

COVID -19 induced food security challenges in the urban periphery. A case of Mazowe District, Zimbabwe.

Oshneck Mupepi

Email: omupepi@gmail.com Telephone +263 775 313 686

Abstract

Communities in urban peripheries of Mazowe District are facing heightened food security challenges due to lockdown restrictions adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe as a measure to abate the spreading of the Coronavirus disease in March 2020. This paper reviewed secondary data to determine the impacts of Corona virus-induced lockdown and its associated restrictions. The review was crucial in coming up with a general overview of the impacts of Coronavirus on food availability and accessibility within urban peripheries of Mazowe District. Online newspaper articles and reports were the most crucial sources of information in building knowledge on the impacts of Coronavirus and drawing applications in the study area with the support of direct observations. The movement of people from urban peripheries to towns and cities and within urban periphery communities themselves has been suspended to reduce spreading of this pandemic in the country. The review confirmed that following these lockdown restrictions, the majority of households in peripheries of urban areas within the district have been and are still subjected to food insecurity challenges. These challenges are emanating chiefly from failure to access market centers and growth centers/ towns to purchase basic food products, essential inputs for food production initiatives and to sell produces among others. As a result, food choices and dietary needs of communities in the peripheries of these urban areas have been severely affected. This essay, therefore, recommends the strengthening of food systems and the availability of food sources in urban peripheries to avoid dependency on towns/cities for basic food. Food security challenges being faced in urban peripheries of Mazowe can be abated if food supply to growth centers is ensured, access to market places and food retail outlets is controlled and food prices are controlled to avoid both the spread of Coronavirus and increase of food insecurity in urban peripheries.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic, Food security, urban peripheries, Mazowe, Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction

November 2019 marked the onset of spreading of a flu-like infectious disease which the Chinese doctors confirmed to be emanating from the so-called Corona Virus (European commission, 2020). First cases were reported in the Chinese province of Hubei. As of 23 January 2020, the city of Wuhan has been locked down as a measure to contain the fast-spreading disease. Afterwards, most of the Chinese cities adopted the same measure. By 11 March 2020, Covid-19 cases have been reported in 163 countries which led to the World health organization declaring the disease a pandemic (European commission, 2020). So many countries including Spain, France and Italy adopted the Lockdown initiative as a measure to contain the pandemic.

The Zimbabwean government was no exception in adopting the lockdown measure a few weeks after South Africa. During the lockdown, policies like a shelter at home and social distancing, as well as movement restrictions, led to myriads of challenges related to food accessibility and availability (UNSDG, 2020) especially in areas in the peripheries of urban areas. Mazowe District has very few towns within it, hence it depends on Harare as a source of food supplies as well as a market for various farm products. However, Mvurwi town to the northern part of the district is an alternative to the city of Harare for food supply and farm product marketing (Fig 1). Some growth points like Concession, Glendale, Nzvimbo and Centenary also provide these services but at a small scale. Since the majority of the population in this district is in rural areas, lockdown restrictions which affected the movement of people to and from these areas resulted in challenges to access and making food available for people who are far from these areas. Also due to limited chances of travelling to Harare city and Mvurwi town, retailers in local growth points have increased prices of their products, taking advantage of desperate populations who cannot travel to cities and towns for the acquisition of food products. Farmers also were failing to access these market places to sell their products which is their main source of livelihood, especially during the post-harvest period. This essay will discuss how Covid-19 induced lockdown restrictions have led to difficulties in accessing and making food available for the population in urban peripheries within Mazowe District.

