COVID-19 AND GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN WUHAN, CHINA

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As the epicentre of COVID-19 outbreak in China, Wuhan implemented some of the most stringent quarantine measures yet seen globally. Between January 23 and April 8, the city of 11 million people was in lockdown and all those who had not already left its confines for the annual Spring Festival (about 9 million people) were quarantined within the city (Ma and Zhuang 2020). In these circumstances, their need to access food posed a serious challenge. Food insecurity, which in China had been a problem for only a small number of households, suddenly became the reality for a significant proportion of the city's population (Zhong et al 2020).

Between March 24th and April 3rd 2020, the Hungry Cities Partnership conducted an online survey with 796 residents of Wuhan to assess the food security situation of the population and their strategies to access food after the lockdown. The survey used the online survey platform "*Wenjuanxing*" and was circulated on the most widely-used mobile app in China: *WeChat*. The survey was followed up with in-depth telephone interviews with a sub-sample of online respondents in April and May 2020. The aim was to understand the everyday experience of food access in the city during the lockdown and details of strategies used by local residents to ensure household food security in a rapidly changing policy environment.

The survey and interviews indicate that the most difficult period for accessing food was between February 14th (when the prohibition on residents leaving their homes for any reason began) and the end of the month when food buying groups were organized. From February 11th to 14th, municipal policies restricted the number of times people could go out of their residential neighbourhoods, typically allowing only one member in each household to go out once every three days. On February 14th, the policy escalated to complete mobility restriction that required everyone to stay at home. The lockdown of residents was possible because the majority of Chinese households live in apartment buildings

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and many of these buildings are clustered in so-called "gated communities" with controlled access (Pow 2009).

Based on the online survey results and in-depth interviews, this brief explores the diverse practices of community organizing to access food, the critical stakeholders involved, and the challenges they faced. The study demonstrates the potential of community organizing in mitigating food insecurity challenges during the pandemic and any other potentially challenging times. The brief therefore concludes with a call for a more favourable policy environment for community actors to exercise their agency.

Food Access Before Residential Neighbourhood Lockdown

The enforcement of the complete lockdown of residential neighbourhoods in Wuhan sent shockwaves through the city's food system as grocery shopping was restricted and there was no preparation time for people to switch to alternative ways of food shopping in such a short period. The immediate challenge at the beginning of the enforcement of the lockdown of neighbourhoods was that it left thousands of households at serious risk of food shortage.

Between January 23rd, when Wuhan's coronavirus restrictions began, and February 14th, residents of Wuhan were still allowed to do their grocery shopping in supermarkets, community stores and public markets (also known as "wet markets") before the markets were ordered to close on January 30th. A change in buying habits occurred with survey respondents recalling that they would take two to three big shopping boxes to purchase as much food as they could, thereby minimizing their exposure to COVID-19 infection. This shift ran counter to the Chinese tradition of frequently purchasing food for its freshness and favouring fresh products over frozen food.

Another reported change before the lockdown on February 14th was in informal street vending. After the closure of public markets, many vegetable vendors from the markets turned to street vending outside gated communities. Although the respondents complained that the prices were much higher than they had been in public markets, they would still buy from street vendors because of the freshness of the food. Coincidentally, the city lockdown happened two days before the Chinese Spring Festival, when most people traditionally stock up with food for a family reunion. Many respondents therefore said that they were initially not too worried about food, especially salted meat, sausage and rice, because they had already purchased a considerable quantity before the lockdown. Their most pressing food concern then was the shortage of fresh vegetables.

Community Organizing for Food Access

People in Wuhan responded to the unprecedented crisis by organizing food-buying groups online. They mushroomed in number in late February, replacing traditional public food markets, and became the most important way of buying food when the interviews were conducted (Dai and Qi 2020). The online survey results found that 66% of households accessed food

through buying groups during the period of quarantine. Among these, 54% bought food through buying groups two to three times per week.

Community organizing played a critical role in the operation of buying groups. The survey showed that 34% of Wuhan respondents purchased food through buying groups organized by volunteers. In some neighbourhoods, the residents relied entirely on self-organized buying groups. The operation of buying groups was embedded in the Chinese mobile app *WeChat*. The organizer would connect with suppliers, typically food vendors, wholesalers and farmers, and compile the list of food items available. This information was then shared in *WeChat* groups formed by households within the community. People could then place orders before a deadline, typically the end of the day, in a manner known as "*jie long*", which literally means building a sequence. If a person wanted to order potatoes, for example, they would copy previous orders in a list and add their name and the amount of the order under the list and send the updated list to the group. The organizer only had to check the most recently updated list posted in the group before the deadline.

