INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and state responses to it have had a significant negative impact on the lives, wellbeing, and rights of the approximately 15 million stateless people around the world who have been denied a nationality, as well as tens of millions whose nationality is at risk. Globally, the devastating impacts of exclusion and denial of fundamental rights, including healthcare, during the pandemic relate to much deeper structural problems – the historic and systemic exclusion, deprivation and marginalisation of communities that have been made stateless as part of wider discriminatory political acts, or pursuant to dominant, discriminatory ideologies. COVID-19 has shone a light on these challenges and also presents a unique opportunity to raise visibility, address the structural causes of statelessness, and secure lasting change, through working directly with stateless people and being accountable to them. The same is true for Kenya, where the pandemic has further brought to light the acute human rights deprivations endured by the Nubian community.

This publication is an extract of the global report, Together We Can: The COVID-19 Impact on Stateless People & a Roadmap for Change, published in June 2021 by the COVID-19 Emergency Statelessness Fund (CESF) Consortium, a global consortium of NGOs and citizenship rights activists, initiated by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (I.S.I) in June 2020 to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on stateless populations. It focuses on the situation in Kenya, by presenting the Kenya chapter of the global report, along with the key thematic findings and a practical 3-step Roadmap for Change, which provides a framework for resolving and addressing the structural discrimination and exclusion of stateless people, during times of COVID-19 and beyond.

The Together We Can global report is grounded in the experiences and expertise of Consortium members drawing on a mix of desk research and findings from research-based action advocacy projects being implemented by CESF consortium members in 13 countries. In addition to documenting challenges, the report identifies emerging positive practice and concrete examples from the CESF project countries. It also draws on information from other countries, solicited through an open call for information which ISI shared with partners, regular tracking of news and information on COVID-19 and statelessness by the ISI team, as published in ISI Monthly Bulletins, interviews and conversations with relevant partners, and dedicated desk-based research conducted for this report. All desk research reflects public information available at the time of writing. While we have made efforts to verify the ongoing nature of practices identified, this was not always possible, and we welcome any updates or corrections from relevant stakeholders. All information is up to date as of 25 May 2021.

ACRONYMS

CESF – COVID-19 Emergency Statelessness Fund
COVID-19 – Corona Virus Disease 2019
ID - Identity Document
NRF - Nubian Rights Forum
PPE – Personal Protective Equipment
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Kenya is home to an estimated 18,500 stateless persons and approximately five million Kenyans who face discrimination and barriers in accessing nationality documentation. Various minority communities are impacted, including the Pemba, Galjael, Shona and those of Burundian, Congolese, Indian and Rwandan descent. Nubian and some Kenyan Somalis whose access to Kenyan identification documents is limited, also face challenges with documentation. These minority communities experience institutionalised discrimination in the issuance of documents and are subjected to a vetting process, based on ethnicity, in order to acquire an identity card or passport.

Kenya’s moves toward digital identification, brings with it, further threats to the inclusion of these excluded communities. Kenya recently introduced the National Integrated Identity Management System which has made access to public services conditional on access to a HudumaNamba (identification number). Those who are denied a HudumaNamba because they are undocumented or stateless, will be denied basic human rights including access to universal healthcare, education, employment and accessing government services.

Kenya has been heavily impacted by the pandemic. This chapter focuses specifically on the Nubian community, who faced significant challenges before the pandemic, which have been greatly exacerbated by COVID-19. The Nubian community are denied their equal right to nationality, as they were not recognised as citizens at the time of independence, meaning they were required to apply to register as citizens (through a highly discriminatory vetting process), rather than automatically acquiring it. As a result, many remain without recognition or documentation of citizenship. Nubians reside in various parts of Kenya, such as Kisii, Mombasa, Eldama Ravin, Kakamega, Kilifi, Kisumu and Bungoma counties, but the majority live in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, with a population of over 500,000 people.

**RIGHT TO NATIONALITY, DOCUMENTATION AND LEGAL STATUS**

During lockdown, various registration and government offices closed, leaving a backlog of unregistered births, deaths, marriages and ID and passport applications. This prevented Nubians from beginning the process of obtaining IDs and resulted in pending applications being put on hold. Civil registration offices have since opened with limited capacity, but Nubians and other stateless communities continue to face challenges accessing and acquiring documentation because of the backlogs of applications which have built up during office closures. These challenges have been caused by the suspension of vetting which led to increased number of applicants waiting to be vetted. The introduction of online application has also increased more challenge as not many citizens can afford to apply online which is expensive due to exploitation by intermediaries in the cyber and illiteracy.