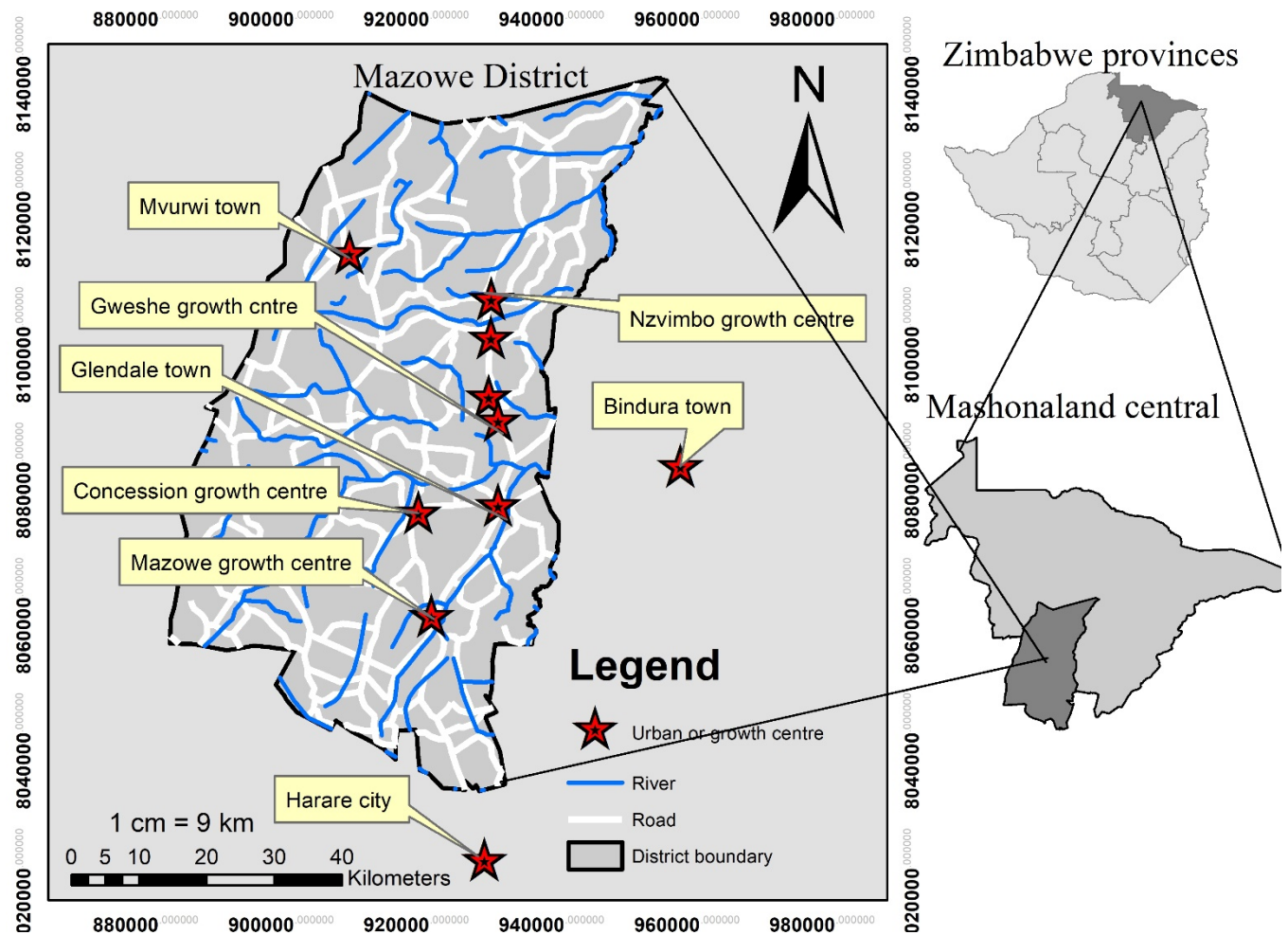


Figure 1: Map of Mazowe district

2. Methodology

The research adopted a descriptive research design. This design was adopted since it allowed the use of qualitative secondary data to describe the impacts of COVID-19 lockdown on food security of communities within urban peripheries of Mazowe District. The literature review was the most crucial method of data collection used in this research. Online newspaper articles and other secondary information from radio stations were used to get an understanding of the lockdown situation and associated restrictions in Mazowe District and other communities in Zimbabwe. The researcher then concluded the implications of this situation basing of knowledge of livelihoods of people within Mazowe district. FAO and World Food program online reports were also used to understand implications of COVID-19 on food security of other communities around the world to compare and draw a solid conclusion on the implication of the same situation on food security of local communities.

Effects of restrictions on food security

Transport restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdown led to reduced movement of rural populations to Harare city and Mvurwi towns which affected their opportunities to access cheap food products for their livelihoods. Usually, people travel to these areas where they can purchase foodstuffs in bulk and at cheaper prices. However, due to lockdown restrictions, people were now being forced to survive by eating food that is available locally regardless of their choices. Most urban periphery populations purchase basic food products like cooking oil, sugar, flour among others at wholesale prices from towns to avoid paying more money for the same products when acquiring them in local shops. According to FAO (2020), COVID-19 lockdown negatively impacted the purchasing power of an already vulnerable population indirectly by lowering the capacity to produce and distribute food. This was the case in urban periphery communities in Mazowe District as people failed to access food from distant markets like Harare and Mvurwi as well as resources to use for food production. The movement was only allowed to those who were travelling for critical or emergence issues like visiting hospitals and other health centres for medical services, attending funeral services among other critical movements only after approval from District administrators or ward councillors which would be exhibited in the form of stamped approval letters. However, for those who took advantage of these letters to access market places, transport costs were so exorbitant which also strained their little income meant for food purchasing.

