

COMMENTARY

Assessment of households' food consumption strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ilorin-South LGA, Kwara State, Nigeria

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Introduction

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agro-food sector included significant effects on existing household food dynamics and tested the resilience of the food system as a whole. The pandemic also negatively affected livelihoods as it resulted in the loss of jobs and, thus, economic hardship (Aday & Aday, 2020). This was especially true in the developing world, where the numbers of vulnerable households were high (World Bank Group, 2022). The study on which this commentary is based was conducted in 2022 and focused

on assessing the food consumption strategies adopted by households in Ilorin-South Local Government Area, Kwara State, Nigeria, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The pandemic, which disrupted the global food supply chain, affecting food availability, affordability, and consumption patterns, revealed the importance of understanding how households navigated these challenges—a knowledge that is crucial for enhancing food security in vulnerable communities. The questionnaires for this study were administered to heads of households and explored information about their occupations, family size, and the specific economic situation of each household during the pandemic. The level of food insecurity experienced by the households was determined by assessing the level of anxiety or worry experienced regarding running out of stored food during the pandemic. Food behavior information was also sought to help deduce how COVID-19 affected households in the target area in terms of food availability, accessibility, and

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utilization. Those among the respondents who reported that the COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in the food consumption patterns in their households were asked to give further information about this in terms of changes in serving size and frequency of food consumption.

Aside from economic hardships and large family sizes or number of dependents in a household, some other factors observed to have contributed to changes in food utilization and consumption in households include supply-chain disruption, drops in the market arrivals of food items, increases in food prices, and changes in the frequency of purchase due to the lockdown directives (such as being able to procure food items at the market once a week rather than twice a week). The occurrences of food reduction and meal skipping as shown by the study reveal the urgent need to strengthen food systems at the community level in order to build resilience and forestall hunger crises due to issues with the availability and affordability of food, as was the case during the pandemic.

COVID-19's Impact on Food Security and Livelihoods

While the economy recovered quite slowly, the uncertainties and disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic continued (World Bank Group, 2022), and the world witnessed the ripple effects of the pandemic on its economy. Prolonged lockdowns were especially difficult for those whose livelihoods rested largely on their employment or occupation. The majority of the respondents in the study area were artisans (33%) and businessmen or -women (27%) who had no stable or fixed income and whose means of livelihood was greatly impacted by the pandemic. Additionally, results from the study revealed that the artisan class also had the highest number of members of households or dependents with an approximate average of 8 persons, while businessmen and -women, civil servants, retirees, and people involved in other businesses all had an approximate average of 5 persons. In the face of the global pandemic, a larger family size coupled with a low or unstable earning capacity tended to worsen the socio-economic disadvantages already contributing to both acute and chronic hunger.

COVID-19's Impact on Food Availability and Affordability


The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges related to food availability and affordability. Results from this study revealed that 84.1 % of the respondents agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their affordability of food items and its availability to them. Concerns about the sustainability of household food storage showed that 46.4% of respondents sometimes worried about running out of stored food before being able to restock, while 40.6% of respondents often had this worry. Only a small percentage of the respondents (13.0%) claimed they never had to worry about the amount of food left in stock.

COVID-19's Impact on Food Consumption Behavior

The pandemic prompted significant shifts in food consumption behavior among households. As reported by Ben Hassen et al. (2021a), shortly after the announcement of the pandemic, panic-buying of storable food products was rampant in many countries. Many families were worried about the prognosis of the crisis and what it portended for their households, and so foods like rice and pasta were stockpiled (Ben Hassen et al., 2021b; Dlodla, 2020). This put more economically vulnerable families, who are unable to stockpile food, at a disadvantage. Respondents in our study also reported changes in the frequency and size of meals consumed, revealing the increased level of food insecurity experienced during the pandemic. The majority of respondents (69.6%) now had just two daily meals, up from 33% prior to the pandemic, whereas the very small group (1.8%) taking one meal per day prior to the pandemic increased to 8.13% after it. The student t-test was applied to determine if the changes in the daily number of household meals before and after the pandemic are statistically significant. It was shown that the decrease in households consuming three daily meals and the change in households consuming two daily meals were both statistically significant at p -value < 0.05 . The pandemic therefore clearly had a significant impact on the food security of the majority of households in the study area.

Conclusion

The disruptions to the global food supply chain, coupled with economic challenges, led to increased food insecurity and changes in dietary habits. We posit that the study highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance food security in vulnerable communities. It provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by households during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasizes the importance of proactive measures to strengthen food security at the community level. Some pointers for policymakers and actors in the food supply chain include the implementation of targeted interven-

tions to address food insecurity and the high cost of food that still exists even postpandemic. This may include subsidies, price controls, and social safety nets. We also suggest that empowering communities through education on sustainable farming practices, food preservation, and efficient resource utilization can enhance local resilience to future crises. Likewise, encouraging the diversification of food sources and promoting local agriculture can contribute to a more resilient and sustainable food supply chain as well as prevent widespread hunger during crises. 

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