LIVELIHOODS AND FOOD SECURITY PROGRAMME

POLICY BRIEF

LFSP POLICY BRIEF NO.4 | JUNE 2021

KEY POINTS

- The COVID-19 pandemic eroded incomes and livelihoods for both rural and urban households, resulting in many households increasing own food production as a response strategy.
- The pandemic induced movement restrictions and social distancing requirements revealed some key weaknesses and vulnerabilities in local food systems and value chains hence the need to propel initiatives around digitalization of agricultural marketing in Zimbabwe.
- Insights from the coping strategies indicated that some of the households employed negative coping strategies such as distress selling of household assets. This suggests a need to strengthen resilience for vulnerable rural and urban households by improving access to competitive markets, social safety nets and increased investments in rural infrastructure and services.
- There is need to shorten agricultural value chains through supporting value addition and processing of agricultural commodities at community level to reduce food losses as a result of supply chain disruptions.
- Promotion of digital innovations to optimize agri-logistics and food distribution as well as facilitating access to markets cannot be overemphasized. The use of mobile applications and other online agricultural marketing platforms can sustainably and inclusively transform local food systems.
- Since the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still evolving, it is critical to regularly monitor and track how different groups of people are being affected and subsequently implement tailor made support and response strategies that resonates well with local realities.
- Increasing awareness programs on good hygiene, importance of social distance and preventive measures especially in local languages should also be included in national policy matrix to further flatten the curve of new cases



Impact of COVID-19 on Food Systems in Zimbabwe - Experiences from urban and rural households

1. Introduction

The ongoing novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) which was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 11th of March 2020 has had profound implications on food systems and livelihoods worldwide (WHO, 2020a; Love et al., 2021). Besides being a serious health crisis across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge to food systems and posed formidable challenges to policymakers (WHO, 2020b; UNDP, 2020). In fact, the economic and social disruption as a result of COVID-19 and necessitated lockdown measures are devastating as many countries plunged into recession and the entire food systems were disrupted (Moseley and Battersby, 2020; World Bank, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, as breadwinners of most families lose jobs, falling ill and/or die, the income and food security of many households are under threat, with those in developing countries like Zimbabwe being hardest hit (WHO, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Specifically, the containment and social distance measures adopted to slow the spread of the virus such as stay at home orders, restricted business operating times and closure of informal food markets negatively affected people's access to agricultural markets and hence access to healthy, safe and diverse diets (Schmidhuber, 2020; Carreras et al., 2020).

Transporters and other food traders also chose to stay home fearing exposure to the deadly virus and being stopped at police COVID-19 check points. This has also further disrupted the food systems from farm to fork. Food systems in Zimbabwe can be broadly grouped into two systems; that is rural which comprise households which mainly consume food from own production and secondly urban where households mainly consume purchased food products from both commercial and informal markets.

In light of these challenges posed by the pandemic on food supply chains, the need for evidence and real time data on the effects of COVID-19 crisis on food systems to support policy response strategies that resonate well with the local realities cannot be overemphasised. Therefore, IAPRI conducted this study to better understand the scope of COVID-19 necessitated disruptions and impacts on food systems in both rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe. Thus, generating evidence to support implementation of evidence based policy response strategies to mitigate its effects and strengthen resilient of food systems in the country.

The report is organized as follows: Section 1 provides a general introduction, Section 2 explains the methodology of the study, and this is followed by a presentation of results in Section 3. Section 4 briefly discusses the results of the study and Section 6 concludes the study by highlighting a few stand-out results and key policy recommendations to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and strengthen resilient of food systems in the country.

