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COVID-19 and malnutrition: situation analysis and options in Africa

MAIN MESSAGES

- Estimates suggest that COVID-19 will double the number of hungry people in the world, thus reversing the trend towards Zero Hunger.
- Country analysis, targeting the poor and most vulnerable for social safety nets, will be important to alleviate the negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on malnutrition in the short term. Direct interventions through social grants and providing food and clean water will be immediate necessities.
- Farmers need to be supported to increase their productivity and access markets to continue supplying food to urban dwellers. These markets are the basis for income generation and resilience during the pandemic. Innovation that promotes private sector participation and demand–supply matching will be very important. Short value chains should be prioritized, taking into consideration food safety aspects.
- Due to trade disruptions across frontiers, strengthening national and regional food reserves should be considered by governments (food reserves are stocks of food products that are held and managed by a public entity). In addition, efforts should be made to promote the production of nutrient-rich foods that contribute to healthy diets.
- Joint efforts are crucial. Countries should strengthen networks, communication, and promote multistakeholder collaboration and partnerships to safeguard against a food and nutrition crisis. COVID-19 is not only a health problem; it is also a crisis that threatens many other systems, such as food, trade and social systems, which can hamper food security and nutrition.

INTRODUCTION

More than 820 million people in the world were hungry in 2018 (FAO, 2019). In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), there were 239 million undernourished people, with a prevalence of 22.8 percent as measured by the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU), a Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) indicator. The target is to bring this prevalence to zero by 2030 (Ritchie *et al.*, 2018). According to the latest Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), 9.2 percent of the world's population (or more than 700 million people) were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity in 2018, with Africa having the highest level of 27 percent. Africa remains a laggard in most nutrition indicators, including access to safe and clean drinking water, which directly relates to nutrition outcomes.

Malnutrition in SSA, especially undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, is driven by a combination of factors. These include conflicts faced by some of the countries in the region and extreme weather events as a result of climate change. Sporadic shocks in the food systems make the route to achieving Zero Hunger and eliminating all forms of malnutrition by 2030 even much more onerous. Since many parts of the continent had already been fighting desert locusts, one can say that COVID-19 outbreak has come at a worst time. Supporting efforts to build resilience of farmers to face such shocks remains one of the key priorities for intervention.

The COVID-19 outbreak is one of the high-impact shocks that will have negative effects on nutrition, as it ripples through food systems. It will reverse the SSA trajectory towards achieving SDGs 1 and 2, in particular, and the Malabo targets which African nations aim to attain by 2025. As COVID-19 ripples through national economies, it is clear that it is not only a health pandemic but also one that has negative economic implications affecting household incomes. In this regard, the pandemic has created a situation requiring multistakeholder approaches to resolve.

