

## Kenyan activist: Wealthy nations in 'dangerous competition' to own coronavirus vaccine

'Kenyans deserve the vaccine just as much as anyone else,' Odede said.



by [Jillian Deutsch](#)

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Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, is holding a conference Thursday to raise the \$7.4 billion needed to immunize millions of children against existing viral infections — which comes on top of funds also needed for a coronavirus vaccine.

But no matter the outcome, activists like Kenya's Kennedy Odede are also consumed by a growing concern: That those efforts could be overshadowed if wealthy countries wind up fighting for the coronavirus vaccine once it's developed.

"There's a dangerous competition going on among developed countries about who will own the [coronavirus] vaccine," said Odede. "I see this as a failure of leadership and basic understanding of how the virus works."

Access to a coronavirus vaccine is important for everyone, but it's crucial for places like Kibera, a sprawling slum area in Nairobi, Kenya, [one of the 58](#) country recipients of Gavi assistance.

It's a place where public health measures are difficult — and sometimes impossible — to implement.

Community workers are doing their best, screening thousands of people for the COVID-19 symptoms; setting up hundreds of hand-washing sites; and going door-to-door to

educate people. But Odede argues they need international help as well.

And more broadly, for all the focus on COVID-19, “leaders must not neglect their duty to continue the fight against infectious diseases in the poorest countries of the world,” he emphasized.

“Millions of African children could become collateral damage if COVID-19 gets in the way of routine vaccination,” he added.

Odede, who runs the NGO Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), told POLITICO about the challenges in fighting COVID in the slums, and why Kenya needs access to a coronavirus vaccine just as much as anyone else.

## The struggle in the slums

Social distancing is next to impossible in Kibera, Odede points out.

“Imagine living in a 10-by-10 [foot] house with five family members and sharing a toilet with 50 households nearby, and you just lost your job,” he explained.

“The slums are like a matchbox for the virus to spread like wildfire,” Odede added. This makes it far harder to contain the coronavirus — even as community workers strive around the clock to keep it at bay.

So far, the virus hasn't hit the African continent as hard as it has Europe and North America. But the World Health Organization has warned that it could, and it projected [last month](#) that COVID-19 could kill close to 200,000 people and drive millions more into poverty.

There are already worrying signs. This week, Kenya reached more than 2,000 confirmed coronavirus cases — with Kibera accounting for around a fifth of those.

The coronavirus is still in its early stages in Kenya, but families are struggling to get by from week to week, Odede said. Shuttered businesses means less work, and less work means less money for food.

Some people “are more scared of dying from hunger than from coronavirus,” Odede said.

For now, health workers have been trying to reach the slums with mass screening, but many residents don't trust the government or dismiss COVID-19 as a hoax. Some think they can treat COVID-19 by drinking alcohol.

This is where community networks step in, as people are more likely to trust friends and family than the government.

Odede — who was recently appointed to the Kenyan government's National COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund — and hundreds of other community health workers go door-to-door to explain that people need to avoid physical contact, wear face masks and wash their hands.

They're also bringing food to people to mitigate shortages and price gouging, and are encouraging the government to continue routine immunization programs to protect against other viral outbreaks.

Social distancing is "next to impossible," but they're telling people to minimize human contact. They're also fighting rumors and misinformation.

"Being a community-based organization means you are the first responder, the essential worker and the advocate for helping vulnerable families get what they need," Odede said.

He stressed that governments need to help provide resources to people.

"If you ignore people who are fighting for survival, there will be panic and mistrust, and the virus will spread uncontrollably," he said.

And once a coronavirus vaccine is discovered, Odede argues, Kenyans deserve it just as much as anyone else. And if they don't get it, the virus will continue to spread in the country and around the world, he said.

"COVID-19 is bringing countries to their knees, and it is a matter of national security to reach the areas that are most fragile, first," he warned.

And community-based workers need to be in place on the ground to ensure everyone actually gets vaccinated, he noted.

"To beat this pandemic worldwide, we need to turn off the faucet entirely, or it will keep leaking," Odede said.