

POLICY BRIEF



Promoting Inclusive Policy Responses to Improve Food and Nutrition Security Post-COVID Pandemic in Africa

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated containment measures have exposed the fragility of Africa's food systems. It has impacted the food insecurity of low-income wage-earning populations, who are often urban or peri-urban. The consequences of COVID-19 responses fell disproportionately on the poor in the form of income losses. Closures of markets and restrictions on movement limited daily wage-earning activities. Additionally, the small or informal actors, who are essential to the local food supply, were highly disrupted, unlike their larger, formal sector counterparts.

The degree to which governments and their partners took account of groups excluded from the formal economy was a defining feature of who was food secure and who was not. These differentiated outcomes also reflect a transforming food security context, where affordability and markets are central features. The scale of impact was significant. According to the FAO and UNICEF, more than 250 million Africans were left hungry¹ in 2020, and a significant proportion undernourished due to income loss. In an effort to reduce the impact of the pandemic and other food system shocks, 2020-2021 saw most African governments lift containment measures and advance social protection measures to support those affected. However, food and nutrition insecurity occasioned by the ongoing pandemic and systemic shocks persist.

The deepening inclusion of those that are vulnerable to such events in national policies and response programmes is a critical part of strengthening Africa's food system resilience. Experience from 2020-21 highlights ways governments can act to support more equitable food and nutrition security outcomes in future crises. These include, amongst others: protecting the incomes of food systems actors by keeping markets open, classifying food services as essential in both formal and informal economies, expanding social safety net transfer interventions and debt repayment changes.

Introduction

The socio-economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 early on elicited fears of severe food shortages as closures of markets and mobility restrictions short-circuited food system demand and supply chains. Fortunately, Africa's food system proved relatively resilient to those challenges. The highest costs were felt by small and informal actors and poorer segments of the rural and urban populations. Now more than ever, there is a need to build equitable and inclusive resilience across Africa's food systems for sustainable food and nutrition security. This policy brief highlights the lessons on including vulnerable groups in efforts to improve food security while drawing on a small but

1 The State of Food Security and Nutrition, FAO 2020 and 2021

growing literature base².

A Marginalised Majority

Adhoc policy responses

March 2020 saw national and regional COVID-19 related responses by African governments and regional bodies to contain the virus³. Responding to the unknown, rushed, and duplicated efforts took place, including border closures, curfews, full lockdowns or strict limits to congregation, movement, and travel restrictions. Only essential services were allowed to keep operating. Despite the need for urgent, effective public health action, concern was widely expressed about the consequences of these actions on the economic, social and health conditions and on food shortages. The predicted largescale food shortages did not materialise as the global and national food systems proved relatively resilient. However, the costs of maintaining national stability were not spread equitably. The burden of COVID responses and disruption fell disproportionately on the poor segments of society, worst-affecting the small and informal actors in the food systems, who represent a significant group- IFPRI notes that small and informal actors account for up to 90% of the food system in low-income countries. In contrast, the better-off socio-economic groups, larger supermarkets, grocery stores, formal supply chain actors and producers were affected much less and, in some cases, even prospered.

These differentiated results are explained by examining how responses directly or indirectly impacted different food system actors or consumers. Despite initial disruptions triggered by national or global responses, larger and formal segments of the market and supply chains, and higher-end retail outlets have remained stable. Better-off consumers equally, were relatively unaffected. However, the same policy responses significantly impacted the economic activities of small formal and informal producers, traders, transporters, and vendors. While reducing incomes for these vulnerable groups, it also decreased the availability and diversity of food available to low socio-economic groups. Low-income consumers often could not access food following the closure or limited operations of food outlets due to restrictions. Curfews and limitations on movement were big burdens for low-income consumers, who typically buy food daily. Restrictions on mobility limited small and informal trade, and especially the trade of fresh or perishable foods (e.g.,

fruits, vegetables, fish, milk). Food supply to open air or wet-markets, as well as small informal or formal food outlets (e.g., kiosks, or road-side vendors) decreased in volume and diversity. Where concerns by governments regarding sanitary requirements led to the blanket closure of informal outlets or open-air markets, the effects were particularly severe. In contrast, formal or larger food outlets complied with emerging regulations and continued running as essential businesses. Those able to work from home may have been less affected, but for the poor this was not an option.

