

PDA Covid-19 Series Vol.1 No.5

# COVID-19;

## A THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY IN GHANA?

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BY: LUCY OFORI-DAVIS

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By: Lucy Ofori-Davis

Graphics by: Gaddiel Mensah Yamoah

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(c) 2020 Participatory Development Associates

No. 30, Asafoatse Oman Street, Kokomlemle

Accra.

**Email:** [info@pdaghana.com](mailto:info@pdaghana.com)

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Undoubtedly, the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues to prompt fears of insecurity within and across countries. Though the virus has left no part of the world untouched, its impact will greatly be felt particularly in developing countries and in economies whose food needs are largely dependent on supplies from other countries amidst closure of borders and travel restrictions. In addressing the issue on global food security in the wake of this pandemic, the [UNFAO](#) noted in a report that border closures, quarantines, and market supply chain and trade disruptions could restrict peoples' access to sufficient/diverse and nutritious sources of food especially in countries hit hard by the virus or already affected by high levels of food insecurity. Owing to this, it further advised that though there is enough food globally now, policymakers around the world need to be careful not to turn this health crisis into an avoidable food crisis as was the mistakes made during the [2007-08 food crisis](#).

Food security is a complex interplay of food availability, food accessibility, food stability and food utilization. In Ghana, an estimated 5% of the population are food insecure. Though Ghana has made impressive progress towards the international hunger targets as the agriculture sector growth increased from [2.9% in 2016 to 6.1% in 2017](#), the major identified cause of food insecurity – [post-harvest losses](#)– remains a challenge. The agricultural sector dominates Ghana's economy, engaging approximately [52% of Ghanaians](#) both directly and indirectly. An agrarian economy like Ghana's whose agriculture sector provides about [90% of the food](#) needs of the country can still produce food albeit disruptions in the global supply of goods and services. What cannot be said is whether this domestic supply can be sustained should the pandemic last longer than expected. Though food supply has not yet been affected (at least from the buyer's lens), the impact on the food security systems – panic buying, food price hikes- is glaring. Days before the partial lockdown and even after, in a bid to see out the future, consumers rushed for more food items than they would normally have. The interaction of demand and supply coupled with an alleged increase in prices at the production side, also saw market folks charging higher than usual for their locally produced wares.

What then can be said of those involved in the sale of imported food products? It is almost certain that the prices of imported food items will be hiked as well particularly now that export-import disruptions are leading to slowdowns in global supply chains. If the slowdown continues, goods are more likely to be hoarded, creating an artificial shortage and later charging exorbitant prices for them.

Notwithstanding Ghana's ability to produce more of what she eats; the agriculture sector is faced with several challenges including low yields over a long period. Fluctuations in annual food yield have also been attributed to the dependence on rain-fed farming, variations in rainfall patterns and magnitude, outdated methods of farming and post-harvest losses. Past and present governments have adopted several policies and strategies in an attempt to mitigate the effect of this problem on food supply. Recently, the [Planting for Food and Jobs](#) and [Rearing for Food and Jobs](#) were implemented to shore up household food supply and the excess fed to industries. In all of this however, the country's food imports accounted for about [20% of merchandise imports](#) in 2018. This is to say that despite the country's somewhat sufficiency in food, any prolonged closure of borders to prevent the vertical transmission of the coronavirus may pose concerns for food security since the importation of supplementary food to augment local supply may be affected.

On the demand side, Amartya Sen, a development economist once noted that the presence of disease kills and so does the absence of livelihood. People in Ghana have seen their livelihoods shattered by a partial lockdown, restrictions in movement, downsizing of employee size, pay-cuts, the collapse of tourism, and an almost end to remittances received from family and friends abroad as the virus continues to rob the world of the usual social briskness that keeps companies and businesses running. What then happens to the affordability aspect of food security, when food prices have increased from source and not much can be done about it because more food has gone waste previously? What happens to the man who might be faced with a fall in his purchasing power because of food price hikes and disruption to his source of livelihood?

A looming food crisis – one of availability or affordability, or both- is imminent unless measures are taken to protect the most vulnerable, keep food supply chains alive and lessen the impacts of the pandemic across the food system. We might other than that, find ourselves revisiting 1983 when an extended drought from 1980 led to famine in Ghana. During that time, sellers hoarded their produce and sold them at higher than normal prices. There was a change in social attitude where people did not want to share their food, a behavior that hitherto was not Ghanaian. While the [food shortage](#) could have (partially) been addressed through food imports, this was not possible as the country was in the middle of severe political and economic turmoil. Similarly, the coronavirus pandemic seems to be having the same effect as people and households hoard food and those who are unable to afford much, ration their food in order to manage their limited supplies (stock). Even if the country wants to import food, the closure of borders and ports would affect the rate of importation.

Having established that food supply, for now, should not be much of a problem, the obvious question now is the country's readiness to keep up with the demand for food and the expected rise in demand. Food processing is still very underdeveloped, with less than 200 agro-processing firms registered and certified to operate by the Food and Drugs Authority (FDA). The local food processing industry accounts for [less than 20%](#) of all sourced processed foods to satisfy growing demand.

The consequences associated with COVID-19 may prove more deadly than the virus itself. For the poorest, it could be starvation and not just hunger. Some questions for reflection remain: could the panic buying and soar in food prices be signaling a looming food crisis? That our food supply could be in trouble should the pandemic prolong? Ghana is sitting on a time bomb that could result in a situation like was experienced some 37 years ago? That food insecurity, predominantly a rural problem is going to be a national one if the spread of the virus persists?

David Beasley explained: “we could talk of the 1918 flu and famine as events of the past, however, this new coronavirus has smashed that illusion of safety and security and proved beyond a doubt that pandemics are a present and mortal threat to all of us. We should, therefore, brace ourselves now for another pandemic, the hunger pandemic that may follow, sowing the seeds of famine in its wake.”

In light of this pandemic, it is only rational to ask how the dimensions of food security, that is availability, accessibility, affordability, and utilization of food is being and would be affected. Is it possible then to process more food locally now, as a way of storing it up to meet demand in the future; even at a price affordable to the poor? This means paying more attention to reducing post-harvest losses, revamping the food processing industry, as well as establishing more food processing companies, not just to ensure constant food supply but also create jobs and increase economic activity. This period should be one of reflection for our leaders in better managing food inventories even in the period after the pandemic. It presents an opportunity to revisit policies, harness the possibilities in the agriculture sector, and innovate the food processing industry. For the citizens, I guess moving forward, we need not be told any more to love our own and patronize made in Ghana goods.