

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SECURITY

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Introduction

When Coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, not many people thought that it was going to become a scourge that would completely alter the course of our lives. As the virus gradually spread to other continents and countries, the World Health Organization swiftly declared it a pandemic. Thus, to curtail the further spread of the virus in their respective domain, various national governments adopted sweeping measures such as total and partial lockdowns, which aside negatively affecting the economy also hindered the availability and accessibility to food.

From the foregoing, therefore, many people were not able to have access to food during the lockdown. To mitigate against this, many national governments and well-meaning individuals and organizations rolled out palliatives in the forms of food items to reach the most vulnerable of their respective communities, but it is hardly sufficient. Even as normalcy gradually returns, the effects of the lockdown occasioned by Coronavirus on food security will be felt for a long time. In fact, according to the World Bank, the U.N. World Food Programme has warned that an additional 130 million people could face acute food insecurity by the end of 2020, on top of the 135 million people who were already acutely food insecure before the crisis, because of income and remittance losses. The purpose of this article is to look at how the coronavirus pandemic has affected food security and nutrition, drawing case studies from countries globally.

What is food security?

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), food security as a concept has evolved with about 200 definitions of the concept in published writings over the years, however, the globally accepted definition of food security according to the organization goes thus: ***Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.*** According to the organization, the definition of food security brings to fore four main *dimensions* of food security briefly discussed below:

- ✓ Food Availability- This is the physical availability of food and looks at the ability to supply food to those in need of it. Food availability is determined by the level of food production, the level at which food has been stocked, and net trade.
- ✓ Food Access- This refers to the ability of individuals to have physical and economic access to food. Whilst the physical access to food connotes that individuals should be able to access food (in a tangible or concrete form), the economic access to food means that individuals should possess the purchasing power or resources that will enable them to

have access to food through various means such as production, trade, barter, community support networks among others.

✓ **Food Utilization-** This refers to the ability of the body to make the most use of the various nutrients supplied by food and is determined by an individual's health status.

✓ **Food Stability-** Finally, these three dimensions should be stable over time and not be affected negatively by natural, social, economic, or political factors.

Global Food insecurity in perspective Pre-Covid-19

Even without the pandemic breathing down our necks and ravaging world economies, the world was already battling food crises as millions of people struggle to get food. For instance, Torero (2020) noted that hunger and malnutrition were significant global problems even before the pandemic as more than 2 billion people didn't have regular access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food in 2019, with about 704 million of them sleeping on empty stomachs; this included 135 million people who were on the edge of starvation.

In Africa, crises like insecurity, climate change, flooding, and locust-warms are the major causes of this food crisis (Blanke, 2020). This has put about 650-670 million people in Africa at the risk of food insecurity, with about 250 million people considered severely food insecure before the pandemic (Pais, Jayaram, Van Wamelen, 2020).

Correlating Covid-19 and potential global food insecurity

It is clear from our introduction that the world was already grappling with a food crisis before the Coronavirus pandemic. However, Coronavirus has exacerbated food insecurity by affecting food availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability. In other words, the pandemic has hindered people's ability to access and utilize sufficient, safe, and nutritious food in the short, medium, and long term through the following means:

1. **Waning income-** The income of many people globally has either reduced significantly or is completely lost, thereby affecting their ability to afford safe and nutritious food. According to the International Labour Organization, cited in Laborde, Martin and Vos (2020), about 200 million people could lose their jobs due to the pandemic. A collapse in demand for food due to lack of income and disruptions to local food markets could prompt a global food crisis (Torero, 2020).

The contraction or loss of income is not unconnected with the impact of the economic downturn felt by many companies which have forced them to either lay off a large chunk of their workforce or significantly reduce workers' salary. This income loss or contraction is felt by both rural and urban dwellers. For instance, according to a study conducted in Nigeria, Lashitew and Kanos (2020) reported that 70% of rural and urban respondents

reported having experienced a reduction in income since the pandemic. The income contraction has put about 70% of respondents in rural and urban areas in Nigeria at the risk of food insecurity.

Internal demand for food in Africa could fall in the medium and long term as purchasing powers reduces due to loss or contraction in income with low-income earners likely to be most affected. And since most of these low-income earners spend about 60-80% of their income on food, any further income contraction could force them to either skip meals or settle for less nutritious but cheaper food, leading to serious nutritional problems (Pais et.al, 2020).