According to FAO (2020), over 45 % of food products consumed are imported from other countries hence closing of borders, restriction of population movements and disruption of markets and supply chains led to higher prices for basic foodstuffs. Mazowe District households are no exception to this impact as their purchasing power is already low due to their dependence mostly on agricultural outputs. People within urban peripheries of Mazowe District are mainly dependent on selling agricultural products to market places hence travelling restrictions hampered their income generation and this made them vulnerable to price hikes. Food price hikes were also experienced in local retail shops at Nzvimbo, Concession, Mvurwi, and Glendale among other growth/shopping centres. Price hikes were and are still worse off in remote communal areas around Howard, Gweshe, and other resettlement areas around concession and Mvurwi areas. This impacted the food security of households in these areas as some people found it difficult to purchase basic foodstuffs at high prices. Consequently, the

availability of basic food required especially daily was impeded and food choices of these vulnerable communities have been affected thus affecting their food security.

Corona virus-induced lockdown restrictions affected food systems through hindering efficient food supply, production and marketing (World Bank, 2020). In urban periphery communities of Mazowe District, scarcity of critical inputs for food production in growth points and other local retail shops has presented severe challenges in food production. Like in other urban periphery communities of the world, urban periphery communities in Mazowe depend mostly on agriculture (on-farm activities) (FAO, 2007). Availability of fertilizers, seeds, pesticides and herbicides in local retail shops had reduced which left communities in Mazowe with only one alternative which was to travel to towns of which travelling has been hindered by the adopted lockdown measure. Availability of basic food like tomatoes and vegetables in urban peripheries is anchored by horticulture hence the availability of fuel for powering of water pumps, purchasing fertilizers and seeds among others have led to reduced production of vegetables which had an impact on the dietary requirements of these people. It has been observed that some farmers who are into gardening were failing to access inputs due to lockdown restrictions which led to shortages of vegetables and other garden food products especially in communities around Mvurwi and Centenary.

Supply of food from nearby towns like Harare, Mvurwi and Bindura dwindled due to transport problems. This was the case especially for retailers in urban peripheries who order food products for sale in rural areas. Secondary information from those who reside close to Harare-Bindura road (those who reside in Glendale), Concession -Mvurwi highway (those who reside in concession and resettlement areas around Tsatse and Nhangura areas) and Mvurwi-Centenary road (those in Mvurwi), during the two-week level 2 lockdown in Zimbabwe from 30 March 2020, it was very rare to see vehicles moving along these roads and those who attempted to find transport ended up cancelling their journeys. This situation led to stagnancy in the supply of goods from towns to the countryside thus affecting the food security of households in these areas.

Besides impacts on food production, Corona virus-induced lockdown has affected the marketing of agricultural products especially in resettlement and communal areas which had severe impacts on the livelihoods of households in these areas. According to the World Food Programme (2020), restrictions on urban periphery-city travel and the closure of urban periphery markets were affecting traditional mechanisms of destocking of local agricultural

products by farmers, particularly in collection markets. The pandemic affected the country during harvesting time when farmers sell their agricultural produce to various markets. Communities in Mazowe District are mostly dependant on agriculture and they earn their significant income once per year which is usually immediately after harvesting between July and August. However, due to strict measures taken under the so-called lockdown, farmers were failing to access markets and the majority stocked their harvests yet they needed to buy food using income from selling these products. Concession, Glendale, Mvurwi and Nzvimbo are major markets in Mazowe and access to these centres was severely restricted due to lockdown which left farmers in urban peripheries with no option than to keep their produces. Those few who managed to produce horticultural products at large scale experienced losses as produces like tomatoes which require large markets went bad. This led to farmers failing to secure food as expected, affecting the accessibility and availability of food in these areas. Diet diversification was also mainly affected by the reduced purchasing power of these communities.