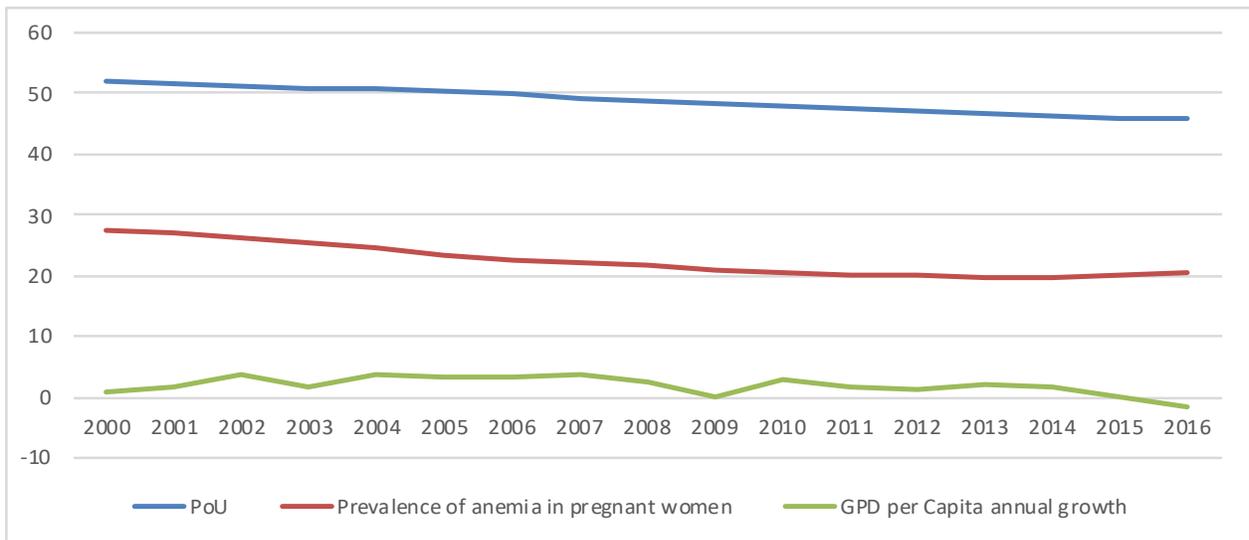
Situational Analysis

COVID-19 is not only a health problem. It is also causing global economic slumps. In Africa, the negative impacts of COVID-19 will likely be worse, given the continent's economic situation. At the moment, many countries have imposed total or partial lockdowns. These limit people's movement and their means of livelihoods. Businesses that are considered non-essential have been shut down. Many African countries have prioritized food supply chains under the agriculture sector as a sector that should be uninterrupted. Financial services, including social protection schemes to protect citizens, have been allowed to operate as well; and internet and mobile money banking systems have been reinforced.

However, disruptions in the food systems are inevitable. Economic slumps worsen household income, and the ability to acquire food. Increasing food prices are often a feature of such pandemics, which is felt acutely by poor households. The informal sector and households that depend on day-to-day informal activities for their income are already affected.

The figure below shows some of the malnutrition trends in some countries in SSA and their relationship to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. The figure shows that malnutrition levels have been declining in SSA in the past two decades, albeit modestly.

