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The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Food Security in Ethiopia

By

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Introduction

This article is meant for drawing the attention of the government, policymakers, and researchers to the food security situations in Ethiopia along and after the COVID-19 pandemic tunnel. Ethiopia is a country with a total population of more than 110 million, of which about 80% of the total population is engaged in subsistence farming in rural areas (CSA 2017). Poverty and food insecurity are still significant challenges in Ethiopia. The causes of food insecurity are multiple and varied, including, but not limited to, extreme weather conditions, environmental degradations, population pressure, less but improving government dedication, and policy drawbacks. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic might aggravate the already-precarious food security situations, both along and at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fact that COVID-19 spreads (according to WHO's series of briefings) primarily through coughing/sneezing and touching of the virus-infected surfaces makes the disease so dangerous for the people to engage in daily livelihoods activities. This

shows that COVID-19 spreads so quickly, unlike the other previous pandemics (such as HIV/AIDS), making the economic activities so challenging at international, national, and local levels. Hence, poor economic performance could be an outcome of the pandemic (in addition to other adverse impacts) as it impacts almost every single business and individual, which in turn aggravates the existing poverty and food insecurity situations of the country.

As noted by FAO (<http://www.fao.org/news/story/en>), our most vulnerable communities may face ‘a crisis within a crisis’ owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ethiopia, whose medical system is under-resourced and the economy is subsistence, the health crisis of the people may be compounded by ‘lost livelihoods and hunger crisis’ unless concerned government organizations and individuals implement the pandemic protection guideline most immediately and adequately.

COVID-19 Outbreak: Global and Ethiopian Overviews

The emergence of coronavirus was reported on 31 December 2019 in Wuhan Town, Hubei Province, China (Guo *et al.* 2020). Ever since China’s first case report to the World Health Organization (WHO), the COVID-19 outbreak has grown into a pandemic. Though China is the first country to suffer from the pandemic, global humanity is currently suffering together with this global public health crisis. New infections are spreading at an unprecedented rate, and deaths have been recorded in many different countries by a minute. According to the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) report, on 20 April 2020, there are more than 2.4 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 210 countries/territories and about 166,000 subsequent deaths. COVID-19 continues to ravage not only health systems but also the countries’ socio-economic and cultural establishments.

Ethiopia has started the COVID-19 outbreak with imported cases. On 20 April 2020, there were 111 confirmed cases in Ethiopia, of which three died of the virus. Most of the confirmed cases and the deceased came from outside Ethiopia. Ethiopia reported the first confirmed COVID-19 case on 13 March 2020. The person found positive was a 48-year-old Japanese citizen who came to Ethiopia from Burkina Faso in early March 2020. The first COVID-induced death took place in Ethiopia on 5 April 2020. A 60-year-old woman died of the virus who was in treatment at a hospital since 31 March 2020.

Many fear that the socioeconomic and cultural scenarios in Ethiopia may exacerbate the prevalence of COVID-19 in the country though the government is trying its level

best to manage the situation. The greeting habits (such as handshaking, kissing chicks and hugging), overcrowding in public transportation and market places, congested living rooms, and unfavorable workplaces are feared to worsening the situation in Ethiopia. Moreover, *chat/khat* chewing traditions, cultural coffee, and meal gatherings, group-based *shisha* smoking, crowds of street vendors, and religious congregations are feared to contribute to the spread of the virus, particularly in urban areas. In addition to these, traditional collective farming and

harvesting practices (such as *dabo* and *walfala*) are through which the virus may spread in rural areas unless proper and strict awareness creation measures are taken.

Currently, almost all business enterprises, education institutions, informal and subsistence businesses, and government offices are profoundly impacted by the pandemic. The majority of the existing about 7.5 million employees (work force) in government offices, NGOs, international organizations and private companies are forced to ‘*stay home or work from home*’ in Ethiopia. Most persons working in several informal sectors (such as street vending, manufacturing, construction, mining/quarrying, wholesale and retail trade) are impacted. These predicaments, no doubt, exacerbate the socioeconomic and food insecurity problems in the country, calling for wide-ranging thorough planning and proper management to buffer the challenges.