2. Data and Methods

The findings of this study are based on primary data collected from both urban and rural households. An online survey was used to gather data mainly from urban households whilst a face to face household survey was conducted to collect data from rural households. The online survey was deployed in January 2021 and the link remained open up to February 2021. In order to reach a wide audience, the survey link was deployed through emails to different stakeholders including the National Agricultural Policy Framework Pillar Thematic Working Groups (NAPF Pillar TWGs). A total of one hundred and twenty seven (127) responses were received and 75% of the respondents were urban and peri-urban dwellers. This online survey was conducted since it was not possible to conduct face to face interviews due to stringent lockdown restrictions which were in place from January to February 2021. To supplement the data collected, a survey questionnaire with rural households was conducted through KoBoCollect in four Livelihoods and Food Security Programme (LFSP) districts; Bindura, Makoni, Mutare and Kwekwe. These districts were purposively selected in order to take advantage of existing structures of data collection and working relationship with Government officials under LFSP.

In each selected district, a random selection of two (2) LFSP wards was conducted and four (4) villages were also selected from those wards. A total of 768 households were interviewed i.e. 192 households per district and 48 households per village. Only households that provided consent and were willing to participate were interviewed to provide their experiences with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on food systems. This household survey was conducted from 21st to 28th April 2021. This was made possible following the relaxation of COVID-19 national regulations and restrictions on the 1st of March 2021, on which movement of people and inter-city travel were eased. This household survey helped to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected food systems in rural areas, how households are coping and what types of tailored support they will need to recover.

Furthermore, to substantiate the report, an extensive review of available literature on the effects of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods and food systems was also conducted. The literature reviewed include working papers, journal articles and survey reports on the effects of COVID-19 globally and in Zimbabwe in particular. Qualitative notes were also taken by enumerators and the quality control monitoring team during the course of the interviews capturing key specific issues that were raised by households. These notes were used to complement quantitative data. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS and Stata.

3. Results and Discussion

This section summarizes the key findings of the study including socio-economic characteristics of the respondents and key effects of COVID-19 on food sources, availability, consumption patterns and access to markets as well as effects on income and income sources. It also discusses the findings of the study on coping strategies employed by households and the proposed government priority responses to alleviate these effects.

Socio-economic characteristics

i. Geographic distribution

The survey respondents came from both urban and rural areas. A total of 895 responses were submitted (127 from the online survey and 768 from the household survey). The respondents are distributed across all ten provinces in Zimbabwe, namely; Harare, Bulawayo, Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, West and East, Matebeleland North and South, Masvingo and Midlands. However, the highest number of respondents (799) came from rural areas (of which 768 were reached through a household survey) whilst 88 urban dwellers and the remaining peri-urban dwellers were reached through the online survey. The geographic distribution is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Geographic distribution of respondents

Area	Frequency	Percent
Peri-urban	8	1
Rural	799	89
Urban	88	10
Total	895	100

ii. Gender and household size

The female respondents constituted 60% whilst 40% were male respondents. Among the female respondents, 52% were heads of households and among male respondents, 92% were heads of households. Among the respondents, the average household size is 5 members.

iii. Education levels

The majority of the respondents (95%) have at least primary level education. Among these, 45% attained secondary level education and 15% attained tertiary level, whilst 35% attained primary level education. This signifies that most of the respondents are literate. The education level of respondents is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Gender and education level of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	539	60
Male	356	40
Highest level of education completed		
No education	39	4
Primary	316	35
Secondary	406	45
Tertiary	134	15

iv. Age distribution

The mean age of the respondents was 49 years. However, most of the respondents were aged 40 years and above (68%). The ages are summarized in Figure 1.