In urban peripheries of Mazowe District, households who survive by vending had their food security severely affected by the lockdown situation. Adverts and information on Coronavirus awareness and prevention instilled fear of contracting the disease in most of the people within peripheries of urban areas. Most people started staying at home, reducing their movements and even avoiding getting close to other people or purchasing products from roadside vendors. This led to most customers deeming purchasing food from vendors unsafe due to the possibility of purchasing contaminated products. According to the Rural Health Information Hub (2019), urban peripheries are considered food deserts because they have very few food retail outlets to provide them with fresh nutritious food. Therefore, due to closure of these few available food outlets and barring of vending due to COVID-19 lockdown, food availability and accessibility in rural areas have been impacted. This was the case in communities within Mazowe District where people rely more on vendors for their food products. Both vendors and customers in Chiweshe, Mvurwi and Mazowe communities have been affected as their income and food sources respectively have been negatively impacted. Besides the fear of buying contaminated food by rural people, vendors were facing difficulties to order these products from towns as travelling has been barred which exacerbated the already existing food insecurity vulnerability in urban peripheries. Due to the stay home recommendation, everyone including children was at home and they all needed to eat. Resultantly food habits of households were compelled to change for instance shifting from eating three to two meals per day (Goddard, 2020).

The season of 2019/2020 was severely impacted by drought and some communities within Mazowe District could not harvest as they expected. Usually, farmers resort to livestock selling to cover their food requirements. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers could not transport their livestock to abattoirs thus leaving them exposed to food insecurity. Farmers within urban peripheries of Mazowe District sell their cattle at Nzvimbo growth point and Harare but due to travel restrictions, they could not transport their cattle to these places. This affected the purchasing power of these communities and to make the matter worse, food prices were high since the onset of lockdown restrictions. Moreover, season 2019/2020 in Zimbabwe was characterised by livestock diseases like Foot and mouth, Lumpy skin and Red water which killed a lot of cattle in Mazowe District among other areas. Death of livestock worsened due to failure by farmers to access growth points and towns to purchase vaccines for the treatment of livestock diseases like Lumpy skin which was prevalent in these areas. More so, dip-tank officers failed to collect dip from Veterinary offices which are located in towns like Mvurwi and Bindura thus worsening the death of livestock from tick-borne diseases. As a result, most households lost their cattle which is the major source of livelihood in these rural communities. Besides only losing herds of cattle to diseases, some people consumed livestock died from diseases which brought in the issue of food safety challenges in these communities. According to FAO (2020), world total meat production was projected to fall by 1.7 percent in 2020, due to animal diseases and COVID-19-related market disruptions. This statement from FAO confirms COVID-19's disruption of meat markets which farmers depend on to sell their livestock and earn their living. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has, directly and indirectly, contributed to food insecurities of several urban periphery people.

Rural communities in Mazowe District earn their living partly through village savings and lending whereby households in rural setups organise groups in which all members of the group contribute an agreed amount of money or food equivalent which will be given to one of the group members. This can be repeated after an agreed time interval which can be one week or month until everyone receives that money. This had been one of the ways households in Mazowe communities secure food for their households. However, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, people could not earn enough to continue these savings leading to food insecurity to households who solely survived through Village savings and lending. Selling agricultural produces and assets like goats and cattle was the usual way of earning money for these savings but due travel restrictions, markets could not be accessed leading to collapsing of some of these initiatives. More so, buying and selling which usually sustain people in these groups were

impacted as market places and towns were not accessible. As a result, food availability, accessibility and choice have been affected leading to food insecurities in these communities.

Conclusion

In miniature of the discussion, it can be deduced that food security of households in urban peripheries of Mazowe District has been affected by the Coronavirus lockdown notably, food availability, accessibility, dietary diversity and food choices among others. All these aspects of food security have been undermined by the COVID-19 lockdown situation in the Country. The majority of land in Mazowe District is classified as rural hence the majority of its population suffered food insecurity due to their dependency on Harare, Mvurwi and Bindura towns for the supply of food, provisioning of market services among other aspects that determine food security of urban periphery communities. Growth centres and other market places within Mazowe district communities, due to the Coronavirus lockdown, were no longer serving their purpose of providing varieties of food for the people as well as providing inputs essential for food production as most of these services have been suspended. Movement restrictions hindered almost every aspect of rural people's livelihoods leaving most households exposed to food insecurity characterised with food availability, accessibility, diversity and choice challenges.

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