

KEY POINTS

- Fruits and vegetable production, supply and distribution will be negatively impacted due to the restrictions in movement through social distancing and the national lockdown
- The hardest hit will be the households that rely on rain-fed horticulture as their source of livelihood and those who depend on informal/casual labour from the horticultural sector
- Government should give precedence to the health of farmers, traders, consumers and workers in the fruit and vegetable food value chains, and the safety and integrity of food need to be guaranteed.
- Awareness and capacity building of farmers and stakeholders need to be ramped up to ensure their safety and those of workers and casual labour in practicing social distancing and good hygiene while undertaking their farming operations to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- The call for aggregation of produce at local level should be promoted to enable the minimization of numbers travelling to centralized markets and as incentive to big off takers to collect
- Marketing outside production areas, provision of sufficient physical spaces and zoning of markets in towns and cities could aid in lessening the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown.



Minimizing the impacts of COVID – 19 in Zimbabwe: Strategies for the Fruit and Vegetable Markets in Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic is of great concern and developing countries already grappling with food and nutrition insecurity, including Zimbabwe, are expected to be hardest hit by these food system interruptions (Laborde et al., 2020). It is expected that people with pre-existing inequalities such as the poor and those who work informally within the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors will specifically have their livelihoods and food security devastated; as some of the current government measures such as social distancing and travel restrictions directly affect their ability to engage in casual employment (FSIN, 2020; Mulenga et al., 2020).

Horticultural production systems are expected to bear the brunt of the pandemic's impact because government responses such as the lockdown leading to closure of businesses that require horticultural produce (e.g. schools, restaurants) and social distancing limit the availability of seasonal labor requirements, and increased food waste due to high produce perishability from limited market access (Tamru et al., 2020; Richards and Rickard, 2020). Also, urban consumption of fruits and vegetables is expected to reduce (Tamru et al., 2020).

For Zimbabwe, the current economic challenges have reduced household resilience and this pandemic is expected to exacerbate food insecurity for up to 4.3 million acutely food-insecure people in 2020 (FSIN, 2020).¹ The gravity of the pandemic in Zimbabwe, its duration, government interventions used, and the scale of international support are likely to be the main determinants of the full impact of COVID-19 on the national food systems (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2020). Dealing with the pandemic in the Zimbabwean context will require strategies that holistically take into account the socio-economic situation in the country while adhering to international best practice to curb its spread. This will require introspection by the government and other stakeholders on how this can be done while ensuring livelihoods and food security, and nutrition outcomes for the countries are not compromised. This policy brief aims to contribute to this evidence.

2. Data and Methods

As part of the support to enable robust and evidence based policy discussions and dialogue, the National Agriculture Policy Framework (NAPF) Pillar 5 Working Group , with technical support from the Livelihoods Food Security Programme and Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute, convened a virtual discussion focusing on providing key action points relating to government instituting policy measures in agriculture that are able to cushion farmers and value chain actors from supply, pricing, marketing and movement of agricultural commodities and inputs. The inaugural discussion focused on reopening the fruits and vegetable markets in the country. A desk review of current literature on the expected and ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on food supply chains and some potential policy options was also done.

3. Livelihoods at risk due covid – 19 and associated mitigation strategies

Below are some of the critical elements of the food chain and livelihoods that will be impact by the pandemic and associated mitigation strategies

- a. Food marketing and employment: The lockdown has imposed stringent restrictions on movements and business activities including the operations of the informal sector in the country. The restricted or closure of the operations of the informal sector that include mass fruit and vegetable markets and associated smaller markets will have a knock-on effect on incomes and livelihoods of those that trade in these markets and those depending on casual labour as their source of income and livelihood will be curtailed. This is likely to result in hunger and malnourishment of families that rely on these markets for income and food supplies.
- b. Food production: For the horticultural farmer, product losses will increase as the product gets bad in the field and in the market due to limited demand and constrained marketing space and time; diminishing their potential to produce in the future. Rural horticulture producers will also be affected due to the restricted flow of food resulting from closed markets and curtailed movement. To make matters worse, the forthcoming harvest is likely to be bad due to the drought conditions experienced during the 2019/20 agricultural season. The double tragedy of weather and COVID-19 will further exacerbate poverty in both rural and urban areas. To meet their immediate cash needs, rural households might resort to liquidating assets, thus compromising their resilience.
- c. Food prices and consumption: Food prices are also expected to increase due to the disruptions imposed by COVID-19 and there are already reports of price gouging by some unscrupulous middlemen. This will further hinder food access on top of the lower income expected as a result of this pandemic.

It is therefore important to come up with innovative solutions to minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on the production, distribution and consumption of fruits and vegetables in Zimbabwe. The stakeholders agreed that it is important to assist the government come up with innovative solutions that will ensure unrestricted flow of food especially fruits and vegetables within the confines of COVID-19 control protocols. As a rule of thumb, food chains should have less restrictions and interruptions as they are a source of nutrition and should always be treated as an essential service in any disaster.