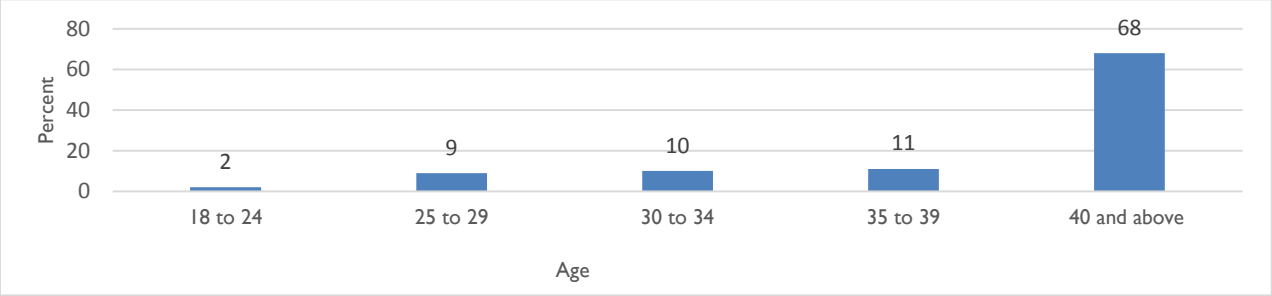

Figure 1: Age distribution of the respondent

v. Main economic activity of the respondents

Although the majority (57%) of the respondents are farmers, some of the respondents rely on casual labor provision (10%) and few are entrepreneurs (9%); whilst the remaining proportion are engaged in various activities such as employees of private company/Non-Government Organizations among others. Categorizing by geographic distribution, most of the rural dwellers are farmers (64%) and for the urban dwellers, the majority are employees of a private company or NGO (46%). These results indicate that the agricultural sector remains a key source of livelihood for the survey respondents. Globally, evidence suggests that the number of people relying on agriculture as the main economic activity has been on the rise since the start of COVID-19 pandemic (Amankwah et al., 2021). This also reflects that the agricultural sector serves as a buffer to many vulnerable households as compared to other sectors such as tourism and hospitality.

vi. *Household income and participation in saving groups*

With regards to income levels, most of the respondents (79%) have household monthly net income less than USD 100 followed by those with income levels between USD 100 to USD 300 (12%) and the remaining proportion has household monthly net income above USD 300. Despite the importance and wider promotion of saving groups as a financial inclusion strategy, only a small proportion (29%) of the respondents are participating in saving groups (mukando/stokvel/ukutshayelana/imali/ukufusha/imali groups).

vii. *Impact of COVID-19 on income*

Although many of the restrictive lockdown measures have been lifted (at the time of writing), 90% of the respondents indicated that their incomes have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated response measures. This was mainly due to disruption caused by movement restrictions which made it difficult to transport farm commodities to selling points (32%), reduced the number of customers (31%) and some of the respondents were unable to work due to health concerns (13%). In emphasising the negative effects of COVID-19 necessitated lockdown measures on access to markets, one of the respondents in Muchaangira village in Mutare district had this to say:

''Due to movement restrictions, we were not able to access markets and our commodities in the gardens deteriorated and rotted.''

Limited market access has resulted in loss of produce especially horticultural products which are highly perishable and hence loss of income.

Closure of schools and other public eating places such as hotels and restaurants has negatively impacted market demand of agricultural products. As a result, this has significantly reduced households' income of smallholder farmers. In emphasizing the severity of loss of customers due to COVID-19 pandemic, one of the respondents in Maravanyika village in Bindura district stated that:

''I reduced my broiler production level (from 1000 to 50 broilers per batch) due to reduced number of customers since schools where I used to sell my broilers before the COVID-19 pandemic were closed''.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to reduction in remittances (35%), reduced salaries (5%), loss of jobs (5%), and closure of business (3%), all culminating to a decline in households' incomes. With regards to the severity of the impact, of those respondents whose incomes were affected, 66% highlighted that the impact of COVID-19 on their incomes was high. This confirms the undeniable negative effects of the pandemic on eroding households' incomes and livelihoods. Global evidence indicates that the pandemic has pushed millions of people into poverty due to falling incomes (IFPRI, 2021). It is estimated that 95 million additional people were living in extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa as of December 2020 (IFPRI, 2021).

