

COVID-19 AND THE HOMELESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WELFARE PRACTICE AND EDUCATION IN GHANA

Abstract

COVID-19 as a pandemic has had severe implications on every country including Ghana. Although it has affected all persons, its implication on the vulnerable, particularly the homeless is immeasurable. This reflexive writeup aims to highlight the interventions made by the Government of Ghana for the homeless amidst COVID-19 and recommend ways to improve these interventions. In this essay, although I indicated that temporal interventions such as food, housing units and money were made available for head porters, a category of the homeless. I argue that these interventions should be made available for all category of homeless and also, the Government of Ghana should adopt sustainable ways of making these interventions permanent, so as to improve the living conditions of the homeless.

Key phrases: COVID-19; Homeless; Vulnerable groups; Social Work Education

Introduction

The highly infectious nature and the number of deaths recorded in the western world and Asia have increased my growing concerns of COVID-19 in Africa. As a social work researcher, I believe, Africa, unlike the western world, is under-resourced in the fight against this pandemic. As such, it is imperative to prevent individuals from getting infected rather than curing them. This has necessitated strategies such as physical distancing, frequent hand wash, stay at home and self-isolation, which have been established by the World Health Organization as ways of curbing the spread of the virus. Although it seems such strategies, through governments, have been introduced to persons all over the world. To some individuals or group of people, I believe, such strategies seem either difficult to follow or nearly impossible. Given that these people have no permanent residence or live in places not fit for human habitation as well as poor living conditions. It is then apparent, not just to me but to a lot of people, that housing, to

a large extent, is closely related to health. This reflexive write-up aims to bring to the forefront the interventions made by the Government of Ghana for the homeless amidst COVID-19 and recommend ways to improve these interventions for betterment of the homeless in Ghana.

Interventions

According to WHO, even though the rate and the spread pattern of COVID- 19 as a pandemic vary among countries. Yet, the basic transmission of the virus is the same everywhere. Due to this, many countries did or have imposed a partial or a total lockdown on its citizenry as a way to halt the transmission of the virus. Countries such as Italy, UK, Spain, France and USA, who have been severely hit by the virus, have all resorted to the restriction of movement through a lockdown. In Africa, countries like Rwanda, South Africa and Nigeria, according to *AfricanNews (2020)*, were among the first countries to also impose a total or partial lockdown as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. According to *OECD (2020)*, many social commentators have criticized this measure as replicating what the western world was doing, without due consideration to the socio-economic position of most African countries. The Government of Ghana, although criticized by a section of the populace, also proceeded and declared a partial lockdown in Accra and Kumasi metropolis. More importantly, these criticisms, I believed, stemmed from the fact that Ghana like most African countries have inadequate and unsustainable social welfare interventions for the vulnerable. Hence, a pandemic of this nature and its associate measure like a lockdown have serious ramifications for the vulnerable in society, particularly, the homeless. A view, I wholeheartedly supported. This public outcry, in my opinion, necessitated the introduction of temporal social interventions during the lockdown. For instance, *CitiNewsRoom (2020)* reported that the President of Ghana, as a way of alleviating the hardship inflicted by the lockdown, announced that water and electricity bill will be absorbed by the Government of Ghana for the next 3 months. It was