Policy gaps

Food security in Africa is often framed in the ebb and flow of traditional, subsistence, rural agrarian life with a particular focus on managing the effects on livelihoods from too much or too little rain. Rural society was generally reported to have fared better during COVID-19. However, in 2020-21 food insecurity was experienced in new devastating ways by the wage-earning poor – employed or self-employed - who often rely on their income to sustain their daily food needs. These wage earners were often found in urban areas. The gap in understanding COVID-19 and the related responses have been, and continues to be, primarily an urban food insecurity experience, even though it also affects wage-earning labourers in rural locations.

A review of the reactive policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the systemic weaknesses of the national and regional policies meant to develop resilient food security in Africa. The design and implementation of such response policies were insufficiently grounded in the vulnerabilities to food insecurity existing from different forms of shock. They also tended to have the greatest negative economic impact on the poorest in societies.

The policies fell short of adequately and inclusively addressing five factors affecting food insecurity⁴: 1) The reliance on imported agricultural inputs for agricultural production and food supply chains; 2) the vulnerabilities in household purchasing power and food access especially where heads of households in rural are women and daily-wage-earning youth in urban areas; 3) sustainable and gender-responsiveness in social protection systems - most safety net programmes targeted the elderly and children in rural and semi-rural areas, and were not well placed to scale up in support of the urban poor; 4) weak social accountability in agricultural policy coupled with movement and meeting restrictions, resulted in limited means for citizen-led

2 Béné, C. et al., 2021. Impacts of COVID-19 on People's Food Security: Foundations for a more Resilient Food System, Montpellier: CGIAR. And IFPRI and ReNAPRI: Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Associated Policy Responses on Food Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa - A Synthesis of Evidence, April 2021.

3 Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Associated Policy Responses on Food Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, AGRA; A Rapid Analysis of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Selected Food Value Chains in Africa, AGRA, Nhemachena, C and Murwisi, K. 2020; Impacts of COVID-19 on People's Food Security: Foundations for a more Resilient Food System, CGIAR

4 State of Food and Nutrition Security and Vulnerability in Southern Africa, SADC 2021

action to hold public officials and service providers to account for the use of public resources and services delivered in response to the pandemic, and 5) African food systems were already battling with climate shocks, conflict, and pest infestations pre-pandemic, but public health responses exacerbated the challenges as they increased the vulnerability of small and poor actors within Africa's food system.

Measures to enhance inclusion

Most African governments lifted containment measures when they judged it necessary and accelerated efforts to reduce and mitigate future impacts of the pandemic. Measures to restore markets included the re-opening of borders and marketplaces, and reclassifying food supply chains as essential services. Social protection transfers of food and cash were made to rural and urban vulnerable populations. Fiscal and monetary incentives were introduced such as reducing VAT, duties, and extending concessional loan facilities to food actors. Mobile cash transfer systems were incentivised by reducing transaction fees and extending transaction limits to aid health care costs and facilitate economic exchange. Where consistently implemented, these measures provided vulnerable groups with valuable financial relief.

Improving policy for low income and vulnerable groups

Governments can ensure that future crisis responses lead to more equitable outcomes by learning from the 2020-21 COVID-19 experience. Below we consider the factors that can contribute meaningfully towards greater food security for all in the face of future shocks.

Incomes

Protecting incomes in market exchanges is key to retaining food access, dietary diversity, and quality⁵. Different strategies from a range of actors emerged over the course of the pandemic. Employers and governments responded and adapted over time to keep businesses operating and staff employed. Modifications to curfew hours or movement permissions were made to better-enable workers to move to and from their workplaces. Replacing blanket business closures with exceptions or conditions of opening helped businesses to operate and keep their staff on payrolls. Modifications to municipal hawking regulations or the

temporary relaxation of vending measures can support informal workers.

Safety nets

Ensuring the right to food by improving social protection programmes and to ensure they take account of an accurate understanding of vulnerable groups. This may require investment in new kinds of food security monitoring systems (e.g. in urban areas) and response systems (e.g. for urban digital cash transfers). Transfers should be capable of enabling recipients to purchase a nutritious diet.