Some individuals with IT skills developed small add-ons embedded in *WeChat* to collect orders and payments. *WeChat* also allowed people to pay for their order easily by initiating a money transfer to the organizer. When this started, the food would usually be delivered to the entrance of the community one or two days later. People who had ordered would receive a call to pick up their orders at the entrance. Volunteers would bring the food to the doors of households where there was limited mobility. In places where complete lockdown was in effect, residents had to rely on volunteers to deliver their orders to their doorsteps. These innovative ways of collecting and managing orders greatly enhanced the efficiency of buying groups in the absence of a professional e-commerce system.

Community organizing also demonstrated its strength in accessing critical resources. Volunteers provided support to vulnerable residents with special needs, including elderly people who needed to refill their drug prescriptions and people who were unable to use mobile phones to place orders in *WeChat*. One interviewee said that when lockdown started, Wuhan received many donations, including food and personal protective equipment from across the country and abroad. Yet, with transport services halted, the government was unable to deliver these donations to neighbourhoods in dire need. Community members in one neighbourhood resolved this by borrowing a bus to transport food and forming a team of volunteers to distribute food in their community. However, in other neighbourhoods without community organizing, access to resources was dependent on the official neighbourhood committee. Ability to access subsidized, affordable or donated food was thus highly dependent on whether community leaders actively mobilized their social connections to acquire these resources.

Grassroots community organizing greatly enhanced the solidarity of the community. People got to know their neighbours through buying groups. Local residents, especially vulnerable groups, were very grateful to the volunteers, and levels of mutual trust soared. As one respondent noted:

> Sometimes people didn't pay for their orders. The organizer would still deliver the order to the entrance of the community. We would just pick up the order by ourselves

> and transfer the payment to the organizer. Everyone obeyed the rule. People who took other's orders by mistake would find out the person in the *WeChat* group and return it...there are many good people during extraordinary times...the organizer of the buying group I'm in delivered all the orders for free. Once I bought a cabbage for 2.99 yuan and paid him 3 yuan on *WeChat*. He returned 0.01 yuan to me.

The grassroots community initiatives also addressed the specific food needs of the local culture and community. For example, fish was mentioned as an important dietary component but was the most difficult food item to access. In some communities, civil society organizations addressed this difficulty in a way that has lasted beyond the lockdown, with a respondent noting:

> Initially we did not expect to include aquatic products in our buying groups. However, approximately at the end of February, one volunteer connected us with a fishpond manager who provided living fish, including grass carp, bream, and the mandarin fish. Now we have many self-organized buying groups. Prior to the pandemic, we didn't have any of them. The pandemic gave rise to them. I realize that civil society has great capacity, and we hope that the buying groups will prevail when the pandemic subsides, because the food we bought from buying groups was affordable and fresh.

The organizers of these buying groups were diverse and varied from community to community. One observable phenomenon was that young adults appeared to be the leading forces in organizing buying groups. First, they clearly cared about their neighbours and were willing to contribute to the community. One interviewee told us that the formation of their volunteer group was triggered by the concern for the elderly and disabled people in their community. Some volunteers even bought food for vulnerable people if they could not afford the food prices themselves. Second, these young adults were technologically skilled and adept in communicating online. The same volunteer group reported that it took them only one night to form a group with 15 members and each member took on clear responsibilities such as sending out messages through *WeChat*, counting orders, connecting to food providers, and delivery of food. Their computer skills allowed them to deal with thousands of orders quickly and efficiently.

In addition to "unofficial" grassroots buying groups organized by individual local community members, some neighbourhoods relied on their property management companies for food delivery. There were also "official" buying groups organized by sub-district offices (*jiedao ban*) or local neighbourhood committees (*juweihui*), the lowest level of administration in urban China. Commercial buying groups organized by small and large food retailers were also common in many neighbourhoods. However, commercial buying groups organized by food businesses often had restricted delivery areas. Interviewees also complained that government-organized buying groups provided limited choice and mainly sold assorted packages of vegetables and meat. Grassroots groups were more flexible and provided more options especially after the relaxing of transportation and market restrictions later in the quarantine period.

The profit-driven nature of large retail businesses damaged their reputation when compared with community-based food purchasing channels. As one respondent observed:

> The two local large retailing groups performed poorly. In the beginning, they raised their food price quite high to profit from the national calamity. Later, they monopolized official buying groups and foisted unsaleable goods into food combos. For example, they only sold yeast in a 500-gram package. Food combos included sanitary pads. They also monopolized meat reserves released to the market by the state...We now have a few dozen buying groups including only three or four groups organized by these large business groups. Food sold in these few groups is obviously more expensive and with lower quality than groups organized by individuals.

Challenges Facing Community Organizing

Some respondents were critical of aspects of the buying groups. They said that food channelled through these buying groups was not as fresh as food purchased in public markets before the quarantine. It was also more expensive and with limited diversity (see the five-point scale in Figure 1). Fish and soybean products such as tofu and dried bean curd were especially difficult to find. Some informants mentioned that it was difficult to join some buying groups as they quickly reached their member limit. Yet, people generally believed that this was understandable given the crisis of COVID-19. The price, freshness and availability of diverse food items also greatly improved in late March and April.

FIGURE 1: Perceptions of the price and freshness of food purchased through buying groups
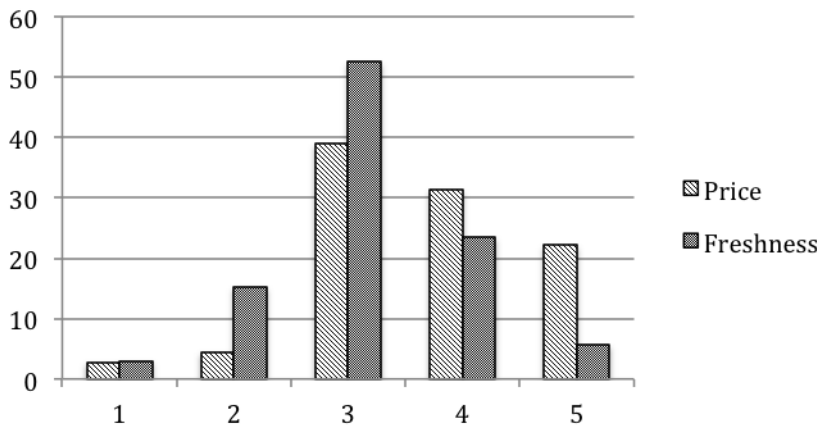
Price: 1 = very affordable and 5 = very expensive
Freshness: 1 = not fresh at all, 5 = very fresh

In one case, grassroots organizing experienced conflict with the local government, particularly the neighbourhood committee offices (*shequ juweihui*) that also played an active role in delivering food to residents in the neighbourhood. Yet, their contribution to community food

access varied, depending on their will and capacity. As one organizer of a volunteer group commented:

> We were unhappy with our neighbourhood committee office. Our conflict with them emerged at the beginning of March. Our volunteer team made great efforts in transporting and delivering food, but the committee office wanted to highlight their achievement [instead of ours] to the upper leadership. When debriefing their achievement to their upper leadership, they disparaged us. They falsely accused our volunteer team of corruption…The governance of community depends on the leader of the local government. Only a responsible leader could enable good governance.

While this example shows that grassroots community initiatives can be constrained and discouraged by the local government, in many cases they proved more effective than the local government in rapidly responding to food concerns in Wuhan.

Conclusion

An enabling policy environment for community actors is essential for them to unleash their full potential. In China, social organizations are constrained by a restrictive political environment (Gleiss and Sæther 2017). The extent and effectiveness of grassroots community organizing in fighting local food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis is a unique and encouraging example of its potential. It also demonstrated the power of civil society in providing essential services during extraordinary times when the state and the private sector were not functioning well and pre-existing vulnerabilities in society (such as food-insecure households) were exacerbated by the crisis (Cook 2020).

Grassroots buying groups are likely to persist as a new and popular way of buying food. Although commercial online markets such as Taobao, Pinduoduo and other platforms of large chains were well developed in China before the pandemic, they played a limited role in Wuhan during the COVID-19 crisis because of the blockage of transportation. Their sudden absence, alongside the closure of conventional physical food outlets, created an opportunity for consumers to discover the value of China's rapidly-developing alternative food networks, including buying groups and community-supported agriculture (Cheng 2020; Si et al 2015). Many respondents praised the convenience of accessing food through buying groups, which will likely become an important player in the food retailing landscape, contributing to the diversification of food sources and adding new dynamics to the changing food system in Chinese cities.

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