How COVID-19 Impacts Food Security in Ethiopia?

According to FAO (<http://www.fao.org/news/story/en>), even before COVID-19 hit, 113 million people on the planet were already struggling with severe acute food insecurity due to pre-existing shocks/crises of different types such as extreme weather conditions, conflicts, displacements, natural calamities, environmental degradation and reluctance of some governments to enhance the agricultural sector and the peoples’ livelihoods.

This means the aforementioned size of the people in the world were already on the extreme end of the hunger spectrum-weak, and less well-equipped to fend off the virus. Similarly, Ethiopia is already one of the most food-insecure countries in the world though it has made remarkable development gains over the past two decades in reducing poverty and expanding investments in essential social services. As per the 2020 Humanitarian Development Plan (HRP), an estimated 8 million people require food assistance in Ethiopia. This figure includes internally displaced

persons (IDPs), who have had to leave their homes due to unrest or natural shocks (OCHA, 2020).

Cognizant of this fact, the government of Ethiopia, together with donor organizations, formulated National Food Security Strategy (NFSS) in 1996 and has been implementing the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), both in urban and rural areas. The target was to significantly reduce the number of food-insecure people in the country though the progress isn't substantial. COVID-19 pandemic is

feared to be a burden on the existing precarious food security situation in Ethiopia since it may adversely impact investments, job opportunities and livelihoods in/around urban areas as well as the production, input supply and marketing of the agricultural system.

Data from the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC) shows that investment has created job opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians over the last two decades. FDI inflows to Ethiopia have accelerated since the late years of the 1990s and recorded US\$ 4 billion in 2017. Ethiopia maintained its top rank in East Africa, with the total FDI stock of over US\$22.25 billion. The primary investing countries are Saudi Arabia, China, the USA, India, Turkey, and South Korea. Most foreign direct investment (FDI) is mainly coming from China.

Between 03 April 2018 and 22 August 2019 alone, for example, Ethiopia managed to attract about 237 investment projects (with an investment amount of approximately US\$711 million) from China between 03 April 2018 and 22 August 2019. Of these, 54 projects are already operational, investing about US\$39 million and creating job opportunities for over 12,000 Ethiopians. The projects will provide job opportunities for about 71,000 Ethiopians when fully operational. The COVID-19 pandemic may result in enormous job cuts among these projects to mitigate the spread of the virus through the reduction of workers' crowds and social/physical distancing. The job cuts may also be because of lack of markets for the outputs of the investment projects (such as cut flowers, textiles, footwears, minerals, and agricultural products) as most importing markets (such as China, EU, the Middle East, South Korea, Japan, and USA) are severely hit by the pandemic and may face an economic downturn.

Economists have already projected that the pandemic may cause the greatest economic downturn next to the great global economic depression in the 1930s. Presently, the National Planning Commission (NPC) of Ethiopia is forecasting the Ethiopian economy to be slowing down by 2.8% to 3.8% due to the pandemic.

Generally, the overall result of the COVID-induced economic depression and job cuts among the investment projects may exacerbate extreme poverty and food insecurity.

Another critical area of livelihoods and food security challenges along the COVID-19 pandemic tunnel is related to informal sector workers, including temporary jobs such as street vending, petty trade, lottery selling, shoes-shinning, assisting taxi drivers and other similar activities. Several sources indicate that during the last few

decades, the informal sector has been growing fast in urban areas of Ethiopia due to the influx of many young populations into the sector who comes from rural areas of the country with the expectation of a better life in cities/towns. The sector is believed to play an important role in food security. It provides jobs, reduces unemployment, bolsters economic activity, and helps alleviate poverty. According to the data obtained from the National Planning Commission (NPC), informal sector practitioners in Ethiopia are estimated at about 1.4 million, the vast majority of them living in urban areas. The majority of them, are assumed to be living on daily subsistence income. This group of people is at risk of COVID-19 infestation in that they work in crowds and almost impossible to maintain the social/physical distancing precaution set by WHO. It seems that it is nearly equally challenging for this group of people to stay home or work outside for their daily subsistence. They may have nothing to eat for themselves and their children if they stay home and may contract the virus if to work outside. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic may push several millions of informal sector practitioner Ethiopians into acute poverty and food insecurity if the country is lockdown owing to the pandemic.

