been hit by a second wave of Covid-19. Suspected to be fueled by the Delta variant, the wave has devastated the country that had earlier been praised for managing the pandemic smartly, focusing on a costly but effective lockdown, quickly identifying the first few cases through contact tracing, a subnational-focused Covid-19 response governance framework, and adding to the capabilities of a very weak healthcare system.<sup>1</sup>

The number of cases doubled in just one month, from 40,000 to over 90,000.<sup>2</sup> The number of deaths multiplied nearly tenfold from 300 for the whole of March to May 2020 to the current 2,500. The healthcare system has been overwhelmed by an increase in admissions and patients in need of life-saving oxygen, which is in low supply.

To disrupt the wave, at the beginning of June 2021 the government instituted a second total lockdown of 42 days, with public transportation grounded, schools closed, offices and markets ordered to operate at 10% capacity, and all social and public events banned.

# Targeting Covid-19 relief in Uganda: The role of data, statistics and evidence

On 12 June 2021, following the commencement of the total lockdown, the Ugandan Prime Minister announced that the government was going to support the most vulnerable people who would be hit hardest by the lockdown. As opposed to the first lockdown, where highly connected individuals won inflated tenders to supply food to those citizens, this time the government would send cash directly to people.<sup>3</sup> All the advantages of cash transfers were provided as justification, from affording recipients a right to make their own decisions on what to purchase, to eliminating exploitative middlemen.

The government would send UGX100,000 to each household deemed most vulnerable and hit the hardest by the lockdowns in urban and peri-urban towns. But questions as to how the government was going to select those 'vulnerable' recipients of this relief were rife in the public discourse, given distrust in the government based on past social interventions.

The government said that it would examine mobile money transaction history data of those seeking the relief, to determine whether they indeed were needy, and also use local elected leaders on the ground and prior social protection registries.<sup>4</sup> The Bureau of statistics would later announce that the data used was not its own;<sup>5</sup> and there was enormous debate on social<sup>6</sup> and traditional<sup>7</sup> media regarding the evidence used to identify beneficiaries.

All social safety net programmes eventually suffer targeting challenges – how to prioritise those people with the greatest need? For countries where poverty is so widespread, the challenge is even bigger.

It is against this background that on Thursday 15 July Development Initiatives' Kampala office held an online workshop to bring together all relevant stakeholders to discuss these questions.<sup>8</sup>

The objectives of the workshop were four-fold:

1. Bring together government, donors, civil society, academia and the general public to discuss the role of data in Covid-19 response in Uganda in particular, and other emergencies in general.
2. Raise the profile of the role of data and evidence in Covid-19 policy and discourse.
3. Leverage existing data, governance processes and structures to reach the most vulnerable people with government's Covid-19 interventions.

4. Bring more attention to the dimensional nature of poverty and call for more nuanced measurements and determination of poverty and its indicators.

We also wanted to answer questions that were in the public domain such as:

- Can data in its different forms be used to target emergency relief and, if so, what kind of data should that be, and is it available, accessible, and useable in Uganda, and to what extent would this data accurately help identify those most in need?
- What are the limitations of statistics in identifying those most in need and what complementary methods should be used to identify the most vulnerable?
- What is the role of authorities and local governments?
- Do we really know who the most vulnerable people are, where they are, and what their cost and standard of living is?
- Is there precedence, in Uganda or in the region, where data has been successfully used to target the most vulnerable with social interventions?
- What type of data would be ideal to use in identifying beneficiaries of social safety nets in Uganda?
- What lessons has this crisis brought to the fore on the importance of good, regular and up-to-date data/statistics in decision-making and the National Statistical System in general?

# The roundtable

There was unusually high interest in this event with more than twice the number of anticipated participants attending the event. There was strong interest from the government as well which saw this as an opportunity to give its side of the story on the Covid-19 relief fund and provide information on its wider social protection strategy in the wake of the pandemic. High ranking officials from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development who are running the Covid-19 cash grant, as well as officials from the Office of The Prime Minister that chairs the National Covid-19 Task Force participated in the meeting.<sup>9</sup> Also in the meeting were representatives of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, members of civil society, donors and academia.

# Key takeaways

The government gave a presentation about the Covid-19 relief fund, and background information and data that informed its creation. They shared progress of the rollout of this cash grant, totalling UGX54.7 billion, that targeted nearly 500,000 households in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area, Jinja and other towns and municipalities.

