The Impact of COVID-19 on health & food security in Cameroon

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Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the Wuhan province of China has caused tremendous damages to human lives throughout the world while affecting the global economy due to the untold temporary lockdowns of businesses, companies, and the restriction of international travels across the globe. With high and mostly under-reported COVID-19-related fatalities in many countries as well as the added strain on healthcare services, the burden of this pandemic is easily palpable. The impact of the novel coronavirus outbreak in Cameroon continues to unfold and carries with it considerable human security risks. The United Nation’s Development Program considers seven main dimensions of human security through sustainable human development. These are economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. The departure point of this article brings into focus the effects of the current coronavirus pandemic on health and food security. Based on available data from reliable sources (such as the Ministry of Public Health, the Nkafu Policy Institute’s Coronavirus Task Force, FAO, IMF, World Bank, WHO, etc.), we analyze the impact of COVID 19 on the afore-mentioned aspects of human security and propose recommendations that can help mitigate the overarching consequences of the virus on health and food security in Cameroon.
COVID-19 and Health Security

According to the WHO, global public health security is defined “as the activities required, (both proactive and reactive), to minimize the danger and impact of acute public health events that endanger people’s health across geographical regions and international boundaries” (WHO, 2020). It further recounts that epidemics and fragile health systems not only affect lives but also pose some of the greatest threats to the world economy and security faced today. Cameroon is no exception, as the COVID19 has made an indelible mark on the health security sector in the country. As COVID 19 continues to spread across the country, it induces some fear in certain groups of people. These include older adults and care providers especially those in the frontline, like medics and people with underlying health conditions. With the health system of the country being in a fragile state and having very limited facilities and equipment needed to combat the virus, this only further helps to make issues worst. Healthcare providers are at a greater risk to contract the disease. Hence, their security and safety are of paramount importance.

Health and economic security are inextricably linked because the economic performance of every country is largely dependent on the health of its citizens.
This is considered as a means to attain human security. If we go by “the individual”, it will mean security of employment, income, and a given level of consumption. With the outbreak of COVID 19, people’s health is unsecured posing great risks to their income and consumption patterns due to job losses (UNDP, 2006).

Cameroon’s health status and trends do not reflect a country that “aims to guarantee healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (UNSDG3).” According to the Country’s health analytical profile of 2016, its life expectancy at birth (58.51 years) is lower than the average of each of the regional subgroupings (59 years for ECCAS and 60 years for Sub-Saharan Africa). This further contrasts with world figures for life expectancy which show an improvement from 64 years in 1990 to 71.1 years in 2015 (WHO, 2017). If the current pace of COVID 19 in Cameroon (2,954 confirmed cases, 139 deaths, 1,553 recovered as of (08:19 GMT) 15 May 2020) continues to accelerate, the country’s economy will face more devastating conditions based on its local realities and given that, it operates within the global economy. Job losses may pop up as a result; hence, Cameroonians may find it challenging to finance their health bills given the current atmosphere of structural unemployment because of COVID 19. The IMF had already predicted that the global economy would fluctuate from a 2.9% growth rate in 2019 to a contraction of 2% this year. That is down from a prediction in late January for a 3.3% increase and might be the most intense economic slump since the Great Depression of the 1930s - according to the Financial Times Magazine.
COVID-19 and Food Security

Food security as defined by FAO (2002) “is a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” The outbreak of COVID 19 has limited people’s access to food due to social distancing and confinement; hence, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on food security cannot escape emphasis. This rapidly changing and the unprecedented situation is likely to trigger a global recession. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report published on 2 March 2020, the GDP growth rate in the world will drop to 2.4% (from previously projected 2.9%) because of the economic slowdown caused by this global health crisis. These were projections made before the rapid spread and more recent development of COVID-19 (Committee on world food security, 2020).

However, beyond the immediate health concerns of the pandemic, short, medium, and long-term consequences are expected to be seen in the agricultural sector. This alone will have a significant effect on food security and nutrition and will test the resilience of each country or community to respond to shocks of this magnitude. The poor tend to have low incomes and may find it difficult to cope with the increase in food prices as well as the instability in the availability of food and food supplies. The COVID-19 pandemic is capable of affecting food systems directly via its impact on food supply and demand, and indirectly through a fall in total purchasing power of Cameroonians. Greater impact is felt in the capacity to produce and distribute food given the 13 measures proposed by the Head of State since March 16, 2020, which restrict the movement of food producers and vendors. Given that this pandemic coincides with the farming season, food supply is most likely going to be affected since few farmers can work as usual. Consequently, the economy is likely going to experience food shortages and price hikes in the months ahead.

Farmers equally cite an increase in the cost of transportation that makes it difficult for them to market their farm produce and hence a major reason for the increases in food prices. Due to social distancing policies, many workers in restaurants, retail, and other food-related sectors suffer the loss of jobs and income. While food producers may still experience demand for their production, this is likely to be slow and disruptions in the agro-food supply chain will make their livelihoods less secure. These drop on income and job losses have direct implications for people’s access to food security and nutrition.
As the caseloads of the pandemic continue to increase in the country, panic buying (this occurs when consumers buy unusually large amounts of a product in anticipation of, or after, a disaster or perceived disaster, or in anticipation of a large price increase or shortage) by Cameroonians may further worsen disruptions in the food supply chain and amplify shortages in the supply of food. The longer the pandemic lasts the worse the food shortages will be given that disruptions may get worse and the farmer workforce may be weakened by disease.

**Recommendations**

- **The government of Cameroon should increase the health budget.** An increase in the health budget implies an increased investment in infrastructure, equipment, and personnel in the long term. This equally implies that in case of an outbreak such as the coronavirus pandemic, the government should in the short term put in place a national preparedness plan and a separate financial package to handle the situation.

- **To guarantee food security, the government should increase agricultural spending.** This can be done by ensuring the supply of more seeds, fertilizer, and farming tools to help farmers boost production levels. The majority of farmers still use manual tools. There is a need to invest in more tractors to help facilitate the farming process towards agro-industrial transformation—so that in moments of a pandemic outbreak, the country should not experience food supply shocks.

- **The GOC needs to prioritize social protection mechanisms** for the poorest and most vulnerable people during the COVID-19 crisis. This can be done by erecting measures that incorporate the provision of the Right to Food. These mechanisms should provide essential assistance in the short term and support livelihoods in the long term. There is equally the need to encourage local communities and citizens to increase local food production (including home and community gardens), minimize food waste, and refrain from panic buying.
Conclusion

Amid this continuous rise in the Covid-19 figures in Cameroon, it becomes imperative for the government to look for more sustainable ways of handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Health and food security are two important issues that cannot be neglected given the role it plays in human life. Therefore, to ensure the health and food security of Cameroonian, the aforementioned recommendations are to be considered.