



# Food insecurity during COVID-19 in Cameroon: factors and adaptation strategies

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## **Background**

COVID-19, which has now become a global scourge, has not only affected people's health and health systems but has also disrupted the global economy. As a result, it has increased the vulnerability of economically marginalized populations, which has manifested itself in increased food insecurity. The COVID-19 epidemic led to the implementation of containment and social distancing measures to curb the spread of infection. As a result, these measures hampered the movement of farmers, agricultural inputs, and food products, disrupting food supply chains around the world in general and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, and affecting the availability, price, and quality of foodstuffs.

In Cameroon, numerous preventive measures were taken by the Government on 18 March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19, the first case of which was declared on 6 March 2020. These measures consisted of the compulsory wearing of masks, hand washing, social distancing rules, the limitation of all public gatherings of more than 50 people, the closure of public and public schools, the closure of land, air, and sea borders, the limitation of certain commercial activities (closure of bars, restaurants, and large shops with large numbers of people from 06:00 PM) and the setting up of a solidarity fund to deal with the pandemic (Foka et al., 2020).

This crisis has exacerbated an already precarious food situation in Cameroon. In normal times, food insecurity affected 12.8% of the population in 2019. In the context of COVID-19, this food insecurity rate increased significantly to 20.4% in 2020, due to disruptions in food production and supply chains, rising food prices, movement restrictions, and the economic slowdown (MINADER, 2020).

Policies have previously been implemented to mitigate food insecurity in Cameroon, including agricultural and fisheries support programs, the creation of emergency food reserves, and the importation of basic foodstuffs. However, these policies have proved insufficient in the face of the current crisis caused by COVID-19.

Although preliminary research in Cameroon clearly indicates that the pandemic has an impact on people's access to food during the COVID-19 period (Tambe et al., 2021; Mvodo, 2021; Foka et al., 2020; Suh et al., 2023), our knowledge, no study has examined both the factors that explain household food insecurity in Cameroon during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the effects of coping strategies adopted by households to deal with COVID-19-related shocks on the food insecurity index.

## The problem

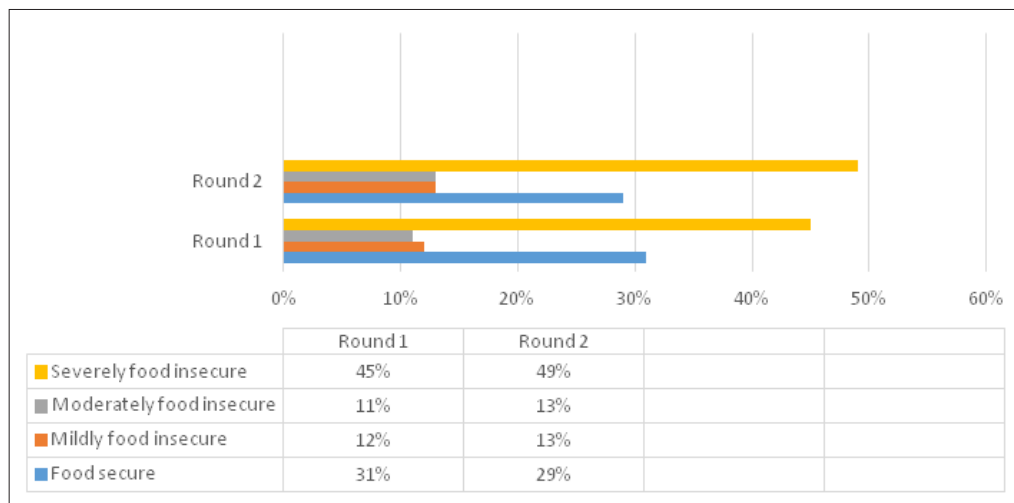
Despite the introduction of agricultural policies, social safety net programmes, investment in agricultural infrastructure, and support measures for small farmers, the country continues to face high levels of food insecurity. Agricultural policies have been hampered by corruption, mismanagement of resources, and lack of monitoring and evaluation, leading to mixed results. Social safety net programmes have faced problems of exclusion and lack of transparency in the distribution of aid. Investment in agricultural infrastructure has been delayed and poorly maintained, limiting its impact on the food supply chain. Support measures for small-scale farmers have encountered obstacles such as lack of access to credit and appropriate training. These failures in the implementation of previous policies have serious consequences for the health, well-being, and socio-economic stability of the most vulnerable populations. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze the trajectory of household food insecurity in Cameroon, in order to better understand the factors and coping strategies that

enable households to maintain or improve their food security over time. This may be useful for guiding policies and programmes aimed at reducing food insecurity and strengthening household resilience to shocks and crises. To this end, we used data from a two-round telephone survey of Cameroonian households. In the first round of the survey, 2680 households were interviewed between 1 and 28 February 2021. In the second round, 1861 households from the first round were interviewed between 21 June and 21 July 2021. Using these data, several factors can be identified: (i) the characteristics of the household, including the age of the head of household, the size of the household, the sector of activity of the head of household, insurance, and mutual insurance, access to the internet, area of residence (ii) shocks can be a loss of income, the death of a household member, loss of employment, an increase in the price of inputs, an increase in the price of food consumed. Households may also use a variety of coping strategies, such as savings, stored food, borrowing, government and NGO assistance, remittances, and loans.

