

Highlights of the learning ideas of IDRC's COVID-19 and Food systems initiatives



I. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic was first and foremost a public health crisis, but ripples of its impact were felt across all modern human systems, most notably food systems. This brief learning report examines lessons from experience that can be used to increase resilience to future systemic shocks, which are expected to become more frequent.

The insights that emerged from research on COVID-19 and food systems are organized into three categories according to their purposes: the first aimed at documenting impacts of the pandemic on food systems; the second focused on analyzing responses to those impacts, including those led by states, aid organizations, local communities, and households; and a third seeking to inform long-term responses to enhance resilience.

Systems thinking and operational resilience were adopted as analytical frames within which data was analyzed and presented, drawing lessons for the international development community, including policy makers, funders, and researchers.

In addition to synthesizing the studies of responses made by the international organizations to COVID-19 and food systems, a rapid landscaping exercise was conducted on three different types of development organizations—Bilateral Donors, Multilaterals, and Foundations. The investments on COVID-19 and food systems made by a subset of actors from each of these categories were reviewed along two key dimensions: (1) *response type* and (2) *the agrifood value chain segment*.

Regarding responses, the three types are:

- **Rapid responses:** These are projects implemented to address immediate needs in the short-term. They were designed to address critical and urgent needs in a timely manner. (e.g., data gaps on the impact of the pandemic on food systems).

- **Strategic recovery responses:** These are projects with a medium- to long-term time frame that focus on mitigating the negative impacts of the shock (e.g., research into the efficacy of various interventions and measures to maintain food security). Descriptions of responses reference use of knowledge and evidence to inform decision-making now and for future shocks.
- **Systemic resilience responses:** These are explicit mechanisms for continuous learning and adaptation to shifts occurring in the system, including listening and feedback loops. Description of responses reference their approach to transformation and interacting with dynamic systems.

These responses were done in the segments of the *agrifood value chain*. It distinguishes the segments of upstream, midstream, and downstream, providing insight related to investment targets along the value chain. The segments are defined as:

Upstream

includes all aspects of production—the physical act of farming as well as the procurement of inputs and equipment.

Midstream

is when produce crosses the farm-gate, which involves a variety of business-to-business (B2B) transactions of food trading, sometimes as a raw product (e.g., processors, packagers), others as an intermediary (e.g., wholesalers, distributors).

Downstream

is the point at which a person purchases the food for consumption in a business-to-consumer (B2C) transaction, such as those that happen at shops and restaurants.

II. Impact of COVID–19 and Containment Measures on Food Systems Across the Value chain

This theme highlights important similarities that emerged regarding negative impacts of movement restrictions, knock-on effects from the upstream, and shifting competitiveness between local and global supply chains across the 19 projects that were examined.

These included food production and access to agricultural inputs, similarities regarding disrupted access to material inputs for production, labour, and access to land and fishing grounds as presented in the table below:

Table 1. Upstream Takeaways: Food production and access to agricultural inputs

Supply shocks affected access to agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers and seeds.	Labor shortages and restrictions reduced harvests and put jobs and livelihoods at risk.	Restrictions on movement negatively impacted producers' ability to access land parcels and fishing grounds.
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Table 2. Midstream Takeaways: Processors impacted by decreased production upstream

Curfews and restrictions to internal movement constrained marketing opportunities for food processors, complicating logistics related to food handling and distribution.	Processors were impacted by decreased production upstream which decreased activity and increased competition for employment.	COVID-19 containment measures altered competitiveness between locally oriented and globally oriented supply chains differently across countries.
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Table 3. Downstream Takeaways: markets and livelihoods

Market closures negatively affected food vendors and consumers, particularly those in the informal sector.	Measures including lockdowns, limiting movement, border closures, shutting down business and offices led to economic recessions which negatively impacted job security and livelihoods.	Containment worsened poverty and food insecurity levels.
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Table 4. Takeaways: Women and gender relations

The COVID-19 lockdowns reinforced and exacerbated gender inequities in the home in many instances, though not always.	Men staying home also had a negative impact on levels of domestic violence.
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III. How Efficacious were the Responses to Mitigate Food Systems Disruptions?