2. **The rising cost of food-** The Food and Agriculture Organization through her food price index reports that global food prices rose to the highest levels in August 2020, since February. According to the organization, the FAO Food Price Index (FFPI) averaged 96.1 points in August 2020, up 1.8 points (2.0 percent) from July and 2.1 points (2.2 percent) higher than its level in the corresponding month last year.

The price of food has been on the rise since the pandemic. Blanke (2020) noted that prices rise due to panic buying, transport restrictions, rising prices of food imports, and disruptions in trade flows. For instance, according to a report on www.guardian.ng rising food cost hastened the national inflation rate in Nigeria as the inflation rate rose to 12.34% in April, from 12.26% recorded in the previous month as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics. The rising food cost was attributed to the rising cost of transportation, food wastage, shortage of food imports, and shortage of labour on the farm.

3. **Shortage of farm inputs-** The pandemic and the lockdown occasioned by it meant that farmers were not able to get agricultural inputs like quality seeds, animal feed, fertilizers, and other inputs critical to the planting season as such inputs were either short in supply or unavailable. For instance, Ehui (2020) noted that farmers struggled to get supplied with necessary agricultural and livestock inputs like seeds and fertilizers needed for planting. This was echoed by Tamru, Hirvonen, and Minten (2020). According to them, prices of farm inputs such as herbicide, fungicides, fertilizers, and improved seeds crucial to the production of vegetables in Ethiopia have gone up as such inputs are short in supply due to border closure.

The disruptions in the supply of important agricultural inputs to farmers as a result of movement restrictions meant that many farmers in rural areas would have missed the planting season. For instance, Blanke (2020) noted that farmers in rural areas were unable to acquire important agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, crop protection products, and animal feed in time for the planting season. Zhang (2020) also noted that the arrival of

the spring plowing season in China meant that crop farmers had to go back to the farm. However, restrictions in movement meant that such crop farmers may not be able to get the necessary farm inputs such as seed, fertilizer, pesticide, and agricultural machinery and labour they needed in time for the spring plowing season which would potentially dip their income for an entire year. Missing the planting season also means that there will be a significant drop in agricultural productivity, leading to a shortage of food, thus affecting food security.

4. **Reduction in food importation-** As many countries are not self-sufficient in food production, food importation became the viable option adopted by most to bridge the gap between the shortage in their food supply and their teeming population, especially in developing countries of Africa and Asia. Africa's import of food and agricultural inputs amount to between 45 billion and 50 billion dollars a year (Pais et al, 2020). However, the coronavirus pandemic has left many countries unable to sustain food importation which may not be unconnected with the economic downturn and measures such as curfews, movement restrictions, and border closure occasioned by the pandemic.

Also, many food-exporting countries briefly introduced food export bans to ensure food security in their countries. For instance, Swinnen and McDermott (2020) noted that major exporting countries introduced export bans on the rice and wheat market. This means that those countries that depend on the food importation from major exporting countries are unable to get the food they needed even when they have the means and resources to import foods as the sellers were unwilling to sell. This may pose a serious food security challenge for chronic food importers like African countries. From 2016 to 2018, Africa imported about 85% of its food from outside the continent (UNCTAD, 2020). This means that African countries may be unable to feed their citizens as their inability to import would exacerbate the food crisis on the continent which was already worsened by incidents like drought, regional conflicts, flooding, and locust-warms before the pandemic.

Conclusion

The serious disruptions which include restrictions on labour, transportation, processing, retailing, and input distribution threaten the food and nutrition security of many in low and middle-income countries (Swinnen and McDermott, 2020). However, according to a World Bank report published on <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19> on the 14th September 2020, Global production levels for the three most widely consumed staples (rice, wheat, and maize) are at or near all-time highs and trade at prices that are close to their January 2020 levels. The World Bank noted that the risk of food insecurity is at country levels. According to the bank, even though the global food prices are stable, different countries are experiencing varying levels of food price inflation at the retail level due to the measures taken to combat the spread of the virus. Besides, the bank opined that even though current food insecurity is by and large not driven by food shortages, supply

disruptions and inflation affecting key agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and seeds, or prolonged labor shortages could diminish next season's crop. Thus, domestic food supply chains, loss of incomes, and labour shortages are some of the issues to be addressed at country levels for the world to avert a global food crisis in the medium and long term.

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