Each household received UGX100,000 to buy essential household items to last the remaining days of the 42-day lockdown. At the time of writing, this lockdown is due to end on 30 July 2021.

The beneficiaries fell into these categories:

- Bus drivers, taxi drivers, conductors, loaders, boda boda riders (motorcycle taxis), salon operators, slum dwellers, orphans and vulnerable children.
- Baggage carriers, wheelbarrow pushers and touts in taxi and bus terminals, bar attendants, DJs, gym workers, bouncers, waiters, waitresses, cooks, food vendors, teachers at private schools and those not on government payroll, car washers, street vendors and shoe shiners.
- Special hire drivers (Uber-like, sedan taxis – the other ‘taxis’ are 14-seater Toyota HiAce’s), and artists (musicians, producers, comedians and promoters).

The total number of beneficiaries targeted were 501,107. The number of beneficiaries recorded as having received the money as of 15 July were 448,134 (89.4%). 34 out of 42 cities and municipalities targeted had submitted 100% of their beneficiary data. Current beneficiaries by sex are 52.7% male and 47.3% female.

The government adopted the cash system to avoid a repeat of the 2020 scandals in the procurement of maize flour and beans for vulnerable groups during the first pandemic-induced lockdown.<sup>10</sup>

The grant has been targeted to people living in poverty in urban areas rather than rural ones. The rationale for this was that people living in urban areas were likely to be hit the hardest by the lockdown, given that they live in the epicenter of Uganda’s informal, day-to-day, hand-to-mouth petty economy and therefore their livelihoods were the most disrupted.

A number of databases and registries were also mentioned as having been the source of beneficiaries’ data. These included:

- The business registries from the Kampala City Authority
- Data from Uganda Revenue Authority

- Major trading associations such as the Uganda Taxi Drivers and motorcycles Associations
- The existing social protection registries from the ministry of Gender, labour and social development
- UBOS's routine business and trading surveys and registries, and other sources.

The government admitted shortcomings in its evidence gathering and the data itself:

- The social protection registry the ministry runs is inadequate and doesn't capture all vulnerable persons. There needs to be one at least for each region. They however are very costly to create and require frequent updates.
- There are a lot of data silos in the government ecosystem. There is a need to decentralise data collection, use community data systems and join up databases.
- There is a need to centralise registration within various informal trade and business associations (boda-boda, street vendors, waiters, waitresses and so on).
- National identification is still limited. A national identification number was needed to validate each beneficiary but many people didn't have one, nor did they have the national ID. More people need to register for ID and the government needs to facilitate the process by making it mandatory.
- The role of local government authorities and subnational data is critical. A more systematic and routine method of collecting data is needed at this level to enrich national data infrastructure for emergency purposes like this one

Other audience comments and recommendations included:

- The need to build one comprehensive national data system using the social protection single registry and expand it to the informal sectors.
- Targeting vulnerable people should not be driven only by digital methods but should make use of local community knowledge and involve citizens. For example, neighbours know their people and their vulnerabilities.
- There should have been further micro-disaggregation to target gender especially young vulnerable women and girls, adolescents, orphans and vulnerable children.
- Examine multiple layers of vulnerabilities. While both men and women in urban areas may be vulnerable, women are more at risk. The selection criteria targeted boda boda drivers (motorcycle taxis), taxi operators, bar operators, musicians, food vendors and salon proprietors. There is need to understand the criteria used to identify these groups – “how gender sensitive and inclusive is it when the majority of those falling under these categories are men? This excludes women who are caring for Covid-19 patients, single mothers, and women proprietors of small businesses, who were most affected by the lockdown restrictions, as well as other vulnerable people such as persons with disabilities, teenage mothers, people living with HIV, and families that have directly been affected by Covid-19. We should have ensured that women's need were met, as they currently carry the pandemic's care burden.” Said one participant.



- The National Covid-19 Task Force is skewed to medical personnel only. There are no planners, economists, social scientists, statisticians, educationists on the Task Force. Nor is there any representation of thematic groups such as persons with disabilities. Consequently, some of the decisions being taken are skewed towards the health sector, ignoring the socioeconomic ramifications of the pandemic.