viii. Impact of COVID-19 on food environment

The social distance measures and stay at home regulations enacted to slow the spread of COVID-19 infections resulted in food environment disruptions. Most of the respondents (40%) indicated that due to the pandemic, sources of food, availability and quality of food products were highly disrupted. In essence, the delays due to transportation and logistics disruption and road blocks/police check points resulted in quality loss or complete damage of perishable products. This has also affected the availability of food commodities in supermarkets and agricultural markets. On the other hand, the pandemic has also negatively affected people's mobility and hence access to shops (71%) and agricultural markets (30%) to buy healthy and nutritious food products. This was further compounded by limited business operating times which also resulted in food spoilage and wastage particularly for the horticultural products. Food services were also affected by the pandemic and 72% of the urban dwellers reported a decrease in eating out at restaurants and/or hotels. This was mainly due to closure of these food outlets. Furthermore, reduced incidents of eating at relatives or friends' places were also reported (61%) due to stay at home orders. These changes broadly affected the food environment i.e. where people get food and include external dimensions such as food availability and source of food products - as well as personal dimensions such as geographical access, convenience and affordability (UNSCN, 2020).

ix. Impact of COVID-19 on food related behaviors

A question was asked for respondents to indicate if they had experienced any changes with regards to food related behaviors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the respondents indicated that they had experienced changes. In particular, 46% of the respondents reported that they panic bought and stock piled food products, especially during the early days of first lockdown in March 2020. This was mainly triggered by difficulties in accessing food markets due to movement restrictions and stay at home orders (50%), closure of agricultural markets and hence perceived scarcity of agricultural commodities (23%), shortage and limited variety of food products in markets (29%), and imposed limits on quantities one bought in supermarkets (5%). Likewise, a considerable percentage of respondents (28%) also indicated that, they started to rely on food aid or gifts from relatives and friends. This reflects on the inability of households to afford the pre-COVID-19 food product basket mainly due to reduction of household income (73%) and unaffordability of food since food items became expensive (56%). In rural areas, some of the

respondents (16%) also indicated that they relied on wild food harvesting, a situation which they had not experienced before the pandemic. These changes are summarized in 2 below.

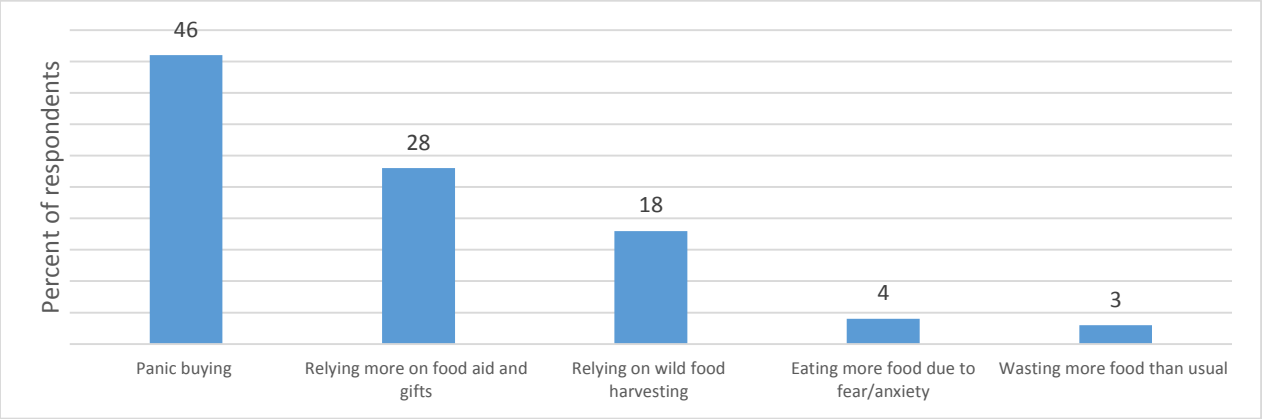

Figure 2: Changes on food related behavior due to COVID-19

x. *Impact of COVID-19 on household food and nutrition security situation*

The majority of the respondents (89%) indicated that their households had experienced deteriorating food and nutrition security due to COVID-19 induced shock. Specifically, most of these respondents highlighted that, they are now eating less meals/ reduced portion sizes (77%), unable to eat healthy and nutritious food items (56%) and worried about not having enough to eat (45%) since the start of the COVID-19 necessitated lockdown in March 2020. In elaborating the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic on household access and consumption of a variety of food items, one of the respondent in Mfolo village in Kwekwe has this to say:

"We used to eat different food items per day but now, we are eating sadza in the afternoon and sadza again in the evening."

