

Food Insecurity: A Warning Sign of Poverty

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between food insecurity and poverty in Nigeria. Poverty and food insecurity is social determinants of economic wellbeing. The pandemic COVID 19 which had extremely affected the world economy has also increased the rate of food insecurity as well as poverty in various households by 16%. The present economic conditions have produced a pattern of widespread starvation among the poor with more people dying from poverty-related causes. The rapid increases in food insecurity are as a result of the pandemic, lack of agricultural storage facilities for food and actions of wholesalers and transporter in the market. The studies enumerate the responsibilities of both governmental and non-governmental organizations on aiding the increasing food scarcity and alleviate poverty among the masses.

Keywords: *Food insecurity, Poverty, COVID 19, Economy*

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Background to the Study

COVID 19 is one of the biggest global economic shock in peacetime since the 1930s and is having a severe impact on employment and investment across all sectors of the economy. With the global economy set to shrink by 6% in 2020, some 300 million jobs may have been lost during the second quarter of the year. This disruption has sent shock waves through food markets, with global food investment expected to shrink by an unparalleled 20% in 2020 (Biorol,2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has serious potential negative impacts on food security, livelihoods and incomes, and poverty all over the world. More than half of the world populations were under some form of social distancing to contain the health crisis, these results to the poorest parts of the world being poorer and as well increase the level of food insecurity.

During the COVID-19 crisis, most governments restricted the export and import of food and other essential human needs. This behavior aggregated, with dire unintended consequences for vulnerable people in food-importing countries, increasing prices and exacerbating issues of food insecurity already inflamed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also negatively affects producers in the export-restricting countries. This led to increase in the prices of food commodities: for instance, a sachet of paste tomatoes which was sold for #50 cost #120 now while a cup of rice which was #100 costs #240 now. These exorbitant food prices strongly influence the livelihood and dietary choices of the poor masses. These increase in the food materials during and after the pandemic has affected the poor who spent almost their income on food, hence they are at risk of food insecurity, they are not sure of their next meal.

The majority of the people facing the threat of food insecurity are mostly children, women and the elderly who rely basically on agriculture for survival. These poor households depend on the sale of their farm produce to local markets which were shut down as of the COVID 19 crises thereby posing a high risk of hunger within these household. In most cases inability to access the produced food also affected many households in urban cities as the few food commodities obtained are costly. This showed that hunger is a common characteristic of poverty, a cause of suffering and the center to people's experience of poverty (Short, 2001).

The rates of food inflation have been observed to be on the high rate within and after the period of the pandemic. A report by Ekott (2020), in Premium Times Newspaper indicated that food inflation in Nigeria has risen to 16% in August, 2020 compared to what was obtainable (15.48%) in July based on the statistics from National Bureau of Statistics. Increase in the food prices is also responsible for the rate of hunger in the society. This can be observed in the cost of some food items such as 100kg of rice which cost about N26,000 before the pandemic is now sold for N54,000, a bag of beans is now sold for N21,000, a bag of maize is N22,000 while that of garri is now N18,000. An interview conducted by Daily Trust on September, 2020 revealed a farmer who lamented that many of them have resorted to broken rice (last grade of milled rice) which was sold before as N550 is now N950.

At Ojodu mini-market in Lagos, the business hub of Nigeria, a bag of rice, which was hitherto sold for N18, 000 is now N22, 000 while a bag of foreign rice, which has been banned but still being smuggled in is sold at N30, 000. Vegetable oil, which was sold for N11, 000 is now N14,

000. Also, a 4-litre paint bucket of garri goes for between N700 and N1000. A 4-litre paint bucket of beans rose from N1, 500 to N1, 700. Also the price of flour, a major ingredient for bread, increased from N10, 500 per 50kg bag to N13, 500 per bag, sugar increased from N13,500 per bag to N29,000 and down to N19,000. Survival is becoming difficult for most of them.

Causes of Food Insecurity and its Effect in COVID 19 Period?

The corona virus pandemic generated a wide range of economic crises which affected so many countries in the world, leading to a relative lock down in terms of all the activities of these countries. COVID 19 became a human crises threatening the food security as well the nutrition of people around the world. Various household were surviving below \$1 (suffering from hunger) before the virus came. According to a report by Reliefweb (2020), 820 million people around the have already been identified as chronically food insecure prior to the pandemic. Their statistics showed that the number has nearly doubled presently after the pandemic.

Food insecurity have been on the high side because measures to control the outbreaks are affecting global food chains. Restrictions on borders and lockdowns are slowing harvest (as millions of workers are without livelihood) and constraining transportation of food to markets. Several food processing plant have been forced to shut down as a result of the outbreak which having going on within the workers. This has result to the decay of perishable food items as the food supply chain have been disrupted, decreasing consumer demand. People in the urban areas also have limited access to these food materials because they are not being supplied again, hence the state of hunger increases for both the farmers (food producers) and the consumers who couldn't access the food.

