

COVID-19 CONTAINMENT AND FOOD SECURITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

by Jonathan Crush* and Zhenzhong Si*

Governments in the Global South have responded to the looming threat of COVID-19 with a range of containment, economic, and public health strategies. The Oxford Coronavirus Government Tracker (OxCGRT) identifies 18 separate government measures, and classifies eight of them as “containment and closure” strategies (Table 1). We have added another eight common measures observed in the South to the OxCGRT list. As Hale et al (2020) note, government responses to COVID-19 within each of these general categories exhibit “significant nuance and heterogeneity.” For example, C7 measures range from complete and prolonged quarantine and residential lockdowns, as in Chinese cities and migrant-worker hostels in Qatar and Singapore at one extreme, to general exhortations by politicians with little or no enforcement at the other.

The impact and efficacy of these measures is “highly contingent” on local political and social contexts (Hale et al 2020). Contextual variables include the willingness or ability of lower-tier government (state, municipal) to comply with national government policies, regulations, and legislation; the degree and type of enforcement; and the response of people themselves to containment measures that restrict their mobility, income, recreation, and social life. Some countries, such as South Africa, have deployed the army to enforce containment (Suttner 2020) while others are using the police to arrest and/or fine the non-compliant. Further complicating the picture, each of these measures is dynamic rather than static and subject to change, modification, and partial or wholesale relaxation. While some countries, such as China, stayed the course until the coronavirus was under control, others have opted to loosen restrictions in the face of the severe economic toll of COVID-19. Further waves of infection are widely anticipated in these jurisdictions (Xu and Li 2020).

There is widespread agreement that a primary indirect consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic across the Global South is a dramatic increase in the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity (Amanta 2020, CFS 2020, Geopoll 2020, Gillespie and Whiteside 2020, Jonah et al 2020, Osendarp et al 2020, Reardon et al 2020, Swinnen 2020, UNCTAD 2020, WFP 2020).



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The FAO (2020) has called the food security consequences of the global COVID-19 pandemic a crisis within a crisis, while the World Food Programme calls it a hunger pandemic, warning that 30 million people could die of starvation (Beasley 2020). The number of severely food insecure people could double from 130 million to 265 million by the end of 2020 (Harvey 2020, Laborde et al 2020). The disruption to food systems and security in LMIC cities has important implications for epidemic control and the current and future food security of urban residents. Impaired food security, in terms of malnutrition, caloric deficit, and decreased dietary diversity, may increase susceptibility to infection and worsen the well-being of the infected (CFS 2020). The interconnections between food insecurity and the outbreak highlight the urgent need to examine and improve food security interventions during and in the aftermath of viral epidemics (WFP 2020).

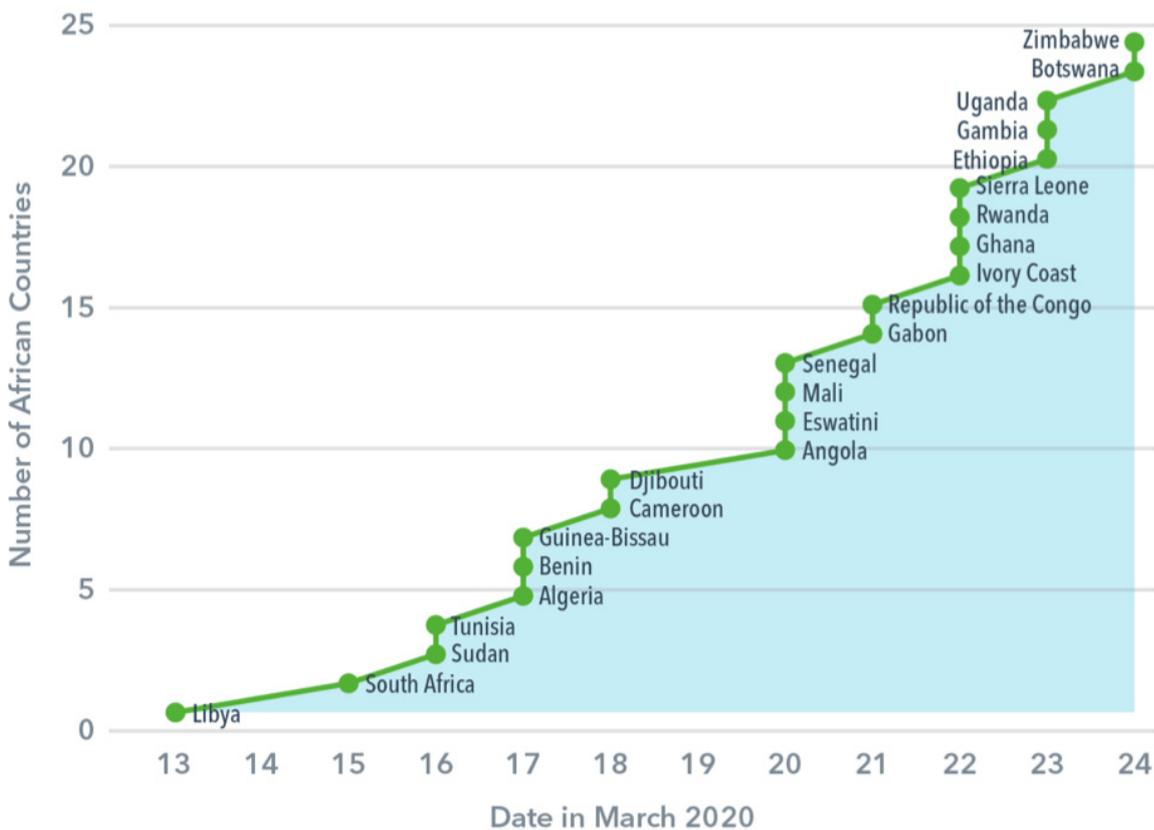
TABLE 1: Government Responses to COVID-19