Cross Border Trade

Ensuring that borders are open for trade including for small scale producers, food processors and traders can advance equity, and expand food reserves to ensure food security and diet diversity. Smaller producers and traders contribute to local economies and food supply. Modified arrangements – inspection, customs, or sanitary requirements – may be necessary to ensure the timely movements of goods during crisis. Particular attention should be paid to perishable goods and movement permissions to final destinations must be provided. It may be necessary to develop special arrangements to allow the same movement by smaller and informal actors.

Prioritize the needs of women and gender equality

The pandemic highlights the rampant gender inequality in Africa's food systems. Women are key to national food systems, but there has only been limited support to women that acknowledges the relatively large socio-economic and gender-based violence vulnerability brought on by the interventions to control the pandemic.

Social accountability with a focus on women leadership⁶

This may include strengthening or establishing smallholder farmer and CSO-inclusive food and nutrition councils at district and sub-district levels to guide, monitor and oversee food and nutrition strategies, plans, programmes and budgets.

Debt

The disruption of supply chains resulted in considerable income loss for food system actors. Many resorted to heavy borrowing to offset losses and to kickstart their recovery. The promotion of food system recovery

5 COVID-19 and nutrition, food security, and dietary diversity and quality Key Findings from a Phone Survey in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, Arise June 2021

6 Outlined in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Mutual Accountability Framework.

through the cancellation and suspension of loan repayments and the renegotiation of longer-term debt obligations would be a welcomed relief – especially for micro, small and medium size food system actors.

Asset Ownership

Recovery from the pandemic has been difficult for women and youth as they are often workers and not owners of most-productive assets. Investments in human capital in areas such as secure land tenure rights, improved access to information, and stronger social protections were found to lower the barriers to participation that marginalized groups face.

Marketing and Supply chains

Small producers and traders who supply open air markets, or small commercial outlets such as local grocery stores, restaurants and micro-vendors must have the same ability to move and conduct business as their larger, formal counterparts. This may require mechanisms to accord both owners and employees of small businesses accreditation as essential service providers, and movement permissions. It may also be necessary to accommodate the unique requirements of different commodities (horticulture, fruits, milk, meats/ fish etc.).

Commerce and Markets

Allowing open air markets and local food outlets/ vendors to operate, even on a limited basis, during a crisis is important for consumers, producers, and businesses alike. Solutions will need to include mechanisms to assure compliance and enforcement. Consideration must be given to the safety and security of their staff, including transmission and their movement to and from home. Dialogue should begin with these actors to better understand their businesses and what solutions might be required.

Dialogue, engagement, and innovation

The COVID-19 experience has reinforced the importance of collaboration across private and public sectors. It has underscored the degree to which food security for all is increasingly about business and market mechanisms. It emphasises that small and informal businesses are critical actors when it comes to ensuring equity among the actions taken by governments and other actors. Recognising not only businesses but small and informal actors could allow government policy to tap into their innovation, tenacity, and entrepreneurial spirit. These businesses adjusted their working hours and conditions during the crisis to accommodate their workers, and initiated mobile markets i.e. handcart sales, taxi car boot sales or home delivery services in poor communities. These entrepreneurs have a place in dialogue and in

identifying future food security solutions.

Ubuntu

Governments should empower their citizens to display solidarity and mutual support in these difficult times. This can be done through the promotion of ‘home grown’ products to reduce dependency on imports, price controls and incentivizing agri-businesses to produce and sell food products at inclusive price points, as well as the public recognition and celebration of generosity and solidarity.

Conclusion

Africa is committed to food systems transformation since the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021. Part of this agenda is ensuring that governments across the continent are better-prepared for diverse shocks to food security that can throw countries off-track. Many lessons exist from the COVID-19 pandemic for use in the future. Efforts to generate and sensitize lessons should continue. Interventions to control the pandemic had a disproportional effect on low-income groups. This should not happen again. As presented in this policy brief, there is need to ensure robust, purposeful, and contextualized policy action in order to promote inclusive food and nutrition recovery and security in Africa.

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