In conclusion, the roundtable unanimously agreed that the Covid-19 relief cash transfer was the right first step by the government. It was also agreed that the government was bound to face challenges of roll-out as a result of a number of factors, including inadequate data. To have more robust data on the most vulnerable people, and therefore improve the targeting of social safety nets in future, there's need to:

- Harmonise all existing datasets and data systems into a social register;
- Decentralise data collection;
- Boost the role of local governments in maintaining management information systems at local levels; and
- Improve national identification and ensure that everyone has a national identity number.

# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> American Journal of Public Health, December 2020. *Uganda as a Role Model for Pandemic Containment in Africa*. Available at: <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305948>
- <sup>2</sup> Republic of Uganda Covid-19 Response Info Hub. Available at: <https://covid19.gou.go.ug/> (accessed 30 July 2021)
- <sup>3</sup> Abele, M. 2020, Covid-19: Uganda officials face jail over food prices, *Anadolu Agency*, 9 April 2020 [online]. Available at: [www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-uganda-officials-face-jail-over-food-prices/1798910#](http://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-uganda-officials-face-jail-over-food-prices/1798910#) (accessed 30 July 2021)
- <sup>4</sup> Abet, T. 2021, Covid relief: Govt to give direct cash, *Daily Monitor*, 21 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/covid-relief-govt-to-give-direct-cash-3444516> (accessed 0 July 2021)
- <sup>5</sup> Damali M., 2021, Relief cash: UBOS disowns vulnerable people statistics, *Daily monitor*, 2 July 2021. Available at: [www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/relief-cash-ubos-disowns-vulnerable-people-statistics-3459302](http://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/relief-cash-ubos-disowns-vulnerable-people-statistics-3459302) (accessed 30 July 2021)
- <sup>6</sup> NTV Uganda. 2021. Prime Minister Robina Nabbanja says money will be electronically transferred to individuals whose selection will be based on what kind of transactions they make on their phones. [Twitter]. 23 June 2021. Available at: <https://twitter.com/ntvuganda/status/1407579169660231680> (accessed 30 July 2021)
- <sup>7</sup> Kirabo J. 2021, Ugandans with mobile transactions above Shs 200,000 are not vulnerable says Nabbanja, *Nile Post*, 23 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://nilepost.co.ug/2021/06/23/ugandans-with-mobile-transactions-above-shs-500000-are-not-vulnerable-says-nabbanja/> (accessed 30 July 2021).
- <sup>8</sup> Development Initiatives, 2021. Targeting Covid-19 relief in Uganda: The role of data, statistics and evidence. [www.devinit.org/what-we-do/events/targeting-covid-19-relief-uganda-role-data-statistics-and-evidence/](http://www.devinit.org/what-we-do/events/targeting-covid-19-relief-uganda-role-data-statistics-and-evidence/)
- <sup>9</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, <https://mglsd.go.ug/>
- <sup>10</sup> Daily Monitor, 2020. Four OPM officials arrested over procurement process for beans, maize flour. *Daily Monitor*, 9 April 2020. Available at: [www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/OPM-officials-arrested-inflated-prices-for-COVID-19-relief-food/688334-5519020-rxgb2tz/index.html](http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/OPM-officials-arrested-inflated-prices-for-COVID-19-relief-food/688334-5519020-rxgb2tz/index.html) (accessed 30 July 2021)

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Contact  
Bernard Sabiti  
Senior Strategic Partnerships and Engagement Manager  
[Bernard.Sabiti@devinit.org](mailto:Bernard.Sabiti@devinit.org)

To find out more about our work visit:

[www.devinit.org](http://www.devinit.org)

Twitter: @devinitorg

Email: [info@devinit.org](mailto:info@devinit.org)

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#### **GLOBAL HUB**

Development Initiatives  
First Floor Centre, The Quorum  
Bond Street South, Bristol  
BS1 3AE, UK  
+44 (0) 1179 272 505

#### **EAST AFRICA HUB**

Development Initiatives  
Shelter Afrique Building  
4th Floor, Mamlaka Road  
Nairobi, Kenya  
PO Box 102802-00101  
+254 (0) 20 272 5346

#### **AMERICAS HUB**

Development Initiatives  
1100 13th Street, NW, Suite 800,  
Washington DC 20005, US

#### **UGANDA OFFICE**

Development Initiatives  
Plot 31 Ntinda – Kisaasi Road  
Block C Level 3, Ntinda Complex,  
P.O. Box: 25760, Kampala, Uganda  
Tel +256 39 324 1297