This also confirms the deteriorating diet quality as a result of the pandemic and a shift from nutritious foods such as animal-sourced foods and fruits which are now more expensive to cheaper staple foods. The same trend has also been observed globally with an estimated 267.6 million additional people projected to be unable to afford a healthy diet between 2020 and 2022 on top of 3 billion people who already were not able to afford quality diet pre-COVID-19 (IFPRI, 2021). Moreover, in emphasising the effects of the pandemic on reduction of meals per day, one of the respondents in Tokoyo village in Makoni district had this to say:

"Although we have not spent the whole day without eating anything, we have reduced the number of meals per day from three to two meals a day."

In addition, some of the respondents indicated that they had incidents of running out of food (17%) and some had incidents of going a whole day without eating (16%). Only a small proportion indicated that COVID-19 pandemic had no impact on their food and nutrition security situation (13%). This signifies that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the food and nutrition insecurity situation among the sampled districts and some of the respondents in urban areas. In fact, about 5.4 million rural Zimbabweans and 2.4 million urban dwellers were already estimated to be food insecure in 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation due to job losses and reduction in income levels making it difficult for families to put enough food on the table (FNC, 2020a; FNC, 2020b). This deteriorating food and nutrition security is detrimental to the country realising its Vision 2030 of being a middle income country, and also the fight against malnutrition and hidden hunger in the long-term.

The respondents were also asked how they are coping with the effects of the pandemic and most respondents indicated that they increased own food production (47%), and some embarked on providing casual labour (17%). However, some of the respondents employed negative coping strategies such as distress selling of household assets (livestock, vehicles, ploughs and television among others) in order to buy food (7%), others used up savings (9%), and some borrowed money from friends and relatives (2%). These negative coping strategies were also reported in other African countries such as Rwanda (SNV and Wageningen University and Research, 2021). Although these coping strategies seem to provide short term relief, they are not sustainable in the long run as then end of the pandemic remains uncertain, even with the current vaccine roll-out that is still very low in developing countries, including Zimbabwe. Hence, there is need to strengthen resilience of vulnerable rural and urban households. The impacts on food nutrition and security due to the pandemic is summarized in Figure 3.

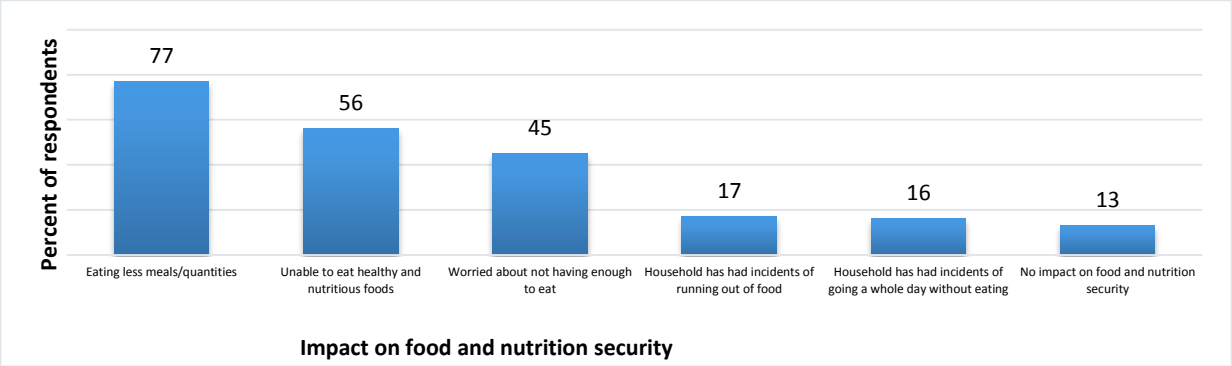

Figure 3: Pathways in which COVID-19 affected food and nutrition security

xi. Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on household food and nutrition security situation