**RIGHT TO HEALTH**

Kibera is a hotspot for the spread of COVID-19 due to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions (including lack of water and hygiene products including soap), where social distancing and good hygiene practices are difficult to follow. Stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness face many barriers in accessing healthcare services. The lack of legal identity is a barrier to accessing inpatient treatment from government and private hospitals, with high costs also preventing access to private healthcare. As a result, many are left to depend on herbal medicines. The fear of police harassment, arrests and detention due to lack of documentation further decreases the likelihood of seeking medical help. At the time of writing, the Nubian community living in areas where local NGO, NRF, operate had not been included in the national vaccination plan. Due to the limited number of vaccines available, lack of legal documentation, remote geographical location and poverty, those with nationality issues currently have very little access to the vaccine.

**Mental Health**

There are reports of deteriorating mental health in Dadaab refugee camp, a rise in suicides and a 50% rise in psychosocial consultations. Cash and food transfers have dropped by 10 to 30%, and refugees suffer from anxiety and uncertainty about the future, especially in the context of COVID-19.

**Socio-economic rights**

Exclusion from Emergency Relief: The National Hygiene Programme, locally known as “KaziMtaani”, is designed to cushion the most vulnerable but able-bodied citizens living in informal settlements from the impact of COVID-19. The programme provides income generating opportunities by recruiting residents of these settlements to carry out projects aimed at improving the environment, service delivery and infrastructure development. In Nairobi, more than 12,000 Kenyans living in Mathare, Kibera, Mukuru and Korogocho have benefited from this initiative. Despite the reach of this programme, only those with ID cards are recruited, excluding many Nubians and stateless persons.

Member of Parliament Kisumu Town East, Hon. Shakeel Shabbir

**KENYA**

“It is so unfortunate to realise that the Nubians are still facing challenges on access to nationality and citizenship. This has limited them from accessing services such as healthcare, securing job opportunities or even ownership of land which has further increased their vulnerability both socially and economically.”

Ensure that stateless communities are included on an equal basis in the COVID-19 vaccination plan.

Work with civil society, UNHCR, the Red Cross and other stakeholders to ensure that stateless communities are included on an equal basis in the COVID-19 action plan and are provided with food and other relief according to need.

Recognise stateless communities in Kenya, facilitate their equal access to nationality and remove barriers to accessing legal documentation.

Immediately stop forced evictions of the Nubian community, who face discrimination in accessing nationality and are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

This chapter looks more closely at right to nationality, documentation and legal status; right to health and socio-economic rights, and makes the following call to action to the government and relevant stakeholders.
from its benefits. Further, to receive a weekly stipend of 1000 shillings under this programme, one must be in possession of a registered SIM card.12

**Lost Livelihoods**: Prior to COVID-19, the Nubian community experienced difficulties in accessing services due to lack of documentation which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The community continues to face challenges accessing government aid such as food relief, medical care and PPE. The government offers basic services and cash transfers done primarily through mobile phones which are inaccessible to many Nubians and stateless people, as they cannot register and use a SIM card without providing an ID card. As a result of lockdowns, job opportunities have been scarce and where work is available, the lack of documentation acts as a barrier to employment. This has resulted in an increase in poverty, malnutrition and the inability to acquire basic necessities. A general lack of awareness of the impact of COVID-19 and prevention measures among stateless communities and the general public, further heightens their risk.

**Statelessness and the Right to Nationality in Kenya**

The 2010 Constitution, 2011 Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act and 2001 Children Act all contain provisions pertaining to citizenship in Kenya. Accordingly, citizenship is mainly acquired at birth on a jus sanguinis basis, if at the time of birth, one parent was recognised as a citizen of Kenya.

The causes of statelessness can be grouped into two broad categories – legal and administrative.16 Legally, there are no adequate safeguards to prevent statelessness. The 2010 Constitution, for example, states that Kenyans acquire citizenship at birth; however, this only applies if at least one parent was registered as a Kenyan citizen at the time of birth.17 The Constitution and the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act both further contain provisions regarding the renunciation of citizenship and the deprivation of citizenship which do not safeguard against statelessness.18 Administratively speaking, many Kenyans do not have access to identification documents due to gaps in registration, identification and citizenship procedures.20 This is compounded by a lack of awareness of the importance of birth registration.21

In practice, ethnic minorities including Kenyan Nubians, Kenyan Somalis and the Coastal Arabs are disproportionately threatened by the risk of statelessness.22 Obstacles include difficulties in obtaining documents such as identity cards or passports.23 Moreover, children from these communities face a higher risk of statelessness as birth certificates cannot be used as proof of citizenship.