## Research results

Figure 1 shows that 31% and 29% of households are food secure in round 1 and round 2 respectively. While 45% and 49% of the households reported going through severe food insecurity in round 1 and round 2 respectively. These figures show that a significant proportion of households in Cameroon did not have regular and reliable access to adequate food.

**Figure 1: Food insecurity status in Round 1 and Round 2**



Overall, socio-economic instability and lack of access to essential resources were identified as major determinants of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cameroon.

Internet access has been identified as a key factor in reducing food insecurity. The internet offers a wide range of employment opportunities, education, and information sources that can help to alleviate food insecurity. Households headed by someone employed in the formal sector (public or private) appear to be less affected by food insecurity. This may be due to a more stable and potentially higher income than those working in the informal sector. Households in regions affected by armed conflict are more food insecure. The violence and instability resulting from these conflicts can disrupt access to food and livelihoods. On the other hand, people living in refugee areas are associated with an increase in food security or a decrease in severe food insecurity, as are people living in refugee and internally displaced person areas. Humanitarian agencies and international organisations such as the UNHCR often provide food to people living in refugee areas.

Factors contributing to socio-economic shocks that increase food insecurity include the following: the loss of a household member can lead to a reduction in the financial and material resources available to meet the food needs of the rest of the family. If a household member is financially dependent on a deceased benefactor, this can lead to economic instability and increased food insecurity. When an active member of the household falls ill, this can lead to a loss of income and a financial imbalance, making it difficult for the whole household to access adequate food. If one or more members of the household lose their jobs, this can lead to a drop in income and an inability to meet basic food needs. If a family business goes bankrupt, this can affect the household's source of income, leading to food insecurity. Theft of crops or livestock can cause significant financial loss for farmers and livestock breeders, which can lead to difficulties in obtaining food and giving up the business. If farmers do not have sufficient labour to help them with farm work, this can lead to a drop in food production, increasing food insecurity.

Insect invasions can destroy crops, reducing yields and food supply in affected regions. Rising prices for agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, or pesticides can make food production more expensive and affect farmers, potentially leading to food insecurity. When food prices rise, low-income households may find it difficult to afford enough food, contributing to food insecurity. If farmers cannot sell their produce at a fair and profitable price, this can lead to economic hardship, particularly in terms of access to adequate food. The restriction and containment measures put in place to combat COVID-19 have led to the loss of jobs in many sectors, which has a significant impact on access to food for many households.

## Policy recommendations

By analysing the factors and adaptation strategies mentioned, here are some economic policy recommendations that we can formulate in our policy brief for the government of Cameroon:

**Strengthen internet access:** Given that internet access has been identified as a key factor in reducing food insecurity, the government should invest in expanding internet infrastructure and connectivity, particularly in rural areas. This will facilitate access to employment, education and information opportunities for households, thereby helping to reduce food insecurity.

**Support the formal employment sector:** Given that households headed by people working in the formal sector are less likely to face food insecurity, the government should put in place policies and programmes to promote the creation of formal employment. This could include tax incentives for businesses, vocational training and improved access to credit for small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Strengthening security in areas of armed conflict:** As households living in areas affected by armed conflict face increased food insecurity, the government should increase security and stabilisation efforts in these areas. This will help to reduce disruption to agricultural activities, ensure food security, and facilitate humanitarian access.

**Strengthen insurance and social protection mechanisms:** Given that insurance and direct cash transfers have been identified as effective coping strategies, the government should promote the establishment of agricultural insurance mechanisms accessible to farmers, as well as social protection systems that support vulnerable households in the event of food insecurity.

**Promote investment in agriculture:** Given that poor harvests due to labour shortages and rising prices for agricultural inputs are contributing to food insecurity, the government should encourage investment in the agricultural sector. This can include subsidies to farmers, improving access to agricultural credit, providing technical training, and promoting sustainable farming practices.

**Strengthen food security systems:** The government should strengthen existing food security systems, such as food security programmes and food distribution initiatives, in collaboration with international organisations and civil society actors. It is essential to ensure that these systems effectively reach the most vulnerable populations and to promote the availability and accessibility of safe and nutritious food.

By implementing these recommendations, the Government of Cameroon could contribute to alleviating food insecurity and strengthening household resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to recognise that these recommendations require cross-sectoral coordination, adequate resources and political will to be implemented effectively, and sustainably.

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