

# Is Food Policy Analysis Capacity an Issue in the Developing World in the Time of COVID-19?

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## Introduction

One of the many concerns in a period of raging pandemic is the food security of populations. Policy makers must naturally worry about food security and determine what policies can best be developed and implemented to ensure food security for all people in their jurisdictions. Such policy decisions are informed by information that can be brought to bear in a timely manner. The people who generate and refine such information can be conveniently called food policy analysts, who are an inherently scarce “commodity” themselves, and in some parts of the world are extremely scarce. They are key players in what Jayne et al. (2019) refer to as the policy ecosystem. The question addressed in this Brief concerns the capacity of this policy analysis element of the national and international policy ecosystems working in Sub-Saharan Africa. Any inadequacies may have dire consequences for food security.

## Prevailing Capacity

Capacity for food policy analysis has grown significantly in recent decades around the developing world, including in much of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as is documented by Kuyvenhoven (2014) and Jayne et al. (2019). The growth has been strongly supported by donors through providing training in diverse graduate schools in developed countries in Europe and North America, as well as through assistance and collaboration programs supported by CGIAR institutes, including notably the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). As well as building the human capital of individual policy analysts, support has been provided for institutional development in ministries and independent policy research institutes, such as the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute (IAPRI) in Zambia. This story of food policy capacity development has been well told by Jayne et al. (2019). It is not easy to assess the current adequacy of food policy institutional development, but what is clear is that such investment must be sustained on a continuing basis in order to maintain capacity, given the life-cycles of individual analysts and the inevitable degradation of the engaged human capital.

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Institutional development has surely not been uniform across developing regions, and capacity is clearly lower than required in many countries. It does seem that there is much scope for spillins of policy insight across national borders. Such spillins can be facilitated by forging networking arrangements among food policy analysts. A good example of this is what has been put in place in Southern, Eastern and Central Africa in the form of the Regional Network of Agricultural Policy Research Institutes (ReNAPRI). The nine countries involved in this Network are able to share food policy work quickly and readily and thus hasten the flow of policy insights to inform national decision making in real time.

On food security policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, ReNAPRI has assembled cogent information that is surely helpful for all concerned (e.g., Traub et al. (2020) in progress, some reported in Task Force (2020)). Such work is also supported by the Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System (ReSAKSS) which supports the implementation of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) by providing policy-relevant data and facilitating dialogue among stakeholders. IFPRI directly supports ReSAKSS and has recently moved it to AKADEMIYA2063, with headquarters in Kigali, Rwanda (IFPRI and AKADEMIYA2063, 2020).

## Needs Induced by COVID-19

Food policy analysis, as conceived here, is all about understanding how food systems work, from the growing of crops and animals, to the consumption of food by humans, understanding how such systems deal with change, and determining what policy choices should best be made to ensure food security most effectively for all. Given the inherent complexity of food systems, which largely consist of private agents, contributions to the requisite understanding must come from many disciplinary perspectives, from environmental and resource management angles, through agribusiness and marketing mechanisms, to nutritional and food safety concerns, to mention just a few.

What health policy interventions are most effective at balancing the health, food security and economic impacts? The emergence of a pandemic such as COVID-19 is a significant change for food systems to cope with, and it thus seems reasonable to ask if the prevailing arrangements for food policy analysis are adequate for the rapidly changing world. Good food policy analysis is underpinned by study of what is happening in reality, in the present instance, who is being affected by the pandemic and to what extent food security in general is being compromised. Governments may have “knee-jerk” tendencies to close down markets to try to prevent spread of disease, but such arbitrary closures may drive traders beyond regular markets into more crowded and less safe situations for exchange of goods and infections. Good understanding of such possibilities can inform wise policy making. A good example of food policy analysis in action is that of the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute (IAPRI) in Zambia (Traub et al., 2020).

*Identifying essential services and markets.* One of the decisions that policy makers must struggle with concerns just what is “essential” and can thus be exempted from some restrictions on behavior or offered specially targeted protection assistance. In Nigeria, in the initial phases of response, maize as an animal feed was not declared an essential commodity but the effect of constrained market supplies quickly led to reduced supplies of chicken meat and eggs, and a surge in local prices for these

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nutritionally important foods (Liverpool-Tasie, 2020 pers. com.). Thus treating food as an “essential service” to keep food moving, and opening special procedures (such as “green channels”) for food, trade and agricultural inputs to ensure supply chains are challenging, and require deep understanding of sometimes complex food supply chains (FSCs). Part of the novel challenge for analysts is incorporating necessary health and safety measures along segments of the FSCs. Beyond the farms and FSCs, food policy analysts must also contribute to developing programs to support the most vulnerable populations via safety net programs, perhaps complemented by food distribution in areas where supply chains are severely disrupted.

