

The experiences of IDPs in Mali during COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, governments around the world began implementing public health measures, such as quarantine. How do such measures affect the lives of internally displaced people (IDPs), and how can public health actors adapt approaches?

IDPs have specific vulnerabilities and needs

This qualitative study explored the experiences of IDPs and stakeholders in Mali, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government implemented public health measures such as social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine. They found that the circumstances of IDPs (including crowded living conditions, lack of access to clean water and healthcare) created additional barriers, both for IDPs in adhering to public health guidelines, and for implementing organisations working with IDPs in Mali to deliver services during COVID-19. Improving awareness among IDPs of the disease may help to reduce these barriers.



Photo of an IDP site in Mali. Credit: Study team

Background

In West Africa, a COVID-19 vaccine may take years to reach the full population. Governments and humanitarian actors are still relying on public health measures to reduce the spread of the pandemic, including social distancing, mask-wearing, and home-quarantine of suspected cases. In Mali, such measures were implemented gradually throughout 2020. Over 200,000 IDPs live in Mali, in settlements on the outskirts of Bamako and Segou. Little was known about how these measures would be received by IDPs, or whether they would be effective. This study aimed to generate evidence on the experiences of IDPs in response to public health measures, to support public health actors to better respond to COVID-19 in Mali.

How the research was conducted

The team conducted 36 individual in-depth interviews and 8 focus groups, in Segou and Bamako, including 50 IDPs, 11 humanitarian actors and 7 health, administrative and political stakeholders. An additional data collection round later captured further information on social distancing measures.

Key findings

- Challenges with quarantining and isolation for IDPs include the difficulties in contacting positive cases; the lack of facilities for quarantine and isolation; the lack of physical space for building new facilities; and the lack of financial resources to support IDPs during isolation and quarantine.
- Barriers for social distancing include the proximity in which IDPs live, lack of financial resources, lack of respect for health measures, local beliefs and values, and lack of water /sanitation.
- Local actors tried to meet these challenges by building new shelters or splitting up existing ones; creating income-generating activities and food banks; providing psychosocial help; awareness-raising campaigns; and nightly police patrols to discourage IDPs from going out.
- IDPs also developed their own initiatives to reduce infection spread, such as early warning systems for positive or suspected cases and raising awareness.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

- Various specific challenges were faced by both IDPs in Bamako and Segou during COVID-19, and by Malian actors implementing public health measures. It is important to be aware of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of IDPs when implementing public health measures in response to disease outbreaks.
- The findings show IDPs were inhibited from complying with social distancing and quarantine measures not only due to practical or economic concerns (such as loss of income), but also psychosocial barriers such as fear of stigma, or unwillingness to break with existing social behaviors. These factors need to be considered in messaging around public health measures.
- The lack of dedicated space to enable quarantine was also a barrier which could be addressed in future.
- Finally, the strategies of improving systems for early warning about positive cases, and for raising awareness, appear to have been effective and could be built on. Initiatives led by IDPs themselves may be more likely to be sustainable.

Recommendations for future research

Further research could continue to shed light on the experiences of IDPs as the pandemic continues and as vaccines begin to reach Mali, and to explore the experiences of IDPs in other West African settings.

About the study team

The Co-Investigators were Dr Mohamed Ali Ag Ahmed and Dr Birama Apho Ly, of the University of Sciences, Techniques and Technologies of Bamako (USTTB) in Mali. Partners included Arcad Sante Plus, Santé Mali Rhones Alpes and Action Contre La Faim.

Keywords

Mali; internally displaced people; IDPs; COVID-19; public health measures; social distancing

Articles and further reading

The study page and further outputs can be found on the Elrha website.

<https://www.elrha.org/project/implementation-of-public-health-measures-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-french-speaking-africa-case-of-mali/>



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