Introduction

Kenya is a large culturally and ethnic diverse country, with over 40 different ethnic groups and numerous superimposed conflicts. Ethnic tensions and clashes coupled with political instability that manifests during the election period have been on the rise in the recent past. Ethnic group affiliation and highly centralised ethnopolitics are the primary identity of many Kenyans, especially during periods of turmoil. Additionally, the coastal region continues to face insecurity and threats of violent extremism. The COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya continues against a backdrop of increased humanitarian needs resulting from drought, floods, and a devastating locust outbreak in Garissa and Tana River counties. High levels of unemployment and increased sexual and gender based violence remain a concern and are straining access to essential services and livelihoods.

Within the context of ongoing conflict and insecurity, COVID-19 continues to pose a risk to peace and security. In particular, pandemic response measures risk exacerbating existing grievances and perceptions of injustice over access to services, particularly at the community level. Additionally, enforcement of preventive measures by security actors has been fraught, and Search’s early warning system has identified incidents of violence in Kwale and Tana River counties1. At the onset of the pandemic, many citizens questioned the existence and/or severity of the virus. As the country contends with a second wave, and more citizens are affected by the virus, most Kenyans no longer question its existence and are feeling the impact of the situation.

Data collection and analysis

Data for the conflict snapshot was gathered from January 18 to 22 January, 2021 in six target counties. This report was prepared by the Search for Common Ground Kenya team, with support from Search’s COVID-19 Response Programme Team and Institutional Learning Team. For more information on the data collection methodology and tools used by Search for this research, click here. This report is part of a series of regular conflict snapshots aimed at providing quick and actionable answers to a set of specific questions. The previous report for Kenya can be found here.

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1. Examples cited through Search's EWER include forceful enforcement of the curfew, arbitrary arrests outside curfew hours, and people being dragged from their farms in the pretext of violating the mask wearing rule.
Update: COVID-19 Measures and Impact on Conflict

As of the beginning of February 2021, Kenya had 101,009 cumulative confirmed cases of COVID-19. The number of casualties were at 1,766, while the recoveries amounted to 83,990. Kenya faced a second wave of the virus between October 2020 and December 2020, with the number of cases doubling after the government eased pandemic-related restrictions. Since the beginning of 2021, the reported cases dramatically decreased and were averaging less than five thousand cases per month in Jan-Feb to start rising sharply again in March. However, these statistics may not be representative of actual case numbers as there has been limited testing over the last two months compared to the previous quarter. The overall sentiment was that the economy had to be opened up again, hence “a return to normalcy was necessary”. The capital city of Nairobi is the most affected in the country.

Currently, COVID-19 prevention measures in place include: an extension of the night curfew to mid-March, a 60-day ban on political and roadside gatherings, as well as a prohibition on overnight events and vigils, except funerals and weddings of up to 150 people. While schools resumed in-person learning in early January, extracurricular school activities such as sports, drama, music festivals, and prize giving days are banned for 90 days, as well as non-essential visits by parents and guardians. All schools are to ensure that they have adequate hand-washing stations, and all exchange visits between schools remain prohibited. Public transport is limited to 60 percent capacity, and protective face coverings are required in public areas, private vehicles, and while using public transportation.

During this round of data collection, there was a notable increase in the amount of respondents and target communities who now believe that the virus exists, and many acknowledge that they know someone who tested positive for the virus. However, Search's monitoring data revealed that only 14% of respondents report adhering to the set COVID-19 health regulations and safety measures. Additionally, Search's COVID-19 early warning, early response (EWER) platform identified harmful trends related to mask wearing, where many communities believe that those wearing masks are carriers of the virus, thus triggering conflicts between those who wear masks and those who do not. These dynamics are now affecting schools in Nairobi County, where students are discriminating against each other based on the perception that those wearing masks are carrying the virus.

The introduction of COVID-19 containment measures, such as lock downs and curfews, have resulted in increased cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children. Particularly, emotional, physical, and sexual violence against children, including cases of defilement, child labor, and GBV are rising, as children remain out of school and many adults out of meaningful employment. Approximately 24% of Kenyans have witnessed or heard about cases of domestic violence in their communities since the onset of COVID-19 containment measures. In November 2020, Kenya recorded the highest rate in Africa of acceptability of a COVID-19 vaccine, at 72%, also one of the highest rates worldwide.