No.	Name
Containment and closure measures	
C1*	Behaviour change (social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing)
C2	School closing
C3	Workplace closing
C4	Cancel public events
C5	Restrictions of gathering size
C6	Close public transport
C7	Stay at home requirements (including lockdowns, quarantine, curfews)
C8	Restrictions on internal movement
C9	Restrictions on international travel
C10*	Closure of public spaces (parks, beaches etc.)
C11*	Closing food markets (wholesale, retail, informal, wet)
C12*	Banning informal sector vending
C13*	Banning sales of alcohol, cigarettes
Economic measures	
E1	Income support
E2	Debt/contract relief for households
E3	Fiscal measures
E4	Giving international support
E5*	Social grant support
E6*	Food distribution
Public health measures	
H1	Public information campaign
H2	Testing policy
H3	Contact tracing
H4	Emergency healthcare investment
H5	Investment in COVID-19 vaccines
H6*	Investment in COVID-19 research
<i>Source: Adapted from Hale et al (2020)</i>	
<i>*Added to original</i>	

The dramatic increase in food insecurity in LMIC cities is partly a function of the disruption of national and globalized food supply chains (Clapp 2020). Food access in urban areas is highly contingent on the importation of food from the hinterland, other parts of a country or from global markets. While food production, distribution, and retailing is generally considered an “essential service”, many states have allowed formal retailers, such as supermarkets and their supply chains, to remain operational while shutting down the informal food sector on which the urban poor depends for food and income. In addition, restrictions on internal movement and international travel have negatively affected informal cross-border trade in foodstuffs. Bouët and Laborde (2020) graphically illustrate how 25 African countries imposed border closures in a 10-day period in March 2020 (Figure 1). They note that these restrictions “were imposed with little warning, taking local populations by surprise. With informal trade interrupted, many people have had little opportunity to find alternative livelihoods. For many families, the absence of income can have devastating effects on poverty and food security.”

Containment measures have thus had an immediate and severe impact on food security in many Southern cities, through the disruption of food supply chains, partial or complete bans on informal food markets and street vending, controls on movement, layoffs and unemployment, a precipitous decline in household income, and the shuttering of school feeding programs. Most poor urban households live in conditions where individual social distancing

FIGURE 1: Closure of Land Borders in Africa, March 2020



Source: Bouët and Laborde (2020)

measures are impossible to implement or enforce. Particularly vulnerable are the urban poor in low-income and informal settlements and, within these areas, population sub-groups such as female-headed households, young children, older adults, day labourers, informal sector workers, the homeless, and migrants and refugees (Chingono 2020, Crush 2020a, Guardian 2020, Hall 2020, Plaas 2020).

In China, quarantined residents resorted *en masse* to online food purchasing and delivery. However, this option is non-existent for the urban poor in many LMIC cities. Most households have no means of ordering food online and there is limited or non-existent delivery infrastructure. Hunger and the search for food are driving desperate people to defy containment measures and social unrest, including looting of food outlets and delivery trucks, is growing in many cities (Cruywagen 2020, France 24 2020, Pijoo 2020, Reuters, 2020). Some governments have introduced or ramped up existing social protection and food distribution programs while others have focused on ensuring compliance through force (Gardaworld 2020, Hall 2020b, Ombuor and Bearak 2020, Suttner, 2020). In some countries, such as India, non-governmental organizations have been more effective than the state in collecting and distributing food to the needy (Rawat 2020).