*Monitoring bottle necks in food supply chain.* The case of South Africa illustrates how food policy analysis can contribute to national decision making. A web-based monitoring tool has been developed by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) to enable key role players to report blockages and breakdowns within the FSC, thus enabling rapid and appropriate responses. This “End-to-End Agro Food Chain Tracker” forms part of the initiatives that Government is driving in collaboration with its Agricultural Task Team. The platform will summarize the results and generate reports that will be shared with the National Joint Command Centre, which is responsible for managing the overall COVID-19 Regulation 398 of the National Disaster Management Act dealing with essential services and goods (BFAP, 2020).

*Identifying where emergency food and monetary aid would be most effective.* This is not an “ordinary” food crisis that is created primarily by problems with food supply, which create food scarcity and high food prices. This food crisis is primarily a crisis of reduced demand due to unemployment in cities, unemployment in food services and reduced income for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the food chain, created by the pandemic and pandemic health policies. Therefore food and income safety nets and special programs are needed. Policy analysts can identify who is being affected (e.g., INDABA surveys in Zambia and BFAP surveys in South Africa), and who should be the targets of relief programs. Analyses could provide guidance on what type of policies and program option that will be effective in reducing suffering and restarting the economy (Upton and Knippenberg, 2019 in Madagascar and Lentz et al., 2019 in Malawi).

Effective analysis of these policy questions and other weaknesses in the FSC that have been highlighted by the pandemic requires well trained, experienced analysts and timely and accurate data. The food policy analysis system needs timely and accurate data on rural communities, including farms, agribusinesses and agricultural markets, to describe and quantify emerging reality (e.g., Reardon et al., 2019) thereby creating baselines, and detecting change that may be important to comprehend, such as climate change. Such survey work is especially challenging at a time of work lockdowns and social distancing. At the international level, the work program is greatly impacted. IFPRI, for instance, has had to resort to telephone surveys, with all the difficulties imposed by that in terms of coverage and representativeness. At the national level such survey work is naturally also at least to some extent compromised during pandemic restrictions, and analysts must make use of existing data collections and supplement that with whatever can be safely gathered as they seek to provide information to policy makers trying to protect food security, whilst managing the pandemic as best they can. Novel

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instruments being developed by international food policy researchers are likely to be useful, as is discussed in the next section.

Needless to say, many of the questions raised by the pandemic involve knowledge that is inherently new and cannot simply be drawn from the prevailing sources of knowledge, and new insight must be forged by contemporary research effort in the food policy analysis community (e.g., Spielman and Richter, 2020). The compilation by Swinnen and McDermott (2020) of recent thinking on COVID-19 helpfully plugs some important knowledge gaps, although much of what is reported is still really work in progress, and needs for contemporary research continue. This, in turn, may require new investment in skills and even new analysts if existing institutional arrangements are insufficient to the task at hand. The extent of such needed new investment is unclear to the authors but assuming that in many countries' capacity was already underinvested in prior to the pandemic, it is reasonable to hypothesize that strong fresh investment is warranted in spite of the fiscal challenges arising from broad direct public responses to the pandemic.

### **Actions to support current analysis relevant to COVID-19**

Beyond the above general needs engendered by the pandemic, matters of more immediate concern should also be addressed. First, there is a need to actively monitor the transmission of the virus, especially new variants, and put in place appropriate policies to slow the spread. New dynamic surveillance tools, such as the [Global SARS-CoV-2 Surveillance Project](#) (Post et al., 2020) are better at tracking new outbreaks and can potentially be useful in making more targeted policy interventions. Second, decisions about what policy analysis to support in the short run need to take account of what policies are being implemented. In this regard a tool managed by IFPRI (and supported by USAID) will likely prove highly useful. Resnick (2020) describes the [COVID-19 Policy Response Portal \(CPR\)](#) (IFPRI, 2020a), which tracks the emerging policy actions systematically across many different domains, enabling governments, donors, and researchers to compare policy commonalities and differences. By systematically tracking the varied responses, at both the national and subnational levels, the CPR is a resource for better understanding comparative policy processes and, in the long-term, for analyzing the actions that are most effective at protecting jobs, incomes, poverty avoidance, and food security during times of crisis.

The following investments and actions of governments and donors are important to develop effective policy responses to the challenges and opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Invest in data and analytics to enable evidence-based decision-making. As mentioned above, agriculture and food policy capacity varies widely across the countries of SSA and South Asia. With some countries such as India having world class policy research centers while some small countries in Africa and Asia have virtually no capacity for independent research. Even in small countries, however, it is important that local analytical capacity exists to help governments effectively use the diversity of advice that they are given by donors, international research institutes and others (e.g., IFPRI, 2020b; OECD, 2020). For larger countries where food and agriculture are important parts of their economies, skilled policy analysts are surely needed to help guide policy makers. In the time of COVID-19 their role is

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particularly important in providing policy makers with answers to the questions posed in the previous sections.