Additionally, stigma and discrimination against people who have been discharged from quarantine and isolation centres, as well as against health workers, have been reported to Search's EWER platform. Moreover, the pandemic is increasing the demand for mental health services as bereavement, isolation, loss of income, and fear are triggering mental health challenges and/or exacerbating existing ones. As such, many citizens may be facing increased levels of alcohol and drug use, insomnia, and anxiety. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic remains dire, and the unemployment rate in the formal sector has doubled since March 2020, rising from 5.2% in the first quarter of 2020 to 10.4% in the second quarter. Health institutions reported insufficient laboratory testing and medical facilities including personal protection kits for frontline health workers and community health volunteers, resulting in a nationwide strike among the pandemic affecting delivery of essential health services during the reporting period.

COVID-19’s Impact on Social Cohesion & Trust

Amid the second wave, trust in Search’s media messages on COVID-19 and information sharing are increasing in all target counties

The most trusted channels to access information related to COVID-19:

- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) 34%
- TV 25%
- Radio 20%
- Friends and family 17%

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3. Random mass testing is not available but rather targeted to people with symptoms, their contacts and travellers.
Out of those who listen, people trust the information shared about Covid-19:

- Trust (very much or mostly)
  - Sept 20: 32%
  - Jan 21: 45%
- Rarely or somewhat
  - Sept 20: 31%
  - Jan 21: 37%
- Do not trust
  - Sept 20: 31%
  - Jan 21: 18%
- No opinion
  - Sept 20: 4%
  - Jan 21: 4%

An increase in trust might be due to the general increase in media programming, including by Search and our media partners, aimed at mitigating misinformation and rumours related to the virus. In addition to increased media programming, in general, citizens no longer deny the existence of the virus, and therefore are likely more receptive to information related to COVID-19.

Overall, youth have the lowest levels of trust:
A greater percentage of youth are active on social media, and therefore might be influenced more by mis/disinformation and rumours circulated online by their peers and popular influencers.

Overall, men trust COVID-19 related information more than women: Additional research is required to better understand why there are lower levels of trust among women.

Tana River recorded the lowest level of trust in COVID-19 related information, even lower than in the first conflict snapshot. Otherwise, levels of trust have improved in the other target counties compared to the first round of data collection:

Information sharing on COVID-19 increased dramatically: respondents are increasingly sharing information heard on trusted media with friends or family. As many communities are no longer in denial about COVID-19, more citizens are sharing information to help curb the spread of the virus. Additionally, increased media programming related to COVID-19 equips citizens with the needed information to share with family and friends.

The lowest rate of information sharing is in Nairobi:
Despite the low level of trust in COVID-19 related information in Tana River, information sharing is among the highest across the target counties. Due to widespread myths and misconceptions related to COVID-19 in that county, there have been numerous campaigns by locals to share information about the virus and prevention measures, including by religious centres who share information with their congregants to ensure their safety within these spaces.

Trust in the government’s COVID-19 response is growing, but so is dissatisfaction with governmental COVID-19 support services, especially among youth.

Citizens continue to rely primarily on the government for COVID-19 service delivery.

- 27% Government
- 37% requested pandemic-related services
- 36% health
- 24% freedom of movement

Overall, health and freedom of movement are the top requested services from the government, compared to employment and food services in the first round. As the entire nation is now affected by the virus, health needs have clearly increased. Findings from our EWER platform show that the economic impact and other secondary effects of the pandemic have an adverse impact.

11. Search produces the INUKA radio programme in Swahili and Somali languages which is aired on our partner radio stations Amani Fm in Tana River county, Lulu Fm in Kilifi county, Kulmiye Fm in Garissa county; Pwani Fm in Mombasa county, Radio Kaya in Kwale county, Ghetto Radio in Nairobi county and Radio Maisha.

12. However, at the time of data collection, Search's programme had not been aired yet in Tana River county, so those respondents may have heard about the show from other sources, but not listened to it directly on the radio.
on citizens’ health, particularly mental health, as citizens contend with pandemic-related stigmas, isolation, stress, worry, and anxiety. While food and employment remain important, the mental health and wellbeing of citizens are emerging as important needs to consider over the long-term. Additionally, movement restrictions continue to be a challenge, and citizens must seek prior approval before moving out of counties under lockdown (Nairobi, Kilifi, Mombasa, and Kwale).

Despite an ongoing heavy second wave, still only 27% of respondents requested services from the government, similar to the first report. This is playing out against an economic situation that remains dire, with a large proportion of the population reporting loss of income during the pandemic, creating heightened vulnerability and needs.

Out of those who sought COVID-19 related services from all service providers combined:

- 25% satisfied (highly satisfied or satisfied) with services received
- 21% somewhat satisfied
- 25% not satisfied
- 28% never received a response

Levels of trust in the COVID-19 response and satisfaction with related services (all providers combined) have increased compared to the first round of data collection. As satisfaction and trust increases, we anticipate reduced tensions and conflict as communities continue to acknowledge the existence of the pandemic and take personal responsibility to curb its spread.

