POLICY BRIEF

Addressing the Drivers of Food Security in Zambia During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The context

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been growing concerns about the impact of the pandemic on household food security (Nguyen et al., 2021; Cable et al., 2021; and Paslakis et al., 2020). The disruptions caused by the pandemic have the potential to influence all the 'four pillars' of food security, including availability, access, utilisation, and stability (Laborde et al., 2020). In Zambia, where the food security situation was already on the decline even before the pandemic (Finn and Zadel, 2020), national and household food security and nutrition were expected to be negatively impacted by the pandemic, primarily

through the loss or reduction of household income and disruption of supply chains due to movement restrictions within and across countries (Mofya-Mukuka et al., 2020; GRZb, 2020).

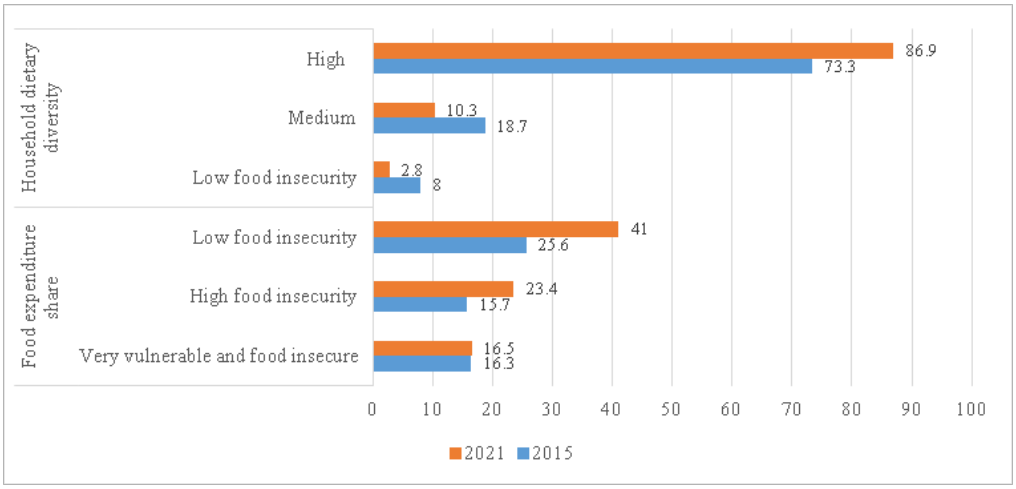
The problem

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been growing concerns about the impact of the pandemic on household food security (Nguyen et al., 2021; Cable et al., 2021; and Paslakis et al., 2020). Available studies show that economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affect members of the society, depending on factors such as socio-economic status, livelihood strategies, and access to markets. However, though informative, these studies tend to be based on small sample sizes, limited geographical coverage or both, and thus less useful for informing the design of effective recovery strategies that lead to more resilient national food systems (Bene et al. 2021). As a contribution to addressing this information gap, this paper investigated changes in household food security and its drivers in Zambia between the pre-pandemic and COVID-19 periods, with the objective of identifying significant drivers of food security and understand how they changed during the pandemic.

Key findings

The study utilised nationally representative data from the Living Conditions Monitoring Survey (2015) and the COVID-19 Socio-economic Impact Assessment (2021), while regression analysis techniques are used for data analysis. The results reveal a significant increase in the food expenditure share during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period, indicating a decline in food security from an economic vulnerability perspective. Surprisingly, HDDS experienced a notable increase during the pandemic, suggesting improved food security in terms of food quality (Figure 1). One plausible explanation for the enhanced food quality is that households might have sustained their food consumption by reducing non-food expenditures or financing food consumption through savings or debt acquisition. This implies that over time, the HDDS indicator might have deteriorated if the lockdown measures had persisted. This finding also underscores the limitation associated with HDDS as a food security indicator during emergencies, emphasising the need to use more sensitive indicators.

Figure 1: Changes in household food security indicators between 2015 and 2021



Regarding the drivers of food insecurity and how they changed between the two periods, the findings indicate that the determinants of household food security remained largely the same before and after the pandemic, albeit with varying magnitudes of effects. Notably, factors such as age and gender of the household head were not statistically significant in any food expenditure share category during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the region of residence, tertiary education level, and wealth consistently exhibited significance. The study revealed that the protective effects of gender and age of the household head, as well as household size, diminished during the COVID-19 pandemic. Education played a significant role in food security outcomes before and during the pandemic, with households headed by individuals with primary or secondary education being less likely to experience food insecurity. However, the protective effects of education waned during the pandemic.

Marital status and region of residence also played notable roles in food security outcomes. Although residing in rural areas was associated with increased vulnerability to food insecurity both before and during the pandemic relative to urban areas, the protective effects of urban residence declined during the pandemic. This confirms earlier predictions that anticipated the concentration of pandemic-induced poverty and food insecurity in urban areas, owing to possible disruptions in food value chains and the impact of containment measures.

Wealthier households were more likely to maintain food security during the pandemic, underscoring the importance of inclusive economic growth and reduction of wealth disparities. The findings also highlight the protective role of wage employment in preventing food insecurity, although this effect weakened during the pandemic due to reduced incomes resulting from lockdowns. It is worth noting that non-wage workers may have faced more severe income losses due to the fact that they could not work

from home and be paid. Additionally, the educational attainment of the household head, which was a relevant factor before the pandemic, saw its protective effects diminish during the COVID-19 crisis, with only higher or postgraduate education remaining relevant, especially concerning households classified as having low food insecurity, a factor attributed to the fact that majority of the lowly educated persons tend to work in the informal sector and therefore could not get paid during lockdown.
Implications for policy

The findings also underscore the significant impact of reduced income due to COVID-19 related lockdowns on food security outcomes, emphasising the need for policies that strengthen social protection programmes, ensuring access to affordable and diverse food.

This underscores the vulnerability of non-wage workers and those with lower educational levels during crises such as the pandemic, necessitating government interventions during such crises with interventions such as targeted cash transfers to protect these groups.

The increased vulnerability during the pandemic among those households that depends on markets for food supplies highlights the need for investments in agricultural value chains, infrastructure, and market integration which are all crucial for promoting self-sufficiency and resilience in food production. Additionally, promoting nutrition education and awareness campaigns can enhance dietary diversity and improve health outcomes.

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