One example of data that are essential to analyzing the impact of COVID 19 policies and that require substantial human and financial resources is the number and distribution of people who are food insecure. The effective monitoring of food insecurity in a timely manner is anything but a settled matter and this must remain an active research theme at all levels. Only through such work can methods and procedures be developed and refined so as to be able to inform potential analysis more adequately. Methods involving high-frequency data gathering can seemingly assist greatly in timely provision of information on emerging food crises, as illustrated in recent studies in Malawi and Madagascar (e.g., Upton and Knippenberg, 2019). Other work in Malawi has shown how data beyond households themselves can usefully be deployed in food insecurity identification (e.g., Lentz et al., 2019). In short, there is much scope for methodological advance, but this will require continued strong support to both national and international food policy research, support that will surely be challenging for donors to mount in the inevitable fiscal crises arising from the pandemic.

Another way governments and donors can strengthen these policy centers is to encourage them to listen to a large range of interest groups and ensure that the centers are included in developing the responses to crises. Even the larger policy research centers, particularly those at universities, often are not as inclusive as is optimal for good policy advice or for their continued strength. Advisory boards, which include representatives of small farms, consumers, civil society organizations, and agribusiness, can help these centers access government and private sources of funds and also help set research priorities and provide practical suggestions and feedback on policy recommendations. Another way to strengthen food and agricultural policy organizations is to ensure that they have influence on key policy issues such as health policy. This may, however, leave the development of COVID 19 policies at the mercy of the health ministers who may be insufficiently informed about how food supply chains work and the realities of rural poverty.

2. Governments and donors need to support the development and publication of national COVID-19 response plans. All countries in SSA and South Asia have a set of policies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic (IFPRI, 2020). What is needed in many countries is a national, multi-sector, multi-stakeholder national COVID-19 response plan that is developed with input from important stakeholders and input from food and agricultural policy analysts. The latter can ensure that the health and rebuilding plans include knowledge about where food comes from, what is essential to food supply and which components of the food system may need help. Inclusion of interest groups in the planning process and transparency in planning and assistance implementation can build greater trust among citizens.

Donors who are often funding the planning process can enable food policy analysts and interest groups at the table in make the plans. In addition, they can ensure that the plans are published, are available to the media in hard copy and electronic form and in multiple languages if needed.

The Malawian government's whole of government approach to developing the country's COVID response plan included consultations with civil society, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. It is published on the web in English (Government of Malawi, 2020). As

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such it has many of the features that other countries might usefully emulate. Since it is available, some of the limitations are also apparent— particularly the seemingly limited contribution of Malawian food and agricultural policy analysts. Agriculture, which is a large part of the Malawian economy, is not mentioned explicitly in the 73 pages of the document (Government of Malawi, 2020).

3. Governments and donors should also work to ensure that a wide range of interest groups and representatives of poor and marginalized citizens play a role in implementing the policies of the COVID plan and in the complementary decision-making processes on food and agriculture issues that are not in the plan. In countries where governments that have more faith in government allocation of goods and services than in private markets, special efforts have been necessary to include agribusinesses in policy making. For example, agribusiness groups in Senegal had little influence on policy until programs sponsored by USAID brought them together with policy makers (USAID, 2017). These same groups could work with the policy makers to mitigate the effects of international and national travel restrictions on machinery and other agricultural inputs such as fertilizer. In Kenya USAID helped strengthen the Agricultural Council of Kenya to bring together business groups along the food and agricultural supply chains to participate in government planning activities (USAID, 2017). Donors also supported the organization of specific agribusiness groups such as the Kenya Seed Trade Association that now interacts regularly with government regulators and policy makers. These organizations could be sources of practical advice on policies to keep food supply chains open during the pandemic and building stronger supply chains in the future.

An even bigger challenge for the forces of inclusion is who to include to represent small-scale farmers, labor, SMEs in the food chain and other marginalized groups. Some of them are represented by NGOs and some of these NGOs are influential because they are well financed by donors. Religious groups can also be supportive of small-scale farmers and the poor. Farmer cooperatives in some countries have strong political influence. Making use of these disparate groups without being captured by the noisiest ones can be a challenge for food and agricultural policy organizations.

4. Donors and governments can enhance accountability for implementing policies concerning food security and health. One method is convening stakeholders to review government and donor agricultural and health plans. USAID has supported joint sector reviews of agricultural plans and programs in which stakeholders agree to take actions that are essential to accomplishing the goals of the plan or program. The stakeholders convene regularly and review whether their targets have been met. These convenings could be even more important with COVID-19 policies in which large sums of money and other resources will be going into the food and agricultural sector with many opportunities for misdirection.

Perhaps more important for ensuring that food and agricultural policy makers are held accountable is strengthening the role of the press and other forms of media. The process starts by governments publishing their COVID-19 plans, policy analysts assessing the impacts of the actions and then making their analyses available to the press in a timely fashion. The national and international press, radio, TV, and the web can inform policy makers about how the program is progressing and register unhappiness or outrage if the plans and policies don't work. Governments and donors can support a free press that is

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knowledgeable about agricultural and food issues through journalist training programs and more generally support for a free press.

5. Use the occasion of the pandemic to make needed changes in the policy process. One possible example would be government support for investments in infrastructure for strong digital networks (e.g., Anderson, 2020b). This infrastructure includes not only hