

The global COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of communities in Nigeria: Policy Brief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns worsened already precarious livelihoods and endemic poverty in across Nigeria. The impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable communities have exposed the weaknesses of crisis responses at the local, state and federal levels. Socioeconomic recovery requires policies to promote resilient and sustainable livelihoods and protect households against future shocks. This in turn calls for close collaboration between governments, civil society, and private sector.

This brief provides policy recommendations for effective emergency responses that support local economies and provide social

safety nets. Recommendations are based on in-depth interviews and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders including academic experts, traditional and political leaders, entrepreneurs, policymakers and communities. The goal was to encourage debate on long-term, sustainable and indigenous socioeconomic progress. This initiative was part of the research project “Whose Crisis? The global COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of communities in Africa,” which aimed to explore the lived experiences of communities in Uganda, Nigeria, Eswatini, Malawi and Botswana.

BACKGROUND

In order to provide a citizen-led assessment of the pandemic, two study sites were selected for the research- Itagunmodi and Ajibode. Itagunmodi is an agrarian community located in the Atakunmosa West Local Government Area of Osun State, in South-West Nigeria. The majority of the inhabitants are artisans, food vendors, traders, subsistence farmers, miners and labourers, who depend on daily wages to feed themselves and their families. Before the pandemic, the

community battled with socio-cultural and environmental degradation as a result of influx of illegal miners. Ajibode is a peri-urban settlement located in the Akinyele Local Government Area of Oyo State. The majority of residents are small business owners and government employees. Ajibode has poor infrastructure and limited access to basic services. People in both communities also rely on remittances from relatives within and outside the country.

FINDINGS

At the start of the pandemic, Nigeria implemented a series of public health measures aimed at containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The impact of restrictions was felt across the country but vulnerable rural and peri-urban communities were more negatively affected than urban areas. Disruptions to economic activity and food supply chains had a disastrous effect on livelihoods and food security especially among smallholder farmers and informal workers. No public assistance was provided to vulnerable households leaving them in dire need of food, income, educational assistance and health care throughout the pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 revealed not only the lack of a functional social welfare system but also the imperative to have one.

In Itagunmodi the private mining company, the Adeleke Dynasty and other indigenes of the Itagunmodi partnered to provide assistance consisting of food, medicine, and ancillary items for the elderly. However this assistance was provided only once and did not reach 30% of the village population. In Ajibode residents reported no assistance whatsoever from government agencies, businesses or civil society organizations. Both communities stated that government and aid agencies did not consult them about their needs.

Precarious livelihoods, loss of income and lack of assistance pushed many households into food insecurity. Many adopted negative coping strategies ranging from choosing less nutritious foods and meal skipping to sex work in exchange for food. School closures left children excluded from education and without access to school meals.

"We did not have anywhere to go, no jobs, we were struggling to survive. Many people died as a result of hunger because we were told to stay indoors. People that died were said to have COVID, but that was not true. People died as a result of hunger."

"Eating well is like a 5-star achievement during this period, I was a father and a commercial driver I could not afford eliubo (Yam Flour) as a proper meal for my family. Instead, I opted for half nutritious dried laafiun (powdered cassava flakes) gathered from my little farm just to eat. Providing for my kids was hard because as a day-to-day earner that I am, if I don't work per day, definitely we will all be starved. Sadly, my kids developed Kwashiorkor from this unhealthy diet"

"I eat only once a day and due to this, I had difficulties in sleeping which prompted me to visit a doctor who checked my BP and told me it was high that I have to stop worrying if I value my life"

"... I pity the women that went to borrow to feed their family from cooperatives most. These organisations were merciless and not lenient with the payback procedures and time. The women out of their frustration and desperation engage in sexual immorality (prostitution) to pay back because the organisations insisted that all borrowed loans must be repaid regardless of the circumstance and within the set time. Such loans can only be cancelled or overlooked when the borrower is dead and the organisation also confirms by seeing the corpse."

Both communities experienced neglect before the pandemic and the lack of assistance exacerbated their economic hardship especially among particular social groups such as the elderly, disabled people, and women.

"I remembered asking my son to take me on Okada to the get food supply from a neighbouring community, we had to started our journey early in order to avoid and escape the law enforcement agent on our way. Unfortunately, I had to part with money in about seven different points before we were given permission to pass"

"Homes and shops were broken into, to cater away food stuffs and valuable item, and we had reported cases of rapes in the community."

- Vulnerabilities such as precarious livelihoods, food insecurity and limited access to basic services must be considered in the design and implementation of public health interventions.
- Crises responses must promote strong community engagement. Community feedback is key to understanding local needs and capacities enabling more effective and feasible strategies. Involving indigenous governance structures is also vital in both urban and rural communities.
- Governments should develop more comprehensive social safety nets to protect people against shocks and prevent them from falling into poverty and food insecurity during crises.
- Social protection programmes must be linked to schemes to help farmers access inputs, markets, and finance. Smallholder farmers are responsible for most of the food production in sub-Saharan Africa. Their livelihoods must be a prioritised in crisis relief measures.

KEY MESSAGES

