

COVID-19 and food insecurity among informal urban settlers in Ghana

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity among informal urban settlers in Ghana. Using a qualitative data collection approach, the paper explores the various socioeconomic factors that have exacerbated this group's food insecurity, including income loss and food supply chain disruptions. It further describes the various coping strategies that informal urban settlers have adopted to mitigate the impact of food insecurity. The findings indicate that the pandemic has had a severe and disproportionate impact on informal urban settlers in Ghana and further reinforces existing social inequalities. The paper highlights the importance of continued government support and the need for effective policy interventions to ensure that these communities have access to adequate food security.

Keywords: COVID-19; Food insecurity; Informal settlements; Urban; Lockdown; Intervention.

1. Introduction

Declared by the World Health Organization as a pandemic and a public health emergency on 20 May 2020, the novel COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating social and economic implications on global economies [1, 2, 3]. The pandemic aside the health challenges it imposed, also revealed the protracted and deep-rooted inequalities and vulnerabilities in global food systems [4, 5]. Since the inception of the pandemic, several economies have seen severe decline and shrinkage - threatening livelihoods and employment opportunities [1, 6, 7]. The pandemic has posed a threat to the global community's attempt to combat hunger through the SDGs by eroding the gains made in global poverty alleviation efforts over the past thirty years, forcing many people into abject poverty and starvation [8, 9].

Ghana reported its first case of the COVID-19 infection on 12 March 2020. Following this, the Government of Ghana like other countries declared a state of emergency and imposed several restrictions such as lockdowns, stay-at-home measures, closure of businesses, and social distancing regimes to curtail the spread of the virus [8, 10]. In Ghana, the quest to end poverty and to achieve zero hunger has been challenging and almost becoming difficult to achieve according to the Ghana Living Standards Survey- GSLs 7 [11]. With more than half of Ghana's 16 regions experiencing higher than average poverty of 24.5%, poverty is becoming more entrenched [8]. The increased layered vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic further threaten to increase food insecurity rendering current policy gains fruitless and ineffective.

Ragasa, Amewu & Asante [12] assessed the changes in sources of livelihood, household incomes, consumption of food, and diet quality during the early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak among urban residents in Ghana. The study revealed that over 83% of urban dwellers in Accra reported lower incomes, basically due to the collapse of businesses and decreased sales from their economic activities. This saw a reduction in their food consumption levels, household incomes, and the quality of food consumed as compared to the pre-COVID-19 era. Only 17% of urban dwellers polled

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maintained their pre-COVID-19 levels of food consumption. The attainment of zero hunger by 2030 appears to be a far-fetched reality in Ghana looking at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the already ailing agricultural systems. Also, major food systems and supply chains have been affected due to lockdowns, COVID-19 restrictions, increased cost of production, and price volatility [13]. Prior to the pandemic, Nkegbe [14] revealed that over 2 million Ghanaians were food insecure. The case for informal urban dwellers is worse in terms of food security and decent livelihoods amidst COVID-19 [13]. Settlers of urban informal settlements already face precarious conditions of survival which have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of people who live below the poverty line (Those who spend less than GHC 3.00 a day on food in Ghana) are mostly those dwelling in informal urban settlements [8].

Many studies have been conducted on the general implications of the pandemic on global economies, but little is known about the impacts on informal urban dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study, therefore, seeks to unravel the food insecurity threats that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic among informal urban settlers in Accra-Ghana.

1.1. Informal Urban Settlements in Ghana

Much attention has been drawn to the growth of informal settlements in the global south which has sparked a plethora of research on informal urban dwellers taking into consideration their contribution to economic development, the challenges associated and the perception of informal urban settlers in Sub-Saharan Africa [15]. According to the UN-Habitat [16] it is estimated that there exist over 1 billion informal settlements worldwide with most of them found in developing countries of which Sub-Saharan Africa is a key area. This is projected to triple (get to 3 billion) by the year 2050 if nothing is done about it [17].