When looking at satisfaction levels in government services specifically, levels of satisfaction are lower than the averages for all services providers and have decreased since the first round.

These trends are worrisome as needs continue to rise, and the government prepares to roll out a vaccination campaign. Indeed, findings from Search’s recent multi-country research show that lack of trust in government may undermine vaccination effort and potentially contribute to increased conflict and tensions.

Mombasa county records the highest percentage of people seeking COVID-19 related services from the government. Mombasa county, known as the second capital city of Kenya, is well equipped to offer most of the services needed by citizens. It is a referral point for most services for all the other coastal counties (i.e Tana River, Kilifi, Kwale and Lamu counties). Being the second most affected county by COVID-19, huge strides have been made in the county to offer support and services in response to the crisis.

Trends to Follow:

Adults (35-49) are most satisfied with services, compared to the youth (18-34) and the elderly (50+). It is unclear why this is the case.

Despite Mombasa county recording the highest rate of requests for services, the level of satisfaction with the support provided there ranks the lowest. Reports from Search’s EWER system reveal that, while there are many services offered in Mombasa, they are often of poor quality and many people report that they are given based on bribes, corruption, and tribal affiliation.

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Men are more satisfied with government-provided services than women, which is a shift from the first round. In the wake of competing priorities, the government has struggled to provide services targeting women, such as maternal and child health services, resulting in the needs of many women going unmet.

The elderly, ages 50+, are more satisfied with governmental services than adults 35-49 and youth 18-34. Low satisfaction among youth will be an important trend to monitor over time. They typically have fewer socio-economic opportunities compared to older generations and face higher levels of unemployment. Overall feelings of youth marginalization and disenfranchisement might be contributing to their lower satisfaction levels.

13. These concerns were raised during EWER weekly calls and community-government dialogue forums.
The satisfaction with services provided by INGOs, the second most popular service provider, is higher than those provided by government as well as than the overall average levels of satisfaction for all service providers. It is worth mentioning, there are no significant differences when the data is disaggregated by demographic groups (age, gender, etc.). This potentially indicates equity and equality in the provision of services by NGOs.

Respondents’ trust that the government is doing its best to consider the needs of everyone equally has increased considerably since the first report, while the amount of respondents who do not trust the government decreased. Coordination between national, county, and sub-county authorities for pandemic response has greatly improved these past months, contributing to better service delivery. Every county now has a COVID-19 steering committee, which are functioning well, and in larger counties, these committees are being replicated at the sub-county level.

**Elderly trust the government more than adults and young respondents.** Many young people do not feel the government adequately responds to or prioritizes youth needs. Moreover, the distribution of government services such as employment services, are perceived as being prioritized for the adult and elderly populations.

**Mombasa respondents reported the lowest rate of trust in authorities.** As mentioned, reports from our EWER system highlight that services offered in Mombasa are allegedly based on bribery, corruption, and tribal identity considerations, which might be contributing to low trust levels. In Garissa, the county government has made notable efforts to increase the level of COVID-19 preparedness, particularly in terms of information dissemination and infrastructure.15

**However, respondents still trust COVID-19 responders more than the government.** 78% trust that these responders keep their best interest in mind when doing their work (a significant increase from the first round). Awareness campaigns and large scale distribution of masks to vulnerable communities have positively impacted trust in these response efforts.

The elderly trust COVID-19 responders less compared to youth and adult responders. Often, responders’ efforts tend to be youth-led, and primarily targeting youth and adults. Older demographic groups are less targeted by these interventions; rather, they are consulted for advice and direction for these interventions. These dynamics might be contributing to lower trust levels among elderly respondents.

There are some variations at county level in terms of trusting other COVID-19 responders:

As mentioned, high levels of trust are likely due to increased media campaigns and local initiatives dedicated to informing citizens and raising awareness about the pandemic. Additionally, efforts to target marginalised communities have improved, through the COVID-19 steering committees at county and sub-county level.
Horizontal cohesion remains high, yet political divides could undermine this cohesion

Levels of interaction across groups are high, and respondents see the value of collaboration for responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Garissa recorded the highest level of valuing collaboration across dividing lines:

For Mombasa, this reflects the county's lower levels of valuing collaboration with individuals from other political groups in particular (49%, whereas 77% value collaboration with people from other counties). 16

In terms of actual interaction, with individuals from other groups (i.e. from other counties or political groups), either remotely or in person in the last three months, has decreased from the first round.