On the other hand, the country's economy doesn't allow the government to fulfill the subsistence of the existing substantial informal sector practitioners amidst the lockdown. Hence, proper options seem to be strong voluntary individual-government-collaboration (IGC) in which the well-off households may be able to support some unfortunate victims on a daily basis during the contagion. Another supportive key option may be organizing food banks (already started by the Addis Ababa City Administration) in cities where the sources could be companies, NGOs/development partners, embassies, well-off individuals, government/private employees, and the farmers. Schools, colleges, and universities could be used as food storage, cooking, and feeding places. Task forces of different levels (national to *kebele* level) are required to accomplish as a scheme, starting from proper selection of the actual victims, collection of resources, cooking, and setting up the feeding spaces. Nepotisms may be emerging concerns that should be taken care of at this juncture.

Agriculture (the mainstay of the country's economy) is another key sector that may be severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in Ethiopia. If the virus spreads to rural areas, it may severely affect the farm workforce hindering production, harvesting, and marketing processes. The general population infection rate may remain relatively low as compared to urban cases. The sparse settlement in rural areas may slow down the spread, unless the farmers contracted the virus and spread it through

market places, religious/cultural events, and group-based working traditions such as *debo* and *walfala*. Notably, market places may be the main point of spread.

If the worst comes, the spread of the virus may end up in sickness and/or death of the farm workforce, making them out of the farm work. Mainly, the elderly workforces are at high-risk level, as data from other countries that have done more extensive testing suggest that COVID-19 has a much higher level of severity for those in their 60s and older. If they become ill or constrained by restrictions on movement or activity, they will be prevented from working their land, caring for their animals, or accessing markets to sell their produce, buy food, or get seeds and supplies. Hence, the spread of the pandemic to rural areas may reduce agricultural output, which in turn, worsens the food scarcity situation in the country. This indicates that preventive and protective recommendations from health experts are critical for our farming population. Hence, a wide-ranging awareness creation work should be carried out to safeguard the farmers.

The rural-urban supply chain slowdown and shortage of agricultural outputs in urban areas are among the feared outcome of the COVID-19 plague in Ethiopia. If transportation is disrupted to slow down the spread of the virus, multiple connected industry sectors may be impacted. As an example of supply chain interruptions on farms, milk collection from smallholders may be hampered and in short supply for dairy processors in cities. In the same way, urban consumers' association may be challenged by interruption of supplies of key agricultural outputs (such as cereals, fruits, and vegetables), leading to scarcity of the products in urban markets. Hence, a comprehensive and well-thought-out planning is essential to buffer the impact of unforeseen events.

Recommendations for social/physical distancing, reduced travel, avoiding crowds, closures, and other protective practices to slow down the spread of COVID-19 may force the urban consumers to make tough choices about food, eating away from home, and overall spending. This may lead to some disruptions in foodservice sales, particularly dairy products, fruits, and vegetables. This will likely hurt market chains

and prices. Concerns about the impact of the virus on the broader economy are likely to have an even more significant impact on the prices of agricultural outputs. Similar to many countries and economic blocks such as China, the EU, and the USA, Ethiopia may experience slower economic growth owing to the pandemic. This may worsen the already precarious food security situation of the country.

The food insecurity impact of COVID-19 may go even beyond the pandemic period if the poor and riskier people are not supported at least to access food. These people

do have very little fall back materially. As noted by FAO (<http://www.fao.org>), they could find themselves forced to abandon their livelihoods. They might have to sell off their assets, animals, or their fishing boat for cash during/after the pandemic to buy food. Farming households may eat all of their seeds instead of saving some to replant, and once a rural farming family does that, getting to be self-reliant again becomes extremely difficult. Some victims might even have no other choices than to leave their homes/businesses and also subjected to trafficking, in search of subsistence elsewhere.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Food security refers to having physical and economic access to food that meets both their nutritional needs and food preferences. Today, Ethiopia faces high levels of food insecurity, ranking as one of the hungriest countries in the world, with millions of people needing food assistance. Ethiopia ranked 97th in the world in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) in 2019. The livelihood of most Ethiopians depends on agriculture, the most significant contributor to GDP and economic growth. An adverse incident in weather conditions, farmers' health, and status of pest profoundly impact on the agricultural outputs as Ethiopian agriculture is incredibly sensitive to the shifts these conditions.