In Ghana, informal settlements are a prominent aspect of how cities and big towns are organized socio-spatially [18, 19]. About 60% of people live in informal settlements in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) [20, 21], the country's capital, compared to the national average of 37.9% [22]. Accra's housing market is paradoxical in that it favours the wealthy while being scarce for people at the lower ends of the economic spectrum. Almost half (45%) of Accra's population lives in slums [19, 23]. These places are overpopulated, have poor sanitary facilities, and limited potable drinking water. Slum dwellings, however, might signify more to locals than just the traditional images of hunger and poverty [23].

Informal urban settlements like the suburbs of Mamprobi and Kaneshie create a sense of home for most people to escape homelessness amidst grave housing crises in Accra. According to a report by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Kaneshie is one of the most densely populated places in Accra and it is popularly known for its vibrant market and commercial activities as well as the concentration of informal settlements or slums [11]. Kaneshie is the host to one of the most popular slums in the city; thus, Old Fadama also known as "Sodom and Gomorrah" which serves as home to people who live in sub-standard housing conditions with limited access to basic amenities like potable drinking water, sanitation, and decent healthcare. Various efforts have been made by the government and NGOs to address the challenges associated with slums by providing basic amenities and resettlement programs. But these efforts have been met with resistance from residents who are concerned about losing their homes and livelihoods [24]. To the elite and average Ghanaians, these places are seen as dystopian. Nonetheless, to the dwellers, these are the few places where they are guaranteed cheap housing, rent and access to other social services within the country's urban prime (Accra).

1.2. Food Security Threats in Ghana

The triple burden of malnutrition is a major issue in Ghana and is largely caused by poverty which prevents households from obtaining enough staples and animal-source food. This has caused people to turn to cheap, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods, further contributing to the burden of malnutrition. In 2018, 1.5 million people faced food insecurity in Ghana, with the Upper West, Upper East, and Northern Regions being most affected. Another two million were at risk, with the Brong Ahafo and Volta regions being of major concern [25]. Additionally, the incident of food insecurity occurs when there is insufficient and unreliable access to nutritious food for a healthy standard of living [26]. This can be ongoing, transient, or seasonal [27]. Research indicates that food insecurity is highly prevalent among Ghanaians [28], with estimates of 4 in 10 Ghanaians experiencing severe food insecurity. This is in line with Ghanaian national estimates of households experiencing food insecurity where about 51% of families experienced either moderate or severe food insecurity in the years 2014–2015 [29].

The obstructions to attaining food security are massive as the sources are complex and multi-faceted in Ghana [30]. Issues such as poverty, climate change, rapid urbanization, population growth, gender inequalities, food loss and inadequate infrastructure surpass the four pillars of food and nutrition security (availability, access, utilisation and

stability). Ghana is currently feeling the impacts of climate change with shifting patterns of rainfall and rising temperatures. It is projected that between 2020 and 2080, Ghana is likely to experience increasing temperatures than before, which is already happening now [31]. Climate change is a threat to food security in two ways. Firstly, the occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events have caused temperatures to be higher than before [32]. This has resulted in the drying up of water sources, ocean acidification, rising sea levels, disruption of ecosystems, and land degradation causing hunger and deepening poverty. Secondly, the changes in weather conditions are causing an increase in the vulnerability of the poor to food insecurity [32].

Moreover, poverty in Ghana is becoming more widespread, with more than 24.5% of the population living in poverty within all 16 of the country's regions [8]. From 2013-2017, poverty estimates rose from 2.2 million to 2.4 million per the 2010 population census [11]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues by leading to job losses and pay cuts for 770,000 employees [11]. This has had a negative effect on household incomes, preventing breadwinners from providing for their families. In Accra, 83% of urban dwellers have reported lower incomes, due to the collapse of businesses and decreased sales from their economic activities [12]. This has resulted in reduced food consumption, lower household incomes, and a decrease in the quality of food consumed compared to pre-COVID-19 levels.

2. Materials and Methods

This research paper is based on both primary and secondary information and a review of relevant literature to ascertain how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the food security of informal urban dwellers within the capital city of Ghana (Accra). A combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation was used to gather data from informal urban settlers living in Mamprobi and Kaneshie (two popular suburbs of Accra) to gain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences with food insecurity as perpetrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One hundred and twenty (120) respondents participated in the In-depth Interviews (IDIs) whilst eighty (80) respondents participated in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from the two communities. For a period of three months, non-participant observation was conducted, and recordings of interviews were made with digital recorders. Afterwards, the transcriptions of the data (IDIs, FGDs) and notes from the observation were uploaded onto a computer and then put into the qualitative software, NVivo 12, to help with the thematic coding and analysis. As a complement to the primary data, available literature, and a body of works on the subject matter from books (both published and unpublished), scholarly articles, working papers, newspapers, online articles, and materials relevant to the topic were considered.

Also, data collected were analysed using a thematic analysis approach to uncover the shared experiences of informal urban settlers living in Accra. Keywords and statements which were not part of the main objectives or themes but were important and could be used to support available literature were also analysed to support findings. The discussions were based on the knowledge grounding of the constructivist perspectives [33]. However, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Contextualizing the Impacts of COVID-19 on Urban Food Security in Accra

In an attempt to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Government of Ghana implemented a strict lockdown directive in the urban centres of the country. Residents of Mamprobi and Kaneshie like other urban suburbs in Accra expected the lockdowns and restrictions to be eased in a few weeks but to no avail. The extended period of the lockdown meant a loss of informal sector jobs which absorb almost all the informal urban dwellers in the city of Accra. Residents interviewed from both Mamprobi and Kaneshie recalled being responsive and obedient to the restrictions in the early stages. However, about 70% indicated they grew restless as the lockdown was prolonged. Some respondents at Mamprobi stated the following concerning the impact of the pandemic on their lives:

"(...) Chale! When Showboy announced the lockdown, I wasn't happy but I was okay thinking it was just for the time being. I didn't know it will be this long" (Xoxo, 34, M).

"As for me, I thought this stay-home thing was going to be just some one-week vibes (...) You know Ghana we just like to follow what the whites are doing so I didn't see it to take this long. But then the thing be serious. Like the whole of 2020 then man not dey fit comot" (Ted, 42, M)

"...The lockdown kept longer than we thought; from April to December" (Liz, 32, F).

Meanwhile, going out meant risking lives as the military presence was everywhere. All residents complied with the stay-at-home measures with few exceptions. Food markets were allowed to operate for specific periods. Buying food from the Kaneshie market was the primary source of food for residents in the Mamprobi and Kaneshie suburbs. 75% of respondents reported increased expenditure of their incomes on food alone due to the continuous presence of their family at home. This was attested by respondents in the statements below:

"(...) me then my bro were always home and eating rough rough. Chale! we spent all our money on food" (Tee, 37, M).

"(...) I and my family were home. My husband and I were okay, you know kids, they were just eating anyhow so most of our money was spent on food since we can't watch the kids go hungry" (Kate, 38, F).

While most respondents reported having enough money to cover their expenses for the first two months of the pandemic, their ability to save was curtailed due to significant job losses following the lockdown. The household survey revealed that nearly 80% of the respondents had no savings, and the majority of this group (85%) were low-income informal workers. Only about 19% reported to have had incomes to cover several months until the end of 2020.

The household survey also revealed that 88% of the 120 respondents reported eating three meals daily during the pre-pandemic era. However, in the aftermath of the pandemic restrictions, most respondents from both suburbs reported loss of income and livelihoods due to job losses. Consequently, both the quantity and quality of food being consumed by these informal urban dwellers in the two communities saw significant negative impacts. A previous online study revealed that 58% of urban dwellers in Ghana suffered food insecurity prior to the inception of COVID-19 [8]. Several scholars have found the dynamics affecting food security in these times to include increasing inequalities; loss of income and livelihoods; breakdown of social protection programs; food supply chains disruptions; and uneven pricing of foods in localized contexts [4, 5, 34]. This situation has further heightened the threat of hunger and food insecurities among many global populations, especially those in informal urban dwellings in Ghana. The quotes below confirm how the COVID-19 protocols impoverished the informal urban communities in Accra.

