

## Securitization of COVID-19 Response: Lessons from Kenya

*This analysis is taken from the virtual discussion “Securitization of COVID-19 Response: Implications for Human Security in Kenya and the Horn of Africa” co-hosted by Search for Common Ground and the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law on June 23, 2020. You can find the recorded session [here](#).*

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Many countries around the world rely on police and military to enforce stay at home orders and other COVID-19 public health measures. In some regions, this means militaries with a history of human rights abuses are in control of the pandemic response. Elsewhere, municipal security actors are being told to step into new roles such as enforcing lockdown orders. A securitized approach to COVID-19 responses can exacerbate conflict, violence, and human rights abuses, as well as limit civic space, particularly in areas with legacies of conflict between citizens and security actors. These trends risk worsening already tense citizen-government relations and driving insecurity and instability.

Kenya’s COVID-19 response in which authorities have relied on a security-centric approach to restrict gatherings and enforce a dawn-to-dusk curfew offers cautionary lessons for other contexts around the world. Such approaches exacerbate pre-existing security challenges as a decade of heavy-handed security measures in the fight against al-Shabaab have weakened civilian trust in governments. This securitized approach in a context of weak trust has contributed to one of the highest number of people killed due to lockdown enforcement.<sup>1</sup> On the first night of the curfew, Kwale police beat a motorbike taxi (boda-boda) driver to death when he was caught breaking curfew after transporting a pregnant woman to the hospital, and several truck drivers were flogged for being on the road at night. This is despite the essential services boda-bodas and trucks provide, including emergency hospital visits and the transport of foodstuffs and medicine. Several more incidents between truckers and law enforcement have continued to raise public outcry. Moreover, the proliferation of misinformation has led some Kenyans to defy public health guidelines. Rumours that the COVID-19 measures were designed to discriminate against Muslims, preventing Ramadan and Eid celebrations, may have contributed to people’s reluctance to follow sound public health advice, increasing the likelihood of violent interactions with the police.

As the world’s largest peacebuilding organization, Search for Common Ground (Search) works with security actors around the world, reaching 13,000 security personnel in 2018 alone.<sup>2</sup> In Kenya, Search has been leading efforts to improve relations between security actors and coastal communities under its *Inuka!* programme and is working now to mitigate tensions between security actors and civilians as a result of COVID-19 enforcement. Drawing on this experience, we offer the following key takeaways:

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic is a peace and security issue.** Heavy-handed responses can lead to an entrenchment of authoritarianism and the closing of civic space. Armed actors have sought to capitalize on the pandemic and

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<sup>1</sup> Ombur, R., & Bearak, M. (2020, April 16). “Killing in the name of corona”: Death toll soars from Kenya’s curfew crackdown. *The Washington Post* ([link](#)).

<sup>2</sup> In [one example](#) of impact, Search’s intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo working on security sector capacity building and civilian-security dialogue and collaboration resulted in 92% of community members now believing security forces protected them.

civilian distrust of authorities, offering their own interventions and sometimes escalating violence. These effects will reshape conflict dynamics in the long term.

2. **Highly securitized enforcement of COVID-19 measures can undermine effective COVID-19 responses.** In Kenya, a decade-long militarized approach to fighting al-Shabaab has led to a perception that security forces persecute communities where al-Shabaab has recruited. Pre-existing tensions between security forces and civilians compounded by a securitized COVID-19 response jeopardize progress made in community-security relations and undermines pandemic response efforts.
3. **Effective crisis response must consider pre-existing levels of trust between communities, security actors, and other stakeholders.** Civil society and local authorities must be considered as stakeholders alongside the government, health services, and security forces because they are particularly well placed to bridge gaps and ensure marginalized communities have access to official responses and resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for countries to reflect on how such measures can effectively address the current crisis and contribute to longer-term stability and security. We recommend the following:

1. **Increase trust by:**
  - Adopting civilian- and community-led responses to promote collaborative mindsets and foster trust. Following the Kwale police killing of the boda-boda driver, Search initiated multi-stakeholder dialogues and outreach between police and boda-boda drivers in Kwale that are helping improve relations.
  - Providing training for security forces tasked with implementing pandemic responses, including nonviolent communication and de-escalation tactics, tools and opportunities for community engagement, and strategies for collaborating with civilians.
  - Ensuring police and other security actors are representative of the communities they serve. In Kenya, the exclusion of women from security institutions has contributed to measures that have failed to consider the needs of pregnant women. Lack of representation makes it harder for security forces to understand the situation of more marginalized communities and for marginalized communities to trust the police.
2. **Prioritize collaboration and coordination by:**
  - Encouraging whole-of-society COVID-19 responses that take into account pre-existing trust levels between governments, health services, security forces, civil society, local authorities, and citizens. As security actors operate in a multi-stakeholder environment, a whole-of-society approach utilizes participatory methods that engage communities in developing responses, reframing the question of compliance.
3. **Lay the groundwork for abating future crises by:**
  - Improving trust through peacebuilding approaches to mitigate the current crisis and prevent future crises. Peacebuilding measures that foster trust between communities and the police are essential for [effective crisis mitigation and response](#).
  - Investing in crisis response planning in advance so plans can be rapidly adapted and mobilized when crises emerge. These plans should be conflict-sensitive and advance stabilization and peacebuilding goals through their approach and implementation.