While both female and male-headed households generally have similar levels of worsened food and nutrition security situation due to COVID-19, female-headed households were mostly affected. In fact, most female-headed households were eating less meals or reduced portion sizes, unable to eat healthy and nutritious foods, worried about not having enough to eat and had incidents of going the whole day without eating. These differences were also statistically significant hence reflecting the severity of COVID-19 on worsening the food and nutrition security situation of female-headed households since March 2020. Thus, this study have indicated that, female-headed households have disproportionately experienced worsened food and nutrition security due to COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures. These results are summarised in table 3 below.

Table 3: Gendered impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutrition security situation

Pathways in which COVID-19 pandemic affected food and nutrition security situation	Male headed households	Female headed households
Eating less meals/quantities	**65%*** **	**75%*** **
Unable to eat healthy and nutritious foods	**53%*** **	**61%*** **
Worried about not having enough to eat	**42%*** **	**51%*** **

Household has had incidents of running out of food	15%	20%
Household has had incidents of going a whole day without eating	**14%*** **	**22%*** **

Percentages in bold (with three stars) represent statistically significant differences (p<0.05)

xii. Priorities to deal with the impact of COVID-19

In order to understand key policy responses that would help households and communities to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were asked about their opinions on key response strategies that should be prioritised. Most of the respondents identified increasing awareness on the importance of good hygiene and social distance (78%), increasing coverage of school feeding programs (72%) and provision of food supplies such as food vouchers to vulnerable households (71%) as key national priorities. In support to these findings, one of the respondents in Mkumbi village in Kwekwe has this to say:

"The government should continue raising awareness on the importance of wearing of masks through radio stations."

Further, over half of the respondents identified enhancing emergency social cash transfers to vulnerable households (65%), giving an essential services status to remittance service providers (64%) and tax relief to small and medium enterprises in the food supply chain (53%) were also identified as high priorities to livelihoods in both rural and urban areas. These findings are summarised in Figure 4 below.

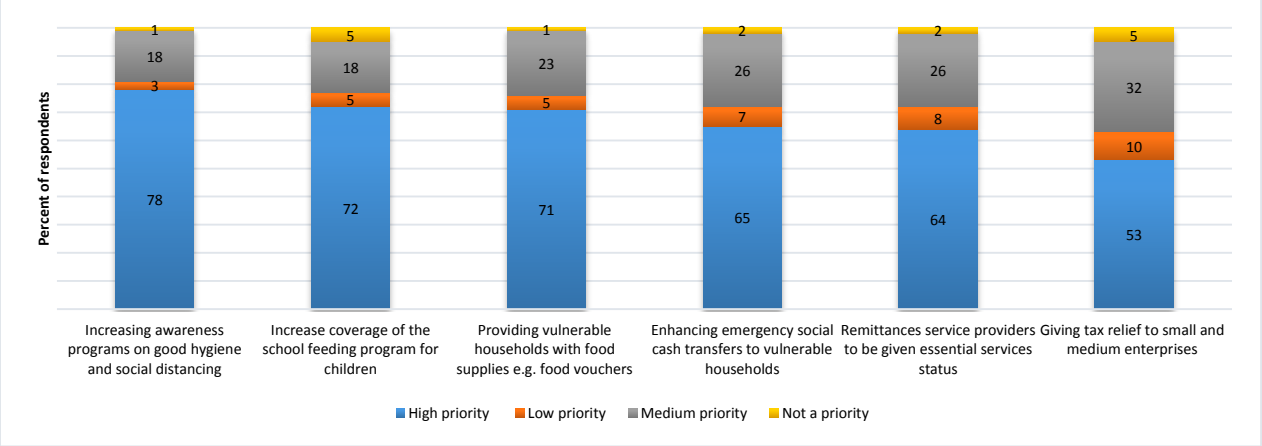

Figure 4: Identified priorities to deal with the effects of COVID-19

4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The findings showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in worsened food insecurity and erosion of livelihoods options including job losses and reduction of household incomes. This clearly depicts the severity of economic slowdown and hardships being faced by households due to the negative effects of COVID-19 and its associated lockdown measures. As such, it is proposed that Government should continue to mobilize resources to cushion the vulnerable households both in