These disruptions in food supply chain has led to volatility or sudden changes in food prices paid by consumers. These prices skyrocketed as a result of the inability to transport them from the area of production to where the consumers can access them. Hence, the available ones are so costly that the poor masses can a=hardly afford them. Various countries in Africa have been huge importers of food items from outside the continent. This heavy reliance on world market is highly detrimental to food security especially at this particular period when transportation is highly prohibited; the disruption in the marketing and trading activities exacerbated the prices of food materials.

Furthermore, prices of some basic foods have been rising tremendously in many countries especially Nigeria. It is pathetic as people have less money in their pocket. The pandemic having led to the shutting down of various businesses have increased the level of unemployment, loss of income and rising food cost, thereby making access to food materials difficult for various households. When the food prices are increasing without a simultaneous increase in the income of the individual, hunger sets in, dragging with him poverty. Moreso, a statement from BBC News (2020) on the report from Food and Agriculture Agency, showed that about 22million Nigerians will be hungry due to the pandemic, lack of agricultural storage facilities for food and actions of wholesalers and transporter in the market.

Alleviating Food Insecurity and Poverty

In order to address the impact of COVID-19 on food security in the long term, various countries will need to build productive capacities to address underlying economic vulnerabilities, and strengthen continental capabilities to better manage food, pandemic and/or health-related crises. Unnecessary export restrictions on food can have far-reaching consequences for the multilateral trading system and African economies. Such measures will not only impede progress in managing the current crisis, but also compromise African countries' longer-term efforts to tackle food insecurity and poverty. Governments should ensure the movement of goods, including food and related essential services (i.e. transportation) is guaranteed. COVID-19 has clearly highlighted the degree of interconnectedness between countries and the importance of maintaining trade links to ensure minimal disruptions to food supply (UNCTAD, 2020).

African countries also need to reduce their commodity dependence, which has been among the key factors increasing their vulnerability to food insecurity. The diversification of their commodity base and value addition will be critical in achieving this, particularly if effectively augmented by a significant increase in agricultural labour productivity and the full implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). It is likely that food security in African countries will benefit from the effective implementation of the AfCFTA. This includes through greater economic diversification (value addition and intra-African trade), the creation of jobs and revenue to fight poverty and food insecurity. Moreover, the AfCFTA can support the procurement of food from closer regional markets. All these factors could go a long way to enhance the continent's food security and reduce vulnerability to current and emerging shocks (UNCTAD, 2020).

Policymakers and agricultural researchers and practitioners need to recognize the need to separate food security and income/economic growth challenges. While the majority of smallholders' farms do not have the potential to generate significant inclusive rural growth, they do provide vital safety nets for the families depending on them. Poor farming households do have the right to access sufficient, safe, nutritious food all year round. An important policy implication is that agriculture may not be the sole or preferred development strategy for those households in the 'hanging in' category. While we argue that agriculture for food security is vital for those rural households, we also recognize that they should be prime candidates for non-agricultural social safety net interventions to help them cope with their current poverty and to transition them or their children to alternative forms of livelihoods.

Additionally, governments need to equip their extension services with access to, and understanding of, a diverse portfolio of flexible farm-level interventions, with affordable technologies aimed at farmers with low capabilities or limited aspiration that would help to increase household food security but might not have such a significant effect in closing the yield gap. Whereas intensification technologies aimed at closing the yield gap should be targeted to medium-sized and larger sized farming operations as well as those smallholders who have the incentive and potential to invest and benefit (Gassner *et al.*, 2019)

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has serious potential negative impacts on food security and nutrition, livelihoods and incomes, and poverty all over the world. Deep global economic shocks caused by COVID-19 have impact on the cash flow and financial liquidity of producers, small and medium agri-businesses to financial institutions, due to inhibited production capacity, limited market access, loss of remittances, lack of employment, and unexpected medical costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic also raises the alarm on the urgent need to transform the world's food systems. According to FAO (2019), global food systems remain a driver of climate change and the planet's unfolding environmental crisis. Food systems contribute up to nearly a third of all greenhouse gas emissions and have contributed to substantial biodiversity loss. There is an urgent need to rethink rapidly how we produce, process, market, consume our food and dispose of waste. This crisis can serve as a turning point to rebalance and transform our food systems, making them more inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Food security and poverty reduction are inseparable. Although food security alone does not eradicate poverty, any strategy to fight poverty must be integrated with policies to ensure food security and to offer the best chance of reducing mass poverty and hunger.

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