**The CESF Consortium Project**

This project, carried out by the Nubian Rights Forum, entails monitoring and responding to human rights violations, documentation issues and challenges faced by the Nubian community during the pandemic. Through evidenced based advocacy, the project aims to end the government-led vetting process that Nubians must undergo, which hinders their acquisition of identity documentation. This project aims to raise awareness about statelessness and the impact of COVID-19 through media outreach utilising local Kenyan TV and radio stations and social media. This project disseminates information about COVID-19 in the community, ensuring accurate information is accessible to all. The project focuses on building partnerships and networking to improve the situation. In collaboration with Kibera Food Drive, the project provides food relief assistance in the form of small food packages and sanitation supplies to those without access to COVID-19 state relief measures. Finally, the project provides legal support to Nubians applying for their identity documents and legal counselling and mental health support to those who have suffered human rights abuses during the pandemic.

NRF is a human rights organisation dedicated to promoting the rights of the Nubian community in Kenya by assisting stateless persons within the community with their applications for identity and citizenship documents. NRF trains and supports community-based paralegals who aim to empower those at risk of statelessness by navigating the Kenyan legal system.

**Impact**

Through a weekly radio show, NRF has been spreading awareness about statelessness and disseminating information about COVID-19. Through dedicated social media work, NRF has grown their supporter base and are now reaching thousands of people on platforms including Facebook and Twitter. Through their radio show and social media presence they have been able to raise awareness within the Nubian community on COVID-19, its impacts and preventative, life saving measures. NRF has gathered information on how the pandemic has affected stateless Nubians so they can offer bespoke assistance and gather an evidence base to strengthen advocacy against the discriminatory identity documentation vetting process.
KEY GLOBAL THEMATIC FINDINGS

Many of the above findings on Kenya, also resonate at the global level. As the Together We Can report sets out, denial of the right to nationality, documentation and legal status as well as inequality and discrimination represent the main structural challenges impacting stateless people in a cyclical and intergenerational way. The other three thematic issues addressed in the global report - right to health, socioeconomic rights and civil and political rights - relate to some of the main rights deprivations stateless people endure, exacerbated by the pandemic. These challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, heightening the cost of statelessness, generating new risks of statelessness and stifling efforts to promote the right to nationality and the rights of stateless people.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH:

The right to health should have universal application regardless of race, religion, legal status or other criteria. A year into the pandemic however, healthcare related challenges faced by stateless people have only heightened. The cost of healthcare continues to be an insurmountable hurdle for many stateless people who are excluded from healthcare plans, subsidies, insurance schemes and free healthcare. The lack of documentation has further prevented access to healthcare, while fear of arrest, detention and harassment by police or officials has also cultivated a culture of fear around accessing healthcare for stateless and undocumented people. The inability to carry out effective preventative measures including social distancing and wearing PPE, as well as lack of access to sanitation and hygiene products and facilities due to living and working conditions, also places stateless communities at great risk. The mental health impacts of lockdowns, loss of livelihoods, exposure to health risks and starvation and exclusion from state relief measures, are also significant. There is an urgent need to ensure inclusivity in the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines, rising above vaccine nationalism. Unfortunately, we are already seeing a ‘citizens first’ approach to vaccine distribution and worrying initiatives including vaccine passports which would further exclude stateless people.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC RIGHTS:

When the pandemic took hold in early 2020, state responses prioritised citizens to the exclusion and detriment of migrants, refugees and stateless people. Over a year into the crisis, there has been hardly any shift in the approach to social and economic support by states and other actors. There has been a significant impact on employment and income and consequently the loss of livelihoods amongst the stateless and those at risk of statelessness. Jobs are mainly found in the informal sector which have been brought to a standstill with the implementation of lockdowns and curfews. There are further barriers to education during lockdowns due to the nature of online classes and the need for access to equipment and the internet.

CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS:

In order to address the threat to public health, most States have implemented restrictions which limit civil and political rights. Some states have also introduced more permanent restrictions. Stateless communities and those whose nationality is at risk face ongoing restrictions and rights violations which, due to pre-existing conditions, have a disproportionately devastating impact. Arbitrary detention, the risk of arrest and fear of harassment by officials has impacted stateless populations and those whose nationality is at risk. For those in detention, there is an increased risk of infection due to the inability to adequately social distance or self-isolate. Restrictions on freedom of movement have exacerbated the impacts of COVID-19 including for those trying to seek healthcare and education outside of refugee camps and has further had an impact on livelihoods and family reunions.

THE RIGHT TO NATIONALITY, DOCUMENTATION AND LEGAL STATUS:

COVID-19 related measures have impacted the right to nationality, documentation and legal status in deeply concerning ways. Disruptions to crucial civil registration procedures have resulted in delays and backlogs leaving stateless people and those whose nationality is at risk in limbo, completely vulnerable to the multiple effects of COVID-19. Such documentation and registration challenges also subject people to longer-term risks of statelessness. Unregistered births and subsequent non-issuance of IDs can heighten the risk of statelessness, particularly among minority and border communities and those with migrant heritage. Asylum and statelessness determination procedures have also been disrupted, as have permanent residence applications, visa processes and other consular services.

EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION:

Discrimination continues to be an underlying and entrenched driving force behind statelessness worldwide. There has been a rise in hate speech, xenophobia and racism. Minority and migrant communities have been vilified in populist political narratives and used as scapegoats for the spread of infection, including to distract from the failings of political leaders. Gender discrimination has also had a significant impact where gender discriminatory nationality laws deny nationality to children. Increased cases of gender-based violence have also been reported, where, particularly in the country contexts with gender discriminatory nationality laws, women are unable to extract themselves from unsafe situations.

For a more detailed overview of these global thematic findings and related calls to action, please refer the full report.
1 CHECK FOR INSTITUTIONAL BLIND-SPOTS

We invite states, UN actors, humanitarian groups and other stakeholders to engage in careful introspection, check for institutional blind-spots, and review and reform policies and practices to ensure that stateless people are prioritised, their particular contexts and needs are understood and addressed and they are not excluded or left behind through:

- strengthening awareness of the issue at all levels;
- acknowledging historical failures;
- collecting and sharing information on statelessness and nationality rights deprivations; and
- resourcing the enhancement of capacities, collaborations and funding.

2 INCLUDE, CONSULT & ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE

We invite activists and NGOs to make their expertise available and those in positions of power, to have open consultation and meaningful and constructive dialogue with affected communities, and commit to including stateless people on equal terms by:

- consulting with activists and affected communities;
- building trust and strengthening solidarity with stateless communities;
- meeting the needs and priorities of affected communities and ensuring their meaningful participation; and
- facilitating wider discourse within society and institutions on equality, inclusion and the right to nationality.

3 BUILD BACK BETTER

We invite all actors to learn the hard lessons that the pandemic has taught us and invest in future-proofing, ensuring a lasting commitment to breaking down the pervasive injustice, indignity, inequality, deprivation and exclusion that stateless people face, focusing on:

- implementing reforms to address discriminatory laws, policies and practices;
- redressing the intergenerational disadvantage and legacy of statelessness;
- being accountable to stateless communities and activists;
- monitoring the performance and progress of states;
- ensuring access to justice and reparations for stateless people; and
- sustainably investing in inclusive societies.

STATELESSNESS DOES NOT ONLY EXIST IN HISTORY BUT IS ONGOING, IN REAL TIME AND IN PRACTICALLY EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD. EVEN THOUGH STATELESSNESS INTERSECTS WITH EVERY OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION, IT REMAINS LARGELY UNKNOWN AND MISUNDERSTOOD. THE LARGE STATELESSNESS KNOWLEDGE GAP, EVEN AMONG PROMINENT DEVELOPMENT, MIGRATION, HUMANITARIAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTORS, IS A CHALLENGE AND BURDEN FOR STATELESS PEOPLE LIKE ME, GLOBALY, WE ARE NOT JUST A COLLECTION OF STORIES. WE ARE OUR OWN ADVOCATES AND EXPERTS THROUGH OUR LIVED EXPERIENCES. THIS REPORT RECOGNISES STATELESS PEOPLE AS LEADERS WHO MUST SHAPE THE VISION AND MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THE PRIORITIES THAT DIRECTLY AFFECT OUR LIVES, OUR FAMILIES AND OUR COMMUNITIES. THE ROADMAP OFFERS A WAY FORWARD FOR OUR ALLIES TO CHECK THEIR STATELESSNESS BLIND-SPOTS, CENTRE US IN THEIR ACTIONS AND BE ACCOUNTABLE TO US WHEN DELIVERING THEIR MANDATES. WE CANNOT END STATELESSNESS BY OURSELVES, TOGETHER WE MUST WORK TO ENVISION A WORLD WHERE NOBODY IS DEPRIVED OF NATIONALITY BASED ON THEIR RACE, ETHNICITY, SEX, GENDER, OR RELIGION. A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE’S HUMAN RIGHT TO NATIONALITY IS PROTECTED AND UPHOLDED, AND WHERE STATELESSNESS IS TRULY RELEGATED TO THE HISTORY BOOKS.

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