BALANCING HEALTH AND ECONOMIC LIVELIHOODS

Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Zambia

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In response to the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, countries across the world have instituted various policy measures which—although different in their approaches—are all evolving as the pandemic progresses. This brief uses data collected under the COVID-19 Policy Response (CPR) project to report on the policy responses in Zambia during the initial six months of the pandemic (IFPRI 2020).

ZAMBIA'S BROAD POLICY RESPONSES TO COVID-19

The first two cases of COVID-19 were reported on March 18, 2020, in Zambia's capital Lusaka. Cases were later reported in Kafue, then Ndola and Kitwe districts in Copperbelt Province, and Kabwe in Central Province. Between March and April, there were fewer than 50 cases a day, but the number rose significantly in May (MoH/ZNPHI/WHO 2020a). Although COVID-19 has since spread throughout the country, Lusaka and other urban districts in the Copperbelt remain disproportionately affected (Figure 1).

In response to the pandemic, the government set up a number of strategic institutions. These include a council of ministers and permanent secretaries, a national epidemic preparedness committee, and a prevention, control, and management committee. An Incident Management Structure (IMS) was set up at the Zambia National Public Health Institute (ZNPHI) following the declaration of the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).¹ The IMS meets bi-weekly at ZNPHI (MoH/ZNPHI 2020a, b, and c; MoH/ZNPHI/WHO 2020b).

FIGURE 1 Cumulative distribution of COVID-19 cases

Source: ZAMSTATS/ Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources (MLNR 2020).

Note: This figure captures the distribution of COVID-19 cases from March 18 to September 6, 2020.

1 A **PHEIC** is a formal declaration by the [World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/) (WHO) of "an extraordinary event which is determined to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease and to potentially require a coordinated international response", formulated when a situation arises that is "serious, sudden, unusual or unexpected", which "carries implications for public health beyond the affected state's national border" and "may require immediate international action."

FIGURE 2 Distribution of policy measures by daily and cumulative COVID-19 cases

Source: IFPRI (2020) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, available at Our World in Data (<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/zambia?country=~ZMB>).

Guided by Public Health Statutory Instruments 21 and 22 of 2020 (issued March 13), the Zambian government announced a partial lockdown on March 20, even though the number of cases was still relatively small (see Figure 2). This meant closing most points of entry into the country for human movement; the main international airport and border points remained open only for the entry of essential goods and commodities. Schools and universities were closed, and social and religious gatherings banned. Conferences, weddings, funerals, and festivals were restricted to not more than 50 people and required the approval of the director of public health, granted through a permit issued by respective city councils. The government requested that all non-essential workers work from home where possible or on rotational basis (GRZ 2020). Several other measures were instituted as highlighted in Figure 3.

To cushion the households and businesses affected by the pandemic, the Zambian government also

pursued a number of social protection policies. These include the Bank of Zambia's approval of ZMW 10 billion (USD 540 million)² for microfinance institutions and commercial banks to help businesses remain afloat (Bank of Zambia 2020), cash transfers for vulnerable households from the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) of ZMW 400 to ZMW 800 (USD 21 to USD 42) per month (UNOCHA 2020), and issuance of a COVID-19 bond of ZMW 2,671 million (USD 144 million), which will be used in part to pay pensioners (Ministry of Finance 2020). Most policy responses were implemented in March and April 2020, with the number of responses falling drastically from May onward. Continued lax policy implementation, especially for measures related to people congregating and wearing of masks, may pose significant challenges in containing the spread and impact of COVID-19. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, lockdown measures were eased before the country appeared to have had control over the number of cases.

2 Conversions based on historical average data for April 2020, when pronouncements were made, with kwacha to dollar rate at ZMW 18.57 to USD 1 (<https://www.investing.com/currencies/usd-zmk-historical-data>).

FIGURE 3 Distribution of Zambia's policy responses to COVID-19

Source: IFPRI (2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ZAMBIA'S FOOD SYSTEM

Policies and responses specific to food security support have been limited in comparison to other policy responses. Notable examples are the Aquaculture Seed Fund and the International Fund for Agriculture Development's Rural Poor Stimulus Facility, which includes provision of inputs and basic assets to enable small-scale producers to maintain production, facilitates access to markets, and delivers targeted funds through existing financial institutions (IFAD 2020). On the market side, food commodity price responses have been mixed over the period from May to July. For example, prices of commodities such as maize and mealie meal decreased while the prices of beans and eggs increased (Mulenga et al. 2020). Such policy and price responses may reduce access to more diverse and nutritious diets.

Looking at foreign aid by sector shows that health received the most support at over USD 60 million, followed by social protection with over USD 20 million, equipment/medical supplies received about USD 2 million, and agriculture about USD 1 million (Alliance for Community Development et al. 2020). The low contribution specific to agriculture is concerning, given the sector's importance in Zambia. But it is not entirely unexpected, since COVID-19 arrived at the end of the 2019/2020 agricultural production season. The pandemic, however, is expected to impact the 2020/2021 marketing season, as job and income losses from the initial movement restrictions and closure of businesses as well as the general economic slowdown may limit cash available to spend during the marketing season.

The informal sector, which accounts for 69 percent of the labor force in Zambia, is more negatively affected by the pandemic, given that people in this sector rely on their daily earnings (Zambia Statistics Agency and Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2020).³ As such, it is difficult for people in the informal sector to comply with stay-at-home partial lockdowns. This is true for farmers and marketeers who depend on daily sales to sustain their livelihoods. In the absence of well-developed cold chains or stimulus packages, reduced sales due to partial lockdown and stay-at-home directives are a big issue for perishable products. If left unaddressed, this might increase food waste, which currently

3 An activity is informal if it is not registered with a tax or a licensing authority.

accounts for 30 to 40 percent of food lost between production and consumption (FAO 2015).

Although necessary, adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures such as providing hand sanitizers or hand-washing facilities may contribute to increasing costs for small businesses. Thus, efforts to disinfect markets to allow controlled trading to take place are very important. Just as domestic markets continue to be adversely affected by movement and lockdown restrictions, so too is cross-border and international trade. Disruptions to trade, including border delays and movement restrictions for industry workers will likely result not only in food waste but also in supply chain disruptions, which in turn may lead to commodity price spikes.

CONCLUSION

The Zambian government acted relatively quickly on a number of fronts to respond to the initial onset of COVID-19. However, the decline in policy responses in recent months is worrying since it coincides with a surge in the cumulative cases of COVID-19, which topped 10,000 in Zambia in August 2020. In part, the surge in cases may be driven by citizens' lax adherence to the public health measures, with people increasingly disregarding guidelines on wearing masks correctly and on social distancing in markets, public transport, and other public spaces. Going forward, concerted efforts are needed to constrain any further spread of the virus through stringent public health measures, while providing targeted monetary and fiscal incentives to sustain the core economic activities that ensure household food, nutritional, and income security, as well as improved resilience.

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