further reported by *CitiNewsRoom* (2020) that food would be distributed to over 400,000 Ghanaians during the lockdown. While I think such interventions were commendable and mitigated the hardship inflicted by the lockdown on the general populace, I also believed an intervention meant for the general populace was not a good fit for the homeless. In that, most of these homeless have no permanent residence or live in places not fit for human habitation. For that reason, an intervention such as absorption of electricity and water bill by the state does not benefit the homeless in any way. I am of the conviction that, the homeless, due to their living conditions, have specific needs that should be met. Needs such as good nutrition, good hygiene, good sanitation and a permanent and befitting place of residence. Thus, interventions aim for the general public seem inadequate, unsustainable and do not meet these specific needs. Again, the inexistence of social protection such as housing for the homeless was made more apparent when a group of head potters, according to *GhanaWeb* (2020), were apprehended by the police for disregarding the lockdown directive. While a section of the populace was of the view that these head potters should be punished for flouting the lockdown directive. Some who shared my view believed that these head potters were not to be blamed, since they had no place of residence. They had no option but to return home. *CitiNewsRoom* (2020) further reported that the Vice President of Ghana, in righting the wrong, gave GH¢500 to each of the apprehended head porters. A move I felt was good but inadequate. The government of Ghana responded well, according to *JoyNews*, by collaborating with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in providing temporal housing units and feeding over 1500 identified head Potter who had no place of residence in areas affected by the lockdown. Also, non-governmental organizations and groups played a role in this. For instance, also *GNA* (2020) reported that the leading opposition political party in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress, also donated not only personal protective equipment's but also, food items to these head potters. As a social work researcher, I had mixed feelings about all these interventions.

On one hand, I felt the government of Ghana made a genuine attempt in seeking the wellbeing of the vulnerable in society, particularly the homeless. At the same time, I also felt, looking how far we've come as a country, we ought to do better. In that, primarily, these interventions should cover all categories of the homeless, meet their specific needs and also, should be sustainable in the long run.

The way forward

As a country, if we are to insulate the vulnerable, particularly the homeless, from the shocks of future pandemic, then, there is the need to include all categories of people experiencing homelessness. From the above, it is quite clear that most of these interventions introduced during the lockdown were intended for head porters. Although this was good to some extent. However, it should be pointed out that head porters are just a fraction of people experiencing homelessness in Ghana. There are other groups of people who fall within the homelessness category. These groups include street children, street beggars, drug addicts and persons living with mental health challenges. These group of homelessness had no direct social intervention intended for them, as in the case of head porters. These other groups had to rely on the interventions aimed for the general populace which does not meet their specific needs. This exclusion to a certain degree can be attributed to the fact that, unlike head porters, Ghana does not have accurate records of these other groups. Thus, making it difficult to locate and provide them with the necessary social aid. It is then imperative for us as a nation to gather accurate data on every category of homeless. To ensure that no one is left out when there is any form of aid during and after this pandemic.

Additionally, during the lockdown, housing the homeless elicited a lot of opinions among a section of the populace. As an individual, who is concerned about the vulnerable in society, particularly the homeless, I must admit, I found this discourse quite wholesome, to say the

least. Some were of the view that students are on an indefinite break due to the pandemic, as such, schools could be used as a temporal housing unit for the homeless. Others contended that the various hotels in the country could be used as a temporal housing unit for the homeless since it is their corporate social responsibility to give back to society and this presented an opportunity to prove that. Others even maintained that abandoned or uncompleted housing projects by previous governments could be used to house the homeless until the lockdown was over. So far, with these varying views, what has been established is the need to house the homeless. In my view, focusing entirely on which structure to house the homeless temporarily, might make us overlook the main problem. The main problem is the sustainability of these houses for the homeless. As of today, 5th June 2020, the lockdown has been lifted and head porters who were given these temporal housing units are back on the street. As a country, what we need to do is to provide permanent houses for all category of the homeless. These houses should be well spaced out to prevent overcrowding. In essence, these homeless should be well distanced from each other in these houses, since an overcrowding population can facilitate the quick transfer of the virus from one person to the other. Additionally, the Government should also take into consideration how to feed the homeless. Given that the homeless move around a lot in search of food, which predisposes them to the virus. It is then essential that the state in its capacity should provide temporal food for the homeless until they are given sustainable occupations. Which will improve their living conditions and prevent them from returning to the streets.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, it has been well established that the vulnerable, particularly the homeless are more susceptible to COVID-19 than any other group due to their living conditions. As such, if we are to prevent the homeless from contracting this virus, then, it's

imperative that we meet their specific needs. Although the Government of Ghana had put in place temporal interventions during the lockdown, yet these interventions did not meet the specific needs of the homeless. I argue that social interventions should be directly intended for the homeless to meet these specific needs.

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