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THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 CONTAINMENT MEASURES ON LOCAL FOOD FARMERS IN DELTA STATE

By

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PREFACE

This policy brief is the first in the series of communication to policy and decision makers on the rapid research project of the *Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED)* titled “The Impact of Covid-19 on local food production and informal food markets in Nigeria with Niger Delta region as case study” funded by the *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*.

CPED’s policy brief series is designed to draw attention of stakeholders to key findings and their policy implications as projects are being executed. This edition which focuses on the effects of covid-19 containment measures on local food farmers, in the Niger Delta communities is based mainly on the reports and key findings in ten target communities where the covid-19 research project was implemented in Delta state.

We are very grateful to IDRC for the support to implement this project. We are particularly grateful to the Programme Officer in charge of our project, Dr. Melanie Robertson, for her support to CPED which has enabled the Centre to continue implementation of the research project and the publication of this policy brief. We also appreciate the cooperation of leaders of various groups and community-based organisations in the target communities for their collaboration with CPED in the implementation of the project.

BACKGROUND

As COVID-19 reaches different parts of Nigeria sometime in February 2020, Federal and State Governments made efforts to contain the spread of the virus. At the national level, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is designated as the government agency in charge of covid-19 preparedness and response activities. A corona-virus Preparedness Group was established at the end of January 2020 by the Nigerian government following the development of the epidemic in China. National NGOs, civil society organisations, international NGOs and UN agencies were also engaged in responding to the pandemic and the effects of covid-19 containment measures. Since mid-March 2020, Federal and State Governments in Nigeria have put in place several measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the spread of covid-19 across the country. These include lockdowns, movement restrictions, social and physical distancing measures, as well as public health measures. The distribution of cases among the various states in Nigeria is uneven and has resulted in diversified response from the federal and state governments. The degree of implementation and level of compliance from the population varies from State to State; this is related to perception of the government, trust in government directives, and different levels of education and sensitisation to the measures.

Aside from the health/mortality effects of the pandemic in Nigeria, the seemingly clearer effect is the impact of the social distancing and lockdown measures on the economy. How people make a living and access markets is impacted by covid-19

across the Niger Delta region. These disruptions are driven primarily by restrictions put in place to curb the spread of the virus. There are emerging signs of the negative impact of covid-19 on nutrition and food security including local food production and the informal economy's food marketing system. This report contributes to a better picture of how covid-19 and measures to contain the virus are impacting livelihoods, especially those of the vulnerable households, food security and access to markets in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

The agricultural food system is one of the largest economic sectors in Nigeria, spanning production, industry and marketing services, especially after the ban on the importation of food by the government in 2015. It is also one of the leading job producers in Nigeria. Indeed, over 80 per cent of all food sales in the country is carried out through the informal food markets. Given the structure and the largely informal food production and marketing systems in Nigeria, governments will have to cater for the informal food marketing channels and also put in place measures to make them operate consistently with the COVID-19 virus containment strategy.

Consequently, policies and programs designed to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria must be accompanied by measures to minimize disruptions to the food system. Nigeria needs to seek balance between saving lives and livelihoods. The best approach to maintain this delicate balance is ensuring that measures are pragmatic, dynamic, flexible and localized with the participation of the key stakeholders.

In order to do this, policy makers and other stakeholders need short term data including: How interruptions in the availability of labour for food production, harvest, post-harvest handling and storage activities, especially for perishables have affected food production and marketing?; How government-imposed “lockdowns” on the free movement of people have affected the transportation of local food products between rural and urban areas and food security?; How the closure of critical food system infrastructure such as rural producer markets, urban wholesale food markets and open-air retail food markets have affected food marketing system and food prices?; How have women, who are key actors in the food production and marketing system, been affected?; and What policies should be articulated to protect the capacity of local food production and marketing.

It is against this background that the present research focuses on the collection of short-term and rapid policy-relevant data to inform government policies regarding social protection for vulnerable households, remote education, and support for informal food markets affected by shutdowns. The study examines the disruptions to food production, marketing and nutrition created by the covid-19 situation and its impact on the most vulnerable population in Nigeria using the Niger Delta region as a case study. It examines the challenges to local informal food production (quantity, types and quality) and processing and distribution in rural communities, food transport to urban markets, and supply-demand coordination problems triggered by the restrictions put in place by government to reduce the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. In effect the documentation of the impact of the covid-19

pandemic on local food production and food marketing systems as well as livelihood patterns in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region is designed to enhance the articulation of programmes that alleviates the impacts of covid-19 on local food production and food marketing in the region in particular and other parts of Nigeria in general.