FIGURE 1 | Malnutrition trends and GDP growth

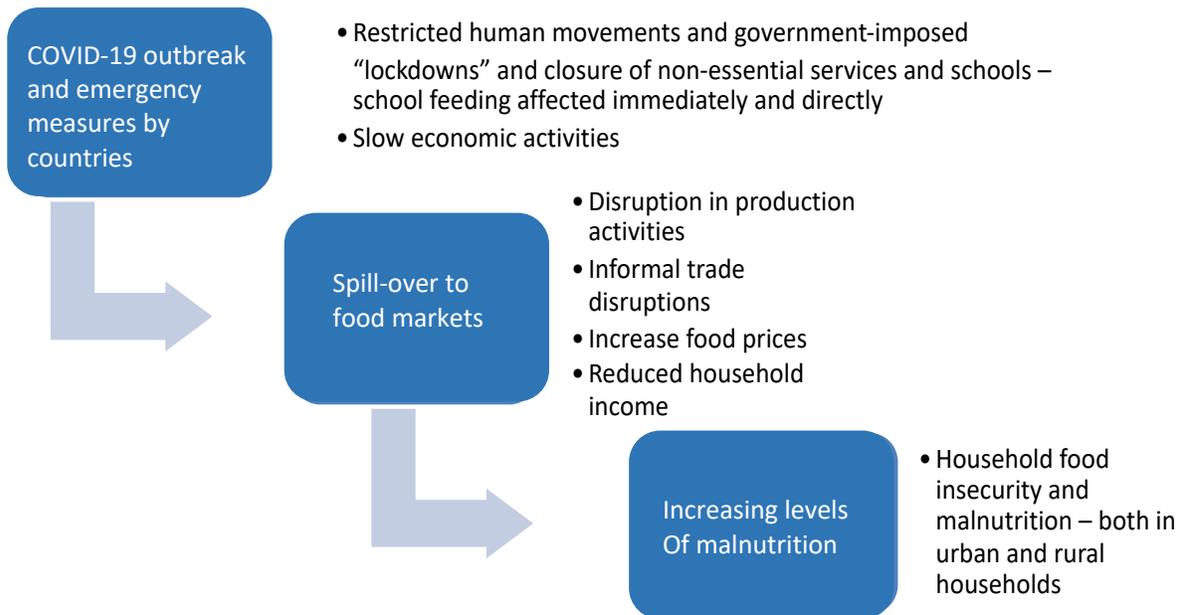


Data Source: The World Bank

Through various mechanisms, including trade loss, tourism and remittances, the African Union Commission (AUC) estimates a negative annual growth of about 1 percent in Africa due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Potential disruptions in the food systems due to COVID-19 are summarized in the figure below:

FIGURE 2 | Potential disruptions in the food systems and household nutrition effects



Data Source: The World Bank

Economic growth and nutrition nexus

Estimates suggest that the COVID-19 could double the number of hungry people in the world (WFP, 2020), which was already high prior to the pandemic. This will, therefore, reverse the positive trend towards Zero Hunger. This reversal will be sharper as recessions deepen in terms of magnitude and duration. *The Global Nutrition Report* (2020) estimates that each percentage point drop in global GDP could add 0.7 million to the number of stunted children worldwide, which will affect poor and vulnerable households more because of existing income inequalities. In 2010, six out of the ten most unequal countries worldwide were in SSA, particularly in Southern Africa (AfDB, 2012).

It is, therefore, effective to combat undernutrition in a resources-constrained situation if interventions directly target the poor at microlevels in an inclusive manner, rather than on macroeconomic stimulus packages which tend to have suboptimal nutrition outcomes. This will require data on inequalities in nutrition indicators for targeted interventions. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which relies on robust data and statistics to enable targeting of the poorest of the poor, can help direct required social safety nets to the neediest and alleviate the COVID-19 negative impacts. This is in line with the “leave no one behind” mandate of the United Nations.

In particular, farmers in periurban and rural areas should be supported in supplying affordable and nutritious food to urban dwellers. These urban dwellers include informal food traders and urban employees who face financial constraints from economic recessions. In the same vein, strengthening food reserves need to be considered by governments to smooth consumption.

Cicia *et al.* (2010) and Nie and Zepeda (2011) note that an increasing number of consumers are looking for alternative sources of food produced near their residences. These short food value chains will ensure quick food supply to areas in need and will also ensure farmers’ access to markets and income. Ensuring food safety is an important intervention measure under the pandemic: safe and nutritious food can help boost immunity to protect against the virus (FAO, 2020).

Government and public policy issues for consideration

- Review interlinked policies and socio-economic analyses that have an impact on nutrition and food systems to improve access and scale supply of safe and nutritious food.
- Support agricultural production and productivity for small-scale farmers through smart agriculture subsidies, including farm inputs and easing food distribution to markets to limit food loss and waste. In particular, within-countries food distribution channels and short value chains should be prioritized.
- Strengthen the rural-to-urban food supply corridors and capacity of small-scale farmers to supply affordable foods of high nutritional value (fruits, green leafy vegetables, dairy, fish, meat, legumes, pulses, and nuts) to increase household dietary diversity.
- Support social safety nets that provide food parcels and direct cash injection for diversified, safe and nutritious food items. Investigate technology for smart cash transfers that directly pay farmers who produce diversified nutritious food items. Many analysts, Gulati and Saini (2015), Kotwal, Murugkar and Ramaswami (2011) and Muralidharan (2011), for example, prefer the cash alternative. These methods of social protection are important, given the need to limit social

gatherings at this time, and they allow for consumer choices. Distributing food parcels could be part of school meals, focusing on home-grown foods from local farmers.

- Develop strong databases to monitor prices of nutritious foods, supply-demand and market matchmaking. This should be done with socio-economic impact analysis of COVID-19 shocks on food systems and food vulnerability assessments, for better targeted interventions.
- Strengthen communications to promote nutrition-related information and healthy diets to build strong immune systems via television, radio, print and social media, which can also reinforce partnerships and networking.

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