

COVID-19 and its effects on local food systems and rural livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa e-Dialogue summary

APRA representatives, researchers and lecturers came together on 9 February 2022 to review and discuss the effects that COVID-19 has had on agriculture – specifically rural livelihoods and local food systems – in sub-Saharan Africa. The two hour-long session began with a series of presentations from APRA representatives highlighting regional-specific outcomes across East, West and Southern Africa, before the floor was opened to expert commentary and a Q&A-led discussion.

Region-specific effects

Following an introduction led by Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, development economist from the UK's Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the first presentation was delivered by economist Amrita Saha, also from IDS, highlighting the main findings from APRA's research. At the start of the pandemic, the United Nations World Food Programme predicted that the number of households experiencing hunger would double. However, Saha noted, "even though the majority of households faced hardship of some kind, they were remarkably resilient." Despite this, "an intersecting crisis between food and livelihood has been noted" – especially as APRA researchers saw a strong correlation between food insecurity and a decline in households' perceived levels of control over their lives.

APRA researcher Vine Mutyasira assessed the effects of the pandemic and its restrictions in Zimbabwe, revealing that factors ranging from labour, household income and production chains to food availability, security and cost, all felt the toll. A variety of approaches can help rejuvenate the country, he noted, including putting a greater focus on innovation – as this will assist food systems and their actors in becoming more resilient and effective.

Masautso Chimombo, an APRA researcher in Malawi, shared that the lockdown restrictions imposed by the government had a significant effect on agricultural, food and livelihood security, along with social and health outcomes (such as schools being closed). Digital innovation is a key lesson for policymakers going forward, he stated, to create opportunities for extension, remote education and trade. The provision of social cash transfers also needs to be more inclusive for all households – as a number of those in more remote locations, who were not able to be contacted by government representatives, missed out on receiving such financial support.

Highlighting concerns in Nigeria was APRA country lead Adebayo Aromolaran, who stated that lockdown restrictions – which varied between states – influenced four key areas of rural livelihoods: market access, food consumption and nutrition, farm and off-farm activities, and non-farm businesses. Reduced availability of labour and crops drove price rises and food insecurity, for example, and these effects are still being felt. "Many households have felt significant pressures on income, meaning food intake and quality has decreased," he said. Policymakers play a vital role in recovery, he added, and they need to provide enhanced business support and review existing policies to allow businesses to bounce back.

For Tanzania, APRA research Aida Isinika revealed that there was no specific lockdown in the country – rather, restrictions were put in place around activities such as movement, gatherings and cross-border trade. These still had a significant effect: declines in living standards, job losses throughout the value chain, and lower participation in off-farm enterprises were just some the effects seen. She

also noted that “female-headed households and youths were most affected, as they struggled to access resources previously – and COVID only exacerbated this issue.” To combat similar concerns in the future, “transparency and flow of information needs to be improved so that individuals can make more informed decisions,” she stated, and steps need to be taken to improve farmers’ overall resilience.

To round up the presentations, Steve Wiggins, agricultural economist at the Overseas Development Institute in the UK, reviewed the existing published literature into the effects of the pandemic on food systems and livelihoods in the sub-Saharan region. He said that, while there are plenty of reports and analyses into this, “they all typically ignore two crucial points: how individuals coped and government responses to alleviate hardship.” As Saha noted earlier, many of the dire predictions made (fortunately) did not materialise – but vast numbers were still hit very hard. Children in particular were affected, with the number experiencing wasting in sub-Saharan Africa rising to 12.9 million – and he believes governments and policymakers should review what could have been done to save more lives and prevent life-changing damage from undernutrition. He also questioned why governments in the South offered so little in terms of social protection – in many instances it was less than US\$5 per person.

Thoughts from expert commentators

Akousa Darkwah, associate professor at the University of Ghana, explained that she was involved in research with Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), investigating the effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods, although this had more of an urban focus. However, she noted “a similarity in findings between this and APRA’s research”: effects were felt by actors throughout the food value chain, and this had implications for incomes and food consumption. Yet, while the pandemic has proved detrimental, it is also important to consider other factors that pose an equal – if not bigger problem – such as climate shocks and currency devaluations. Plus, she reveals, “women have borne the brunt of COVID-related effects, with increased childcare requirements meaning they have less time and energy to dedicate to work.”