The current COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, may severely impact agriculture and, in fact, most other economic sectors in Ethiopia. The ongoing critical suggestions to fight the pandemic (such as social/physical distancing, reduced travel, avoiding crowds, closures, and other protective practices) may adversely affect almost all the sectors. Therefore, in light of this brief discussion, the following suggestions are forwarded to mitigate the possible food insecurity challenges along and at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic tunnel.

Compared to its origin (China), the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Ethiopia is different, as Ethiopia starts with imported cases. Hence, the containment strategy to

fight against the disease could be different. Currently, it seems riskier and more inappropriate for Ethiopia to shut down economic activities externally and internally completely. This is mainly for the reason that mass community transmission of the COVID-19 has not happened in Ethiopia yet as the most confirmed cases (until April 17, 2020) are mainly from travelers coming from outside according to information released by the Ministry of Health (MoH). For another, Ethiopia relies mostly on imports. A severe lockdown of economic activities might imply the risk of social

unrest as people's livelihoods and food security could be significantly affected. This could, in return, hinders the efforts on fighting the COVID-19.

Protection (not patient treatment) of the COVID-19 pandemic is a wise approach and more realistic disaster risk management for Ethiopia to save lives as well as to protect the economy from severe depression. This is because Ethiopia is an impoverished country with severe scarcity of medical professionals and related equipment (such as ventilators and masks) to treat the infected patients properly. All sorts of prevention measures (except complete closure) seem vital for Ethiopia to prevent the pandemic. These include (as recommended by WHO and endorsed by the Ethiopian government) social/physical distancing, reduced travel, and avoiding any form of crowds to prevent the spread of the virus. The recommended measures must be strictly enforced. Specific to the farming community, the farmers must be suspended from going to urban areas (unless to sell/buy essential products) and refrain from group-based farming/harvesting practices in addition to other protection recommendations. While supplying their produces and/or buying commodities/services, they must be strongly and frequently advised (most importantly through rural development agents and health extension workers) to strictly follow the general COVID-19 protection recommendations: proper and frequent hand washing, physical/social distancing, avoiding crowds and other measures as well as using masks whenever they go to market or other gatherings

COVID-19 pandemic more severely impacts the lives, livelihoods, and food security situations of impoverished people, petty street vendors, daily wage earners, homeless street persons, temporary migrant workers, and beggars. Most of this group of people 'cannot *work from home*' or cannot '*stay home*.' They have only two worst choices: (1) to go out for their daily subsistence amid the virus or (2) die of hunger at home. Rationally speaking, they may not take the first option. It may be very challenging to keep these people at home as they may riot to the streets or may engage in some criminal acts to access food. The recent stampede among the crowds of hungry

people surging for food aid in the Kibera slum of Nairobi (10 April 2020) and the food protest in Cape Town and Mumbai (14 April 2020) is distressing examples.

This shows that thorough preparations must be in place to safeguard the group of people who may immediately suffer from COVID-19 restrictions from making a living. Scaling up of the ‘*Food Bank*’ to all cities/towns (already started by Addis Ababa City Administration) seems a brilliant option in this regard. The sources for the food bank may be government treasury, individuals, employees of the government organizations and private companies, business organizations,

NGOs/CSOs, embassies, and well-off farmers. The government and the media are required to aware and encourage the cash/food donors for the food bank to help the fight the double burden on the poor during this unfortunate time. The cooking and feeding place could be schools, colleges, and universities were only thoroughly selected double-burden victims are allowed to access food. Another important option is to encourage individual households to support at least one person/household to be able to obtain adequate meals per day during these evil days.

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