Both youth (18-34) and adults (35-49) report interacting with individuals from other counties or political groups more than elderly. Given that younger demographic groups are more likely to engage on social media and virtual platforms, they may have more opportunities to interact with different groups.

Garissa recorded the highest level of interaction with individuals from other counties or political groups.

In Mombasa, only 64% report interacting with individuals from other counties. Mombasa remains a politically polarised context, where many citizens support the opposition party and have prevailing grievances related to land issues, perceptions of marginalisation, and discrimination of people perceived to be natives of the county.

In general, interactions between individuals from different political affiliations are fraught with tension, at times escalating to clashes between groups.

Respondents from Mombasa reported the lowest feelings of safety when interacting with individuals from other groups

In Mombasa, only 42% feel safe when interacting with individuals from other political groups, accounting for the overall lower average.

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16. Mombasa is a cosmopolitan city with a rich diversity of races, ethnicities, and other demographic groups. However, political divisions remain salient. The county largely supports the opposition amid perceptions that the ruling class tends to come from a particular region, fueling grievances and perceptions of historical injustice and oppression. Given these dynamics, collaboration across political divides is usually fraught with tension and apprehension.

17. From Oct 2020 to Feb 2021, there was an increase in political rallies in Kenya, geared at popularising the Building Bridges Initiatives that seeks to make amendments to the 2010 constitution. This led to more interactions between individuals from different political party affiliations, before gatherings were banned due to COVID-19 restrictions.
feel safe interacting with individuals from the other sex inside the household or private sphere.

As can be expected, men feel safer than women. Prevailing gender norms tend to limit women’s interaction with men. Additionally, higher rates of women face GBV, mostly perpetrated by men, which diminishes their feelings of safety in the household.

Tana River and Mombasa counties recorded the lowest levels of feeling safe when interacting across gender lines compared to Kwale, Nairobi, Kilifi and Garissa. From anecdotal sources, incidences of GBV have been increasing in Tana River county. School closures have led to increased incidents of female genital mutilation and child marriage cases in the county. Mombasa county is predominantly muslim, and religious customs and practices dictate that women and men should have minimal interaction, which might account for the lower rates of feeling safe when interacting across gender lines.

Next Steps For COVID-19 Response Efforts

Support local platforms that are engaged in COVID-19 monitoring and response planning

- Local platforms for COVID-19 information sharing, joint action, and risk mitigation are critical for mitigating emerging risks, ensuring coordination between stakeholders, and supporting a more effective response in general. These platforms should be identified or created and subsequently supported with the right capacity building and other identified needs. For instance, Search’s EWER platform helps monitor evolving conflict trends in the context of the pandemic within target counties. Our EWER teams engage a diversity of stakeholders, including community members, CSOs, healthcare professionals, traditional and religious leaders, security personnel, and local authorities to identify and report emerging trends and risks and subsequently coordinate effective response measures.

Integrate holistic COVID-19 response strategies that tackle the secondary and gender-specific effects of the pandemic

- The secondary effects of the pandemic are pronounced, with high rates of unemployment, rising mental health effects, and increasing rates of GBV, among others. As governments, local groups, and the international community seek to roll out the vaccine, they cannot lose sight of some of these secondary effects and how they will play out in the medium to long term and even negatively impact vaccination campaigns. Strategies should therefore be multipronged by integrating efforts to mitigate some of these challenges while also responding to the more immediate health risks. This is particularly important when considering the needs of marginalised groups. For instance, increased GBV since the onset of the pandemic, has excavated and even entrenched harmful socio-cultural and gender norms. Adapting interventions to incorporate these considerations remains important. For instance, disseminating information, in conflict-sensitive ways, to women and girls at vaccination centres on GBV related services or advancing COVID-19 information campaigns that also raise awareness of GBV during the pandemic.

Enhance community ownership of COVID-19 response efforts

- Inclusion of grassroots structures in the response efforts is critical, particularly in ensuring response efforts integrate community needs, reach marginalised communities, and are seen as legitimate and trusted by communities. Our data shows some unevenness across the target counties in terms of levels of satisfaction and trust in COVID-19 related response efforts. Additionally, in Mombasa, those who value interaction between groups decreased from 70% to 63% – a potential early warning sign of increasing tensions between groups. If these dynamics go ignored, they could undermine response efforts and even potentially trigger conflict. Engaging trusted community stakeholders/platforms can ensure interventions are accounting for contextual dynamics, such as high levels of political polarisation, lower levels of satisfaction in services, and reduced feelings of safety in interaction across groups, as seen in Mombasa.