"(...) Oh! Before 2020 I and my family could eat 3 times a day like breakfast, lunch, and supper but now we only eat twice. At times once but for our kids, we try to make sure they still eat 3 times. You know they are very young 7 and 10 years old" (Kate, 38, F).

"This matter you dey come talk (...) now deir strategy we dey take chop o. You eat once a day so you for time the day and eat heavy once. Gob3 (Beans) can do all the magic" (Pane, 41, M).

3.2. Coping and Adaptation Strategies of Informal Urban Dwellers

Several coping strategies were observed through our field study by the residents of the two informal urban communities. These included but were not limited to cutting down the number of meals consumed in a day (from three to two or one), food preservation, increased expense allocation to food, accessing food relief provided by the government, and relying on loans and credit facilities from friends and relatives. Respondents reported storing similar kinds of food depending on their financial acumen. At Kaneshie, a family head revealed storing about 50kg of rice and maize which saw his family through the initial stages of the pandemic. Several other people with low incomes and unemployed stated they had no money to buy or store food resources. Those who had savings at the bank hinted they did not store food since they could purchase it from the market.

"(...) during the early stages of the lockdown, we bought extra foodstuffs like bags of rice, yam, maize, gari and beans. That was what sustained us during the lockdown season. If not for that like my usual savings would have dried up" (Klaus, 50, M).

Also,

My husband and I secured some groceries for the house during the lockdown, but we complemented it with weekly top-ups just to make sure we had everything to face the hard times (...) It was at this time that I realized the importance of delivery services. (Naana, 43, F).

The government through the local authorities also tried to support the masses through the supply of food relief items. This was a saviour to many poor residents who otherwise would have starved. However, many people expressed resentment about how the food relief items were disbursed. Social distancing arrangements were made in food markets and other private and social organizations donated COVID-19 prevention and control items like nose masks, sanitisers,

and hand washing soaps to residents free of charge. However, many residents complained that the relief response was not well coordinated and did not consider the nutritional needs of the masses at the time.

“(…) we heard the government tried sharing some relief packages for those that were hardly hit by the lockdown. And also, some NGOs and church groups (….) Even my church organized some foodstuffs and other relief packages to be donated to deprived communities and shelter or orphanage homes” (Val, 36, F).

“(…) Chale! dem share food and money give people for town but we not get some. It was some way. I’m sure dem share give their party members” (Bone, 29, M).

The severe hardship of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with its protracted length led to the loss of jobs among many people, hence the subsequent loss of household incomes. This led many into taking loans from family and friends to survive. This clearly reflected the relevance of social capital in times of disaster. However, several others bemoaned that their support systems equally suffered financial strain and could not be of help.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper unravels the food insecurity threats that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic among informal urban settlers in Accra. To get a detailed understanding of the study, a critical look was given to the informal urban settlement in Accra and that of the general food security in Ghana. With in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation coupled with desk-bound existing literature and publications on informal urban settlers living in Mamprobi and Kaneshie, it was deduced through their lived experiences that the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdown protocols took a toll on food security within such communities. In general, COVID-19 affected all facets of the Ghanaian economy crippling both the poor, the average and rich businesses.

Therefore, addressing the impact of COVID-19 on food security among informal urban settlers may require a more comprehensive approach. This may include; ensuring access to affordable and nutritious foods by supporting local food systems, strengthening the social safety net, investing in improved sanitation facilities, clean water supply, and waste management, and strengthening community resilience by encouraging community engagement and building networks within informal settlements that will foster adaptability and help communities support each other during crises.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Statement of Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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