The theme on response measures examined findings related to the response measures adopted by state, and external aid actors as well as local communities and households to respond to the changing context of the pandemic to maintain food security and/or livelihoods. This included both identifying what measures were taken and, where possible, identifying their effects on value chain actors, women and gender relations and associated containment measures on women and power relations between men and women. It also examined adaptation measures taken by food systems actors to adapt to impacts

from COVID-19 and associated containment measures on mobility of goods, services, and labour across market segments and borders of different geographic scales. It further examined findings on the measures taken to adapt to market closures and inaccessibility of markets across segments, including for inputs, wholesalers, and downstream consumers. As markets and mobility were two of the most visibly impacted areas of food systems, commonalities emerged across all projects. The next set of tables generally speak to lack of targeted specific actor groups and the measures taken by households.

Table 5. Takeaways: Response measures

The response measures of governments were not well targeted toward the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups.	Producers and formal food system actors benefited from response to a greater degree than informal actors in mid- and downstream market segments.	Producers employed strategies including shifting production, relying on family labour, and receiving support from cooperatives and networks to cope with impacts.
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Table 6. Takeaways: Markets and Mobility

Closure of local food markets and movement restrictions had negative impacts on food security, forcing businesses and consumers to adapt.	Overall closing borders did not stop movement but increased its cost and danger.	Actors found ways around disruptions and restrictions on internal movement, though usually incurred higher costs to do so.
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Table 7. Takeaways: Women and Gender Relations

Measures undertaken by governments were poorly targeted toward women and as a result gender-neutral policies had gender biased impacts.	Women took more responsibility for the resilience of the household and adjusted their decisions and behaviors accordingly.	Gender-sensitive research can play a role in empowering women as they navigate the complex and dynamic conditions of a crisis.
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IV. Preparing for Future Food Systems Shocks

The research revealed several ways food systems could be better positioned to respond to future shocks, which are expected to increase in frequency due to climate change. Findings offered insights and options for longer-term actions that can be taken to support more effective shock responses in the future:

Table 8. Takeaways: Longer-term responses

Existing social protection systems are weak and need strengthening.	Resilient food systems require reconfiguring supply chains to be more diverse and shorter, and to have better infrastructure.	Networks and organizations that connect affected actors create support systems and can serve as channels to deliver information and aid.
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V. Conclusion

In general, this brief is about the project interventions sponsored by IDRC in response to covid-19 measures across the various segments of the food system value chain in Africa. These responses were categorised into rapid response measures, strategic recovery responses and system resilience responses. Most of these projects were carried by Bilateral Donors, Multilaterals, and Foundation within the context of the responses of governments, private sector and non-state actor in the various countries. The response measures of governments were not well targeted toward the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Producers and formal food system actors benefited from responses to a greater degree than informal actors in mid- and downstream market segments.

Producers employed strategies including shifting production, relying on family labor, and receiving support from cooperatives and networks to cope with impacts. The restrictions put in place to contain the pandemic forced households to adapt to reduce spending and find new sources of money.

The greatest number of projects reviewed in this landscape were directed toward the downstream segment of food

markets, especially in response to the immediate impacts of the pandemic on food systems. Rapid responses focused on downstream were also a high priority for the development community. This result suggests that much of the development community recognized and reacted to the clear and urgent needs in food systems that came from the restrictions on markets and movement, and devised responses that sought to understand and correct these effects, such as by getting food to people that needed it most.

In terms of gaps in the international response, less attention was directed toward the midstream where off-takers, processors, distributors, wholesalers, and other businesses help to move food from upstream farms to downstream markets. However, the travel and trade restrictions put in effect to contain the pandemic had impacts across all three segments.

Another gap observed was that there were comparatively few systemic resilience investments across all segments of the food supply chain. Together, these findings point to policy making and response approaches that could yield better results in the event of future shocks.



VI. Recommendations

- Governments should take measures to address the consequences of initial responses to contain a pandemic on normal food production.
- Government, foundations and donors should plan to provide financial support to small-scale farmers, fishers, processors, and traders so they can continue to operate thereby warding off value-chain disruptions.
- At the upstream and midstream segments efforts should be made to enhance food-system resilience during lockdown. Measures such as organized distribution of low-cost farm inputs to rural areas would enable farmers to continue to optimize yields. Post-harvest losses could be minimized by adequate provision of storage facilities for harvests.
- Lockdowns and social-distancing measures should be implemented in a secure and safe manner that keeps food markets operational.
- Cooperatives should be provided with greater governmental support during future pandemics so they can support local resilience – both during and after a shock – by providing members with income and food security.
- Government and donors should integrate the informal sector into interventions initiatives in the food system. These can be done through cooperatives and trade associations.
- The needs of women in the informal sector should be given special attention for the purpose of recovery and resilience.

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