The *rapid assessment approach* was used to collect the required data entailing the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. Primary data were collected from 10 randomly selected local government areas including 5 urban and 5 rural areas. Within the selected urban and rural communities a total of 2,000 copies of the sets of questionnaires were administered as follows:

(i) 600 Food Producers; **(ii)** 600 Food Marketers and 800 Households. Furthermore, qualitative data collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions in the 10 local government areas. The survey covered important issues including knowledge and concerns about the pandemic, access to food and other basic needs, employment and income loss, safety nets and coping strategies. The data collected also include the nature and types of lockdown measures imposed by various governments; data on labour availability and various farm input supplies for local food production; data on the frequency of market holdings and the types of food marketed; and data on the impact of lockdown on household livelihoods sources, nutrition and vulnerability.

This policy brief which focuses on the effects of covid-19 containment measures on local food farmers in Delta State is the first of a series of policy briefs prepared from the

findings of the study. The remaining part of this policy brief is divided into two parts. The first section summarises the key findings of the study with respect to local food production activities while the second section outline some actionable recommendations, especially in the context of emerging second wave of covid-19 in Nigeria which could lead to further lockdown strategies.

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 CONTAINMENT MEASURES ON LOCAL FOOD FARMERS

The survey shows that a large proportion of local food farmers still depend on hired labour to supplement family labour supply. Consequently, government restrictions on travel and movement had some effects on farm labour shortages. This in turn significantly disrupted the harvesting and processing of food, and thus impacting the supply chain. It was found that over 86 percent of the food farmers reported that covid-19 has affected their ability to hire the required labour for their farms as 58.67 percent of the farmers did not hire labour for their farms since March, 2020. A greater proportion of the farmers who were not able to employ paid labour were women as 40 percent of the 68 percent of the farmers who were not able to hire labour are women. This disruption was also exacerbated as women are often not only the primary crop producers, but are also the main care givers to elderly, the sick and caring for children who due to lockdowns were out of school.

Just as the availability and use of hired labour by food farmers was negatively

affected by covid-19 so was the availability and use of other inputs. It was found that about 60 percent of the farmers were able to visit agro-dealers or markets while less than 40 percent pointed out that they were not able to do so with more women not able to visit markets to purchase inputs compared with men. Considering the major role which women play in food production, the lack of access to agricultural inputs had negative effects on food production during the covid-19 period. Women food farmers are again more affected than men in terms of quantity of farm inputs used as a higher proportion of women (33.00 percent) used fewer and much fewer quantities of inputs compared with men (19 percent). This again reflects the fact that women food farmers are more negatively affected by covid-19 than their male counterparts.

The overall impact of the shortage of paid labour supply, inadequate availability of farm inputs and the high cost of the inputs which has affected the use of these inputs has led to a remarkable decline in the quantity of harvest by famers during the period after March 2020. Covid-19 also led to interruptions in the availability of labour for harvest, post-harvest handling, transportation and storage activities, leading to high post-harvest losses, especially for perishables. It is argued that agricultural production has been decreasing, because fewer people are now working in the fields due to social distancing regulations and fear of contracting the disease. Furthermore, covid-19 has reduced the frequency of farm visits by extension officers who provide technical support to farmers. Although a large proportion of food farmers are

engaged in subsistence production in which case they consume a significant proportion of their products, many of them also sell proportions of their farm produce so as to generate income with which they buy other food items not produced by household. The covid-19 pandemic has brought challenges to food farmers in terms of being able to sell their surplus food items, especially when most of them do not have adequate storage facilities for their surplus food items. The movement of farm products from rural to urban centres is severely affected by the crisis.

Food farmers rely mainly on private transporters to transport produce from the farms to urban markets. Due to covid-19, farmers find it difficult to supply produce to markets due to restricted movement of vehicles. The transport system has been slowed down, and at times, it is unavailable because of travel restrictions. A number of transporters fear taking risks and don't turn up to collect farm produce. Furthermore, as a result of the escalating costs of fuel, the cost of hiring vehicles became unaffordable for many food farmers. Very few people have their own means of transport, so they depend on privately operated vehicles for transportation. Due to the pandemic, buses and motorcycle taxis are not fully operating, or take fewer passengers and charge higher prices. This affects people in numerous ways: Hired labourers are no longer able to travel to other farms; and farmers who try to sell their products in neighbouring towns are no longer able to make a profit. Rising transportation costs are also brought up as the reason for increased prices of products sold in village stores.