POLICY OPTIONS

- a. Health, Protection and Food Safety First

Government should give precedence to the health of farmers, traders, consumers and workers in the fruit and vegetable food value chains, and the safety and integrity of food need to be guaranteed. In that regard, there is an immediate need to establish a task team (national level with options for decentralized teams) to champion the strict implementation of health protocols that are required in agriculture to regulate adherence to safety measures, such as testing, physical distancing, decongestion of markets and other hygienic practices. Increased communication and dissemination of these protocols to all stakeholders and consumers will bring clarity to the interpretation of the lock down essential services provision.

b. Ramp up support at production and farm gate marketing level

There is need for awareness and capacity building of farmers and stakeholders to ensure their own safety and those of workers and casual labor in practicing social distancing and good hygiene while undertaking their farming operations to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Massive broadcasts of guidelines and information through radio, print and social media will ensure capacity building with support of Government extension agents and projects and programmes operating in the those areas. This will be tied up with the ongoing and planned support by development partners and civil society for provision of sanitizers, temperature testing and other support services to promote social distancing.

Marketing of farm produce at farm gate level where social distancing and good hygiene is easy to maintain at these markets. Capacity building of both farmers and buyers is key to ensure they follow recommended guidelines for social distancing and good hygiene practice.

c. Marketing outside production areas - Produce aggregation

Markets outside production areas present a number of challenges with regards to social distancing and decongestion. Farmers prefer to transport their own produce and directly sell at big markets such as Mbare Musika market where the returns to investments are still perceived to be high. With the lockdown measures, the depressed demand both from a consumption and disposable incomes levels and restricted movements may render these big markets not offering the optimal prices. The challenge at this stage is to reduce number of farmers who accompany the produce to markets. Several strategies can be employed such as facilitating aggregation at farm level and have limited number of farmers traveling to outside markets and sell on behalf of others. For farmers to have trust in this kind of an arrangement, there is need to reduce information asymmetry by providing market information such as daily prices from various horticulture markets. Market information can be availed through short messages from e-platforms, radio and social media, organisations like E-Mkambo or Ecofarmer. In addition, big off takers such as OK and Pick n Pay among others should be incentivized to enable them to buy directly from producers at farm gate.

The call for aggregation of produce at local level should be louder now to enable the minimization of numbers travelling to centralized markets and as incentive to big off takers to collect. These strategies will ensure that farmers concentrate on farming activities where they have comparative advantage rather than selling. Capacity building of farmers to be able to engage with off takers at equal footing and transparency in pricing is required. There is need to build trust between farmers and off takers to enable engagement on an equal level.

d. Zoning of markets in cities and towns

To decongest fruits and vegetable markets, the proposal is to zone the markets in cities and towns. This will involve zoning production areas to enable farmers to deliver to specific markets. Excess deliveries would then be internally distributed to where demand outstrip supply. This will achieve both social distancing and decongestion. These measures require that the task team look at alternative logistic support to the traders and consumers in terms of transport, warehousing and cold storage facilities. There is scope to twin this physical zoning with possibilities of time zoning by value chains or staggered timing for selling.

e. Provide sufficient physical spaces for marketing - Use of school facilities

Most suburbs do not have established fruits and vegetable markets with ablution facilities. In the short term, school grounds could be used by traders and buyers of fruits and vegetables as these have water and ablution facilities. Hotels and supermarkets could be compensated to offer cold storage facilities. Local authorities should be tasked to designate these places and regulate the selling places by vendors.

4. Conclusions

The Implementation of the policy/strategies proposed by the government to curb the spread of COVID-19 requires a holistic approach to ensure consumers in towns and cities have constant supply of horticultural produce and maintain livelihoods of the most vulnerable. Social distance and decongestion can be achieved if the health of value chain actors are prioritized and market level support takes into cognizance: physical support to decongest; facilitate produce aggregation; provide market and safety information. This will allow for uninterrupted demand for horticultural produce, and will enable farmers to continue producing as markets will be guaranteed.

5. References

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- We acknowledge the financial support from the Government of the United Kingdom through the Department for International Development (DFID) which has been funding the Zimbabwe Livelihoods and Food Security Programme (LFSP), and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Zimbabwe which has been managing the Agricultural Productivity and Nutrition Component.

ABOUT LFSP:

- The Zimbabwe Livelihoods and Food Security Programme (LFSP), Agriculture Productivity and Nutrition Component (APN) is managed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), with the aim of contribute to poverty reduction through increased incomes for a target 250,000 smallholder farming households. The programme is being implemented in four provinces covering 12 districts as follows: Mutasa, Mutare, and Makoni in Manicaland; Guruve, Bindura, Mazowe and Mt Darwin in Mashonaland Central; Kwekwe, Gokwe North, Gokwe South and Shurugwi in Midlands and Zvimba in Mashonaland West provinces. FAO is in partnership with three NGO consortia led by Practical Action, Welthungerhilfe and World Vision International, two Strategic Technical partners i.e. **IAPRI** for policy influence, HarvestPlus for biofortification, three Commercial Banks, 1 Wholesale Facility - the Zimbabwe Microfinance Fund (ZMF), 5 Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) and the USAID managed DCA Facility. To date the LFSP is funded for two phases to the tune of £72.4m.

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