Earlier in the session, Chimombo stated the need for digital innovation, and Darkwah revealed that steps are already being taken in countries such as Ghana – which helped soften the blow for some. For instance, “online trading grew in popularity when in-person transactions were not possible.” However, it’s important to bear in mind those who are also losing out as a result of this shift – such as traders who do not have sufficient access to computers and digital platforms. It is also impossible for people to ‘build back better’, as the “proper infrastructure was never there in the first place,” she says. Instead, governments need to take this opportunity to build proper, meaningful systems and review what can be done to make the food system more resilient and sustainable.

Next, Sandra Gagnon, programme officer at IDRC in Canada, shared insights into IDRC activities in this area – revealing that they too align with the findings of APRA’s assessment. In addition to affecting all aspects of the food system, she said, lockdowns and restrictions also served to exacerbate gender inequalities in many instances. “Measures adopted by governments rarely took women into consideration – such as the fact that policies aimed at formal food businesses excluded low-income women engaged in production and informal trading,” she explained. This was in spite of the fact that women ultimately played a significant role in individual households’ responses to the crisis.

Existing weaknesses and challenges within the food systems were exacerbated by the pandemic, and it’s important to address these “at a structural level if they are to become more inclusive and

resilient” going forward, continued Gagnon. Greater political incentives need to be offered, she suggests, and there is a need for various networks and organisations to work more collaboratively. In addition, greater consideration is required around the relationship between agriculture and its environmental effect, and there also needs to be enhanced regard as to how women and vulnerable groups can be better supported within agriculture overall.

Q&A

For the final portion of the session, audience participants were able to ask questions about specific challenges and developments. The first posed was in relation to the differential effects of COVID and what was experienced. Mutyasira responded that, for him, the greatest difference has been within gender. “Prior to the pandemic, women were typically less empowered thanks to factors such as reduced access – and COVID has only exacerbated this further,” he stated. He also reflected on Darkwah’s comments, agreeing that women have been held back by increased childcare and home schooling commitments. Saha added that variations in effects were experienced between rural and urban populations, largely down to differences in restrictions and support availability. Some communities – particularly those in more urban areas – received much better assistance, such as from local organisations, which enabled them to be more resilient. John Thompson of APRA and IDS, concurred that “where there were not interventions from local authorities and organisations, support was very piecemeal.” However, he added, people became a lot more diverse during this time in what they were producing and trading, and they did receive support from local leaders in these ventures.

Next, it was asked what can be done to help recover and build greater resilience to future shocks and crises. Wiggins stated once again the importance of receiving financial support from governments – particularly as those in the South dedicated funding equating to just a tenth of what ministers in the richer countries made available to businesses. “While it was positive to see that social protection was ramped up,” he said, various factors (such as a lack of contactability) meant large numbers of people were unable to access it – and these should be addressed.

One participant noted that all the effects discussed have been largely negative – so are there any positives that have arisen in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the pandemic and associated responses? Yes, said Aromolaran. “Community support efforts rose to new levels which many had not previously experienced,” he revealed. Farmer organisations are now becoming more of a priority too, as farmers recognise their importance in providing support, particularly around equipment loans. In addition, “people realised the importance of diversifying not only their farming activities, but off-farm activities,” he explained. “Many used the time during lockdown to learn new skills, such as hairdressing and artisanship.”

‘Has COVID wiped out efforts to slow the rapid rise of inflation?’ was the question next posed to experts. APRA research hasn’t looked into this area, responded Thompson. However, he said, a set of interlocking factors are involved and “the pandemic is likely just the event that’s exposed a decade of underinvestment and vulnerability of just-in-time inventories.”

The final query regarded whether government priorities in terms of rural development in the agriculture sector have changed following COVID. Thompson stated that the response has varied between countries: “Some view it as just another shock or stressor, whereas others are [now] thinking more about social protection measures.” Although Isinika revealed that the Tanzanian government viewed COVID as “just another problem to face,” Chimombo shared that the pandemic has prompted the government in Malawi to invest more in hospitals. Wiggins agrees that crises such

as the pandemic can serve to heighten awareness among policymakers about the risks and challenges faced by agriculture – but asks why, if ministers can mobilise in this instance, can they not do more to tackle climate change concerns?

Closing remarks

Closing remarks for the session came from Ken Giller, professor at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. While “COVID wasn’t as bad as expected in terms of predictions, the pandemic has still deeply touched a lot of people,” he said. “But it’s amazing to see the resilience being displayed by many. Lockdown had a hard effect but people have bounced back.” As for the future? It’s time we looked at the food systems through a broader lens, he states, and place more emphasis on urban-rural connections and the role of income diversification in resilience.