It was found that majority (50percent) of the food farmers sold some of their farm produce since March 2020. A greater proportion (27.33 percent) of the food farmers that sold part of their farm produce are women compared with 23 percent men. The findings of the survey show that a greater proportion of the food famers sold their products in the local market while about 18 percent sold their produce to middlemen. While more women take their surplus products to markets, the reverse is the case for men with regards to selling to middlemen as more men sold to middlemen. The implication is that with covid-19 restrictions on movement, women are negatively affected in terms of taking their food items to markets where prices are higher than those offered by middlemen, thus reducing their livelihoods

An examination of the extent to which covid-19 has affected the prices of farm outputs shows that most of the respondents (56.01 percent) reported that the prices of their farm produce were higher or much higher compared with the preceding five years. Despite that, many food farmers were hesitant selling their food products because they do not know when the covid-19 restrictions will end and so they save their produce for family use. Here again the challenge of storage facilities confronted them as most of food farmers do not have facilities for the storage of perishable food items. It was found that over 76 percent of the food farmers do not have storage facilities. Reasons given for non-sale of products include closed marketplaces (16.95 percent), prices offered too low (10.17 percent) and that transportation was either

not available or too expensive (8.47 percent).

The covid-19 pandemic has made it impossible for government officials to perform their functions owing to travel restrictions. This means that much of the agricultural information flow that is normally given to farmers has been curtailed. In the prevailing environment, farmers had to either adjust to other income-generating activities or wait for the situation to improve. At the commencement of the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria put in place some palliatives to cushion the negative effects of the restrictions that were imposed. However, the vast majority of the respondents (97.00 percent) reported that they did not receive any support whatsoever from government or any of its agencies.

ACTIONABLE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The sustainability of food production during and after covid-19 will depend, in large part, on policy responses over the short, medium and long term. Some of the possible short and medium term policy issues are outlined as follows:

(i) Support to livelihoods (agriculture, livestock, trade and informal businesses) to strengthen capacities for productivity enhancement including provision of subsidized inputs, value addition and market access to ensure food supply remains intact is essential. In the prevailing covid-19 environment, measures that will allow for business and market transactions to take

place while observing social distancing prescriptions must be initiated and implemented.

(ii) To meet immediate needs of the most vulnerable population in rural communities, governments, non-governmental organisations and private sector actors should invest in food storage facilities in the rural areas and possibly create improvised food market channels for the rural populace to purchase essential food items at regular prices.

(iii) Non-profit organizations should as well facilitate the set-up of nodal processing centres for rural women in various localities to boost processing activities of crop produce. This is to enable livelihood and income diversification, as the process of sustainability relies on the resilience of rural women in post pandemic periods.

(iv) Food farmers in Delta State and indeed other parts of Niger Delta region should be empowered to see the covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to boost local food sales, as food imports are restricted by government. There should be strategies to instill a sense of solidarity and pride on the local food farmers about being able to feed their compatriots.

(v) Strengthening local food production system resilience is critical for an effective response to the covid-19 pandemic. As international supply chains are strained by covid-19, relocalizing food production, or seeking a better balance between imported and locally produced food, is a sound strategy for building robustness and resilience.

(vi) More efficient, sustainable and resilient local food production systems require careful management of land, soil, and water through integrated approaches. Such food systems also require reduction of post-harvest food losses at every stage of the value chain with improved practices. These include access to low-cost handling and storage technologies, and packaging.

(vii) As many communities rely on markets, especially in urban settings, capacity for home food production and/or processing is limited, and local production systems are unable to cope with shocks. Therefore, governments need to increase household and community food production through distributing seeds, tools, and fertilizers for small rural farms and urban gardens before, during and after the pandemic. In addition,

governments could help by providing local agricultural and livestock extension services and technical assistance.

(viii) Ensuring that agricultural actors and activities at all levels, particularly harvests, are not severely affected by the unintended consequences of the containment measures and restrictions on movement, while keeping safe the work environment of food producers and farm workers.

(ix) Ensuring that farmers have timely access to quality equipment and crop inputs, including seeds and planting material and ensuring that livestock farmers, including pastoralists, and fish farmers have access to corresponding inputs, such as animal feeds and access to pasture as well as quality fish inputs to support the aquaculture industry.