urban and rural areas. Thus, expanding the coverage of emergency food assistance and robust social protection programs including food vouchers should be strengthened to ensure compliance with stay-at-home orders since households need income and put food on the table daily. Inclusion of nutrient-dense food products such as bio-fortified maize and sugar beans (NUA45) can go a long way in improving diet quality hence alleviate malnutrition among the vulnerable groups. Expanding the coverage and/or reestablishing effective school feeding programs will also be critical to support vulnerable children and ease financial pressure on their families. Thus, apart from contributing towards alleviating child malnutrition, school feeding programs might provide an effective incentive for parents to send their children to school.

Given that, female-headed households were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and experienced worsened food and nutrition security situation as compared to their male counterparts, it is critical for Government and humanitarian organisations to scale-up gender responsive social protection safety nets. Concurrently, it is also equally important to ensure that women are included and well-represented in all decision making process regarding COVID-19 response strategies.

To further rebuild our food systems, it is also equally important for Government and its partners to strengthen safety nets programs among smallholder farmers since the current COVID-19 stimulus package does not have clear long term direct incentives to improve access to finance and productivity among smallholder farmers. On the same note, given that agriculture is serving as a buffer and many households increased own food production as a coping strategy to ensure household food security, it is also critical for Government to develop and operationalize an urban agriculture policy strategy. This will help to provide guiding principles to enhance sustainable agricultural production in urban areas.

Apart from health and economic costs, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed some of the opportunities to sustainably and inclusively transform our food systems. For instance, there is a need to set up collection centres closer to smallholder farmers to significantly reduce the need for mobility among farmers. This also entails national roll-out of the warehouse receipt system to ensure proper storage of agricultural commodities thereby reducing post-harvest losses. Concurrently, Government together with its development partners should accelerate the development and use of e-commerce among smallholder farmers through incentivizing the designing and deployment of digital innovations to optimize agri-logistics, market access and strengthen food products delivery services.

Charity organizations, school feeding programs, humanitarian organizations and Government institutions such as hospitals should also procure agricultural commodities directly from smallholder farmers and/or farmer groups to ensure undisrupted market access among smallholder farmers even during times of crisis like COVID-19. This will also ensure guaranteed and reliable trade agreements.

Institutional reforms for enabling business environment and policy incentives to strengthen private sector investments especially through contract farming initiatives cannot be overemphasized in order to ensure better access to markets among smallholder farmers and increased value chain financing.

Since the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still evolving, it is critical to regularly monitor and track how different groups of people are being affected and subsequently implement tailor made support and response strategies that resonate well with local realities and context. This also calls

for improved coordination and engagement of multiple stakeholders in finding robust and lasting solutions to sustainably transform food systems. This can be done through continuous support to NAPF Pillar TWGs, particularly Pillars 1, 5 and 9. Effective coordination and coherence of policy discussions and implementation will help to alleviate confusion and inefficient outcomes but allow policy makers to swiftly respond to future shocks in an informed, inclusive and a well-coordinated manner. Such transparency in policy response dialogue and implementation helps to build credibility and confidence among different stakeholders and general citizenry.

Policy incentives to support investment in cheap food drying and processing among smallholder farmers to prolong shelf life can go a long way in reducing food losses and waste especially for perishable food products such as fruits, tomatoes and vegetables. Such policy incentives might include simplified licensing and business registration procedures and swift permit issuance to save time and reducing transaction costs for investors. Strong intellectual property rights framework can also stimulate innovation and development of novel technologies to support drying or freezing of some agricultural products through solar systems.

Increasing awareness programs on good hygiene, importance of social distance and preventive measures especially in local languages should also be included in national policy matrix to further flatten the curve of new cases.

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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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