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Introduction

Antibiotics are now a routine part of everyday life in many contexts and their use is increasing among humans, animals and crops.

Informal settlements are political spaces that often lie in the shadow of formality. Informal spaces are tolerated but delegitimized and this further marginalizes the residents.

Urban informal settlements often lack adequate infrastructure, including clean water, proper drainage, access to toilets and health care facilities.

Little is known about the roles of antibiotics in urban informal settlements and how they may enable forms of life, particularly for those who are precarious day-wage earners.

The Anti-Microbials In Society research in Uganda is about understanding how antibiotics are used in society and everyday life within informal settlements.

Methods

The fieldwork for this research entailed the following activities in April to August 2018:

Antibiotic 'pile sorting' with members of 174 households in the settlement – asking respondents to respond to antibiotic pills and packets that were assembled from sources in and around the settlement.

Ethnographic research, participating in life alongside residents, over a 5 week period.

In-depth interviews with 10 residents, community health workers and drug shop owners.

A feedback dialogue meeting with 14 residents in the settlement.

A drainage trench through the Informal Settlement



Interim findings

Antibiotics commonly used include metronidazole, ampicillin and amoxicillin.

About half of respondents (47%) had taken an antibiotic in the week of the survey. 81% of the respondents said they frequently used metronidazole, often because of diarrhoea.

Following the use of antibiotics for diarrhoea brings to the fore cracks in infrastructure that antibiotics are filling in this context:

- approximately 10 public toilets serve a population of 5000, leaving residents to use buckets, polythene bags and drainage trenches for toileting;
- residence in a wetland area means frequent flooding, circulating refuse within houses, which is further accelerated by clogged drainage due to inadequate garbage disposal;
- ambiguity about water quality is accentuated by accounts from different actors and different forms of 'proof';
- frequent charity donations of drugs are put to pragmatic use while stimulating questions over what forms of care these medicines are providing and for whom, with rumours circulating about the dumping of expired medicines.

Medicines stored in one household in the settlement



Conclusions

Use of medicines in this context must be interpreted in relation to other priorities and challenges of daily life. Medicines appear to perform care for people in this informal settlement.

The situation in the settlement suggests that life is established here; these are not mobile living conditions. Settlements are permanent despite being potentially criminalised. The ways antibiotics are making up for infrastructural deficiencies should be considered in this light.

Further research should focus on urbanisation, marginalisation and the ways in which the implementation of policies around medicines play roles in these processes.

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