

Anticipating and Combating Africa's Future Food Security and Nutrition Pitfalls

Mafa E. Chipeta¹, Agriculture and Food Security Analyst

<emchipeta@gmail.com> Tel/Whatsapp: +27724364934 / +265991317321

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This contribution is based on long-term observation of food security and nutrition realities in Africa, with a focus on cities, where the 'modern' market economy has replaced subsistence food provisioning to families.

Poverty as Top Killer

1. At this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, it may sound perverse to say that in Africa, it is poverty that is the most virulent, pervasive and enduring pestilence, and not the corona virus, Mayburg fever, Ebola, or even cholera and malaria. Poverty kills silently and slowly, but is nevertheless lethal – very often, it kills by making its victims unable to afford adequate nutrition, protective housing, proper and adequate clothing, and the education necessary to secure rewarding employment for income. And it kills millions.
2. With Africa's traditional extended-family social protection no longer common, poverty (by keeping its victims marginal to modern economies) also ensures that its victims are excluded from modern official social safety nets such as pensions. It condemns large numbers of people to rely on socially demeaning charitable food aid and other emergency assistance.

Selected observations on poverty, with a focus on Africaⁱ

Selected *salient features of how people work in developing countries*:

- Most of those working in developing countries work in the private sector, not the public sector;
- *A large majority* of those who work in the private sector are not registered with the government, and therefore *do not receive job-related social protection*;
- Earnings levels are very low despite long working hours;
- Incomes are also uncertain (many types of employment are informal);
- Women are disadvantaged in developing country labour markets.

3. Casual observation of Covid-19 dislocations reveal that nowhere is the impact of poverty more dramatic and swift than in Africa's teeming cities. Urban residents are generally better paid, more assured of employment and better served by modern economies than their rural cousins. But within days of Covid-19, they had been reduced to severe hunger, begging and queuing for food rations, being ejected from rental housing and going homeless except as barred by lockdown regulations. All this because far too many of Africa's urban dwellers are poor, have no regular and secure jobs, depend on minuscule and unstable daily earnings from casual labour (not assured salaries) or petty selling of necessities to other poor people. By definition, most such people (who far outnumber the middle and high-income earners) have no savings and no social security income.

Illusory and Easily Dislocated Urban Wellbeing

¹Mafa Chipeta is a retired FAO analyst on food security, agricultural and forestry development. He is Malawian but often lives in South Africa. Contacts - Email: emchipeta@gmail.com; Tel/Whatsapp: +27724364934 / +265991317321

4. For this majority, as soon as the lockdowns were declared, besides formal businesses grinding to a halt, most informal economy earnings and daily wages were cut off. Overnight, proud breadwinners become bread-beggars, with many supplies coming from abroad, with much imported using charitable money often also begged from donors abroad. Essentially, in most African cities (but also rural areas), the gains since the turn of the century may by now already have been rolled back and ambitions lowered from the higher SDG ambitions.
5. This is Africa's reality today: only weeks after the Covid-19 pandemic started, charity services are booming, with food distributed daily while supplies last. Governments will have to ensure that free food distribution continues until the pandemic is over; otherwise, mass starvation and unrest will follow. While such immediate responses are important, the need is to understand the causes of continuing food insecurity and malnutrition in Africa revealed by the Covid-19 crisis.

Suggestions for *Ending hunger and achieving food security for all*

Responses to Guiding Questions

6. Groups especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and food insecurity

- a. In Africa, both rural and urban people are hungry: From being a net food exporter in the 1980s, Africa has become a net food importer, and the world's most food-aid dependent continent. Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that Africa's rural people may well be better cushioned from food insecurity than the urban poor. Rural people can subsist on their own farm produce, but the urban poor² secure food by buying it with their precarious daily earnings from informal wage labour or petty daily trading.
- b. Africa's people with limited and uncertain purchasing power achieve food security and nutrition through the market. International food aid has grown in Africa as farmers have been urged for decades to farm cash instead of food crops. But such charitable supplies could dry up when donors face their own economic pressures (as with the pandemic). Future actions must therefore prioritise the following:
 - i. reversing the dismal reality of Africa with 18% of the world's population accounts for only 2-3% of global GDP and trade: this cannot continue;
 - ii. Africa must produce food surpluses and grow its economy rapidly enough for its increasingly urbanised people to access enough healthy food from markets; and
 - iii. by taking adequate early precautionary actions, Africa can avoid disruptive lockdowns which undermine the already weak earning capacity of its urban poor.

7. What fundamental changes are needed to make Africa's food systems an engine for inclusive growth and faster progress towards ending hunger and achieving food security?

- a. Most African countries gained political independence in the 1960s and were at that time, net agricultural exporters, including of food. Most countries reached net food importer status in the early 1980s due to rapid population growth as agricultural output stagnated or regressed due to poor policy incentives for production and productivity, limited technological upgrading of smallholder farmers, inadequate complementary food

² According to Onyango, in 1950, Africa's urban population share was 14%, but due to the world's fastest rate of urbanization during 1950-1970 (2.4% per annum), by 2014, its urban share had reached 40%; by 2050 it will be an estimated 56% [Amos Ouma Onyango (2018): **Global and Regional Trends of Urbanization: A Critical Review of the Environmental and Economic Imprints**. World Environment, 8(2): 47-62. p-ISSN: 2163-1573e-ISSN: 2163-15812018; Department of Geography, Moi University, Kenya

production by commercial farmers, and failure to create rewarding markets for agriculture. Future success requires reversal of all these.

8. How might COVID-19 facilitate or complicate implementation of needed food system changes?

- a. The introductory section “Poverty as Top Killer” noted the dramatic and extremely rapid adverse impacts of Covid-19 on food security and nutrition, especially in Africa’s cities. Its main lessons for the future might be:
 - i. Lockdowns are so destructive of livelihoods for many predominantly poor segments of society that they should only be adopted as a last resort after early precautionary measures have failed. Whether to apply lockdowns only for those with higher incomes can be decided on a case by case basis.
 - ii. There is a strong case for universal basic income for all the poor, but most discussions of UBI are really only national in scope. Relief measures for the vulnerable should kick in automatically in any emergency;

9. What knowledge and data gaps need to be filled for better analysing current successes and failures?

- a. In UN and other food and agriculture bodies as well as in countries, there is no shortage of diagnoses and analyses of food insecurity and malnutrition and how to reverse them; it serves little purpose to reiterate them.
- b. But there is a shortage of analysis of how quickly urban food insecurity develops in developing countries which are normally considered better off. Analysis is needed for affordable universal social protection for the unemployed, petty business and casual labour.

10. What partnerships and initiatives are needed to harness synergies and/or reduce trade-offs in food systems?

- a. It seems best not to seek universal suggestions: every country has distinct features and what partnerships work best are quite specific, taking into account the very unequal power relations in many countries, perhaps especially in Africa.

¹Source: Gary S. Fields (2011). Poverty and Low Earnings in the Developing World. Working Paper 7-2011, July, Cornell University Industrial and Labor Relations School, Ithaca, NY.