Since 2014, the [Hungry Cities Partnership](#) (HCP) has focused its attention on the transformation of food systems accompanying rapid urbanization in the Global South and the vulnerability of urbanizing populations to food insecurity in its various forms – food availability, food access, food utilization, food safety, and food stability over time (Crush and Battersby 2016, Crush and Si 2019, Crush and Young 2019, Crush et al 2020, Frayne et al 2018). We have conducted comprehensive city-wide household food security surveys, surveyed informal food vendors in city markets and on the streets, and examined the impact of the supermarket revolution and online retailing on the food environment. We have also researched the governance of urban food systems and the impact on food consumption behaviour. Central to this research has been a focus on city markets, including wet markets which have achieved a certain media notoriety during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their role in providing affordable food to urban residents (Crush and Young 2020, Si et al 2019, Zhong et al 2019).

In 2020, as the impact of the pandemic on food systems and food security became increasingly apparent, the HCP was awarded a CIHR COVID-19 Rapid Research Funding grant to research the food security and social policy implications of public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in China with a focus on Wuhan and Nanjing (Crush and Si 2020). We are upscaling this research to six additional sites: three in Africa (Cape Town, Harare, Nairobi) and three in LAC (Mexico City, Kingston, Quito). We already have an excellent baseline understanding of the pre-COVID-19 food system and food security situation in the proposed sites through our ongoing HCP research (Capron et al 2017, 2018, Crush et al 2018, Haysom et al 2017, Kinlocke et al 2019, Owuor 2018, Owuor et al 2017, Tawodzera et al 2012, 2019, Thomas-Hope et al 2017, Toriro, 2019).

The Hungry Cities Partnership is therefore well-positioned to explore in detail how a range of responses to COVID-19 has impacted these urban populations totalling over 20 million people in six countries (to add to the insights emerging from research on Wuhan and Nanjing with a combined population of 19 million). Our aim is to compare the impact of COVID-19, and

subsequent public health and containment measures, on urban household food security, on countries across the Global South. We focus in particular on the urban poor and vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, children, older adults, the unemployed, informal sector workers, migrants and refugees (Fèvre and Tacoli, 2020). We aim to address and improve responses to one of the most pressing social and health challenges associated with the fourth wave pandemic in the Global South – urban food insecurity – and advance evidence-based policy recommendations with broader applicability. We will also engage international, national, and city-level stakeholders and the design of more effective counter-measures to deal with the growing crisis of food insecurity. Our main objectives are to:

- Examine the nature and impact of public health containment and mitigation responses to COVID-19 on food systems and household food security in affected cities in the Global South;
- Undertake a longitudinal analysis of COVID-19-induced changes in levels and drivers of food insecurity through comparison with pre-COVID baseline survey data collected by HCP;
- Assess the effectiveness of government, business, NGO, community organizations and other stakeholder social policy responses to food security challenges and promote more effective policy measures and responses;
- Provide critical decision-making and pandemic response data to international and local stakeholders to inform broader global debates and public health and social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Strengthen the capacity of researchers and research institutions to respond rapidly to ongoing food security challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, rapid and timely research responsiveness to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in LMICs should include a focus on the nature and impact of social, policy, and public health responses that have been implemented in the urban areas that constitute the hotspots for the spread of the pandemic. Population-level containment strategies have been particularly hard on the urban poor and vulnerable population groups such as female-headed households, children, the homeless, informal sector employers and employees, casual workers, the unemployed, and migrants and refugees. As a direct result, a secondary pandemic of hunger and food insecurity is now impacting many of these groups. An effective and sustainable global response to the COVID-19 (and any further) viral pandemics must therefore ensure that food security is an essential piece of the containment and mitigation puzzle. Our first COVID-19 Rapid Research Grant has been examining how the containment measures implemented in the original epicentre of the pandemic in China negatively affected the food system and food security of populations with a high pre-existing degree of food security. In scaling up the research to six new sites (where we have ongoing projects) we are focusing on cities and populations with low levels of pre-COVID food security and asking whether social and public health policy responses have exacerbated food insecurity and, if so, in what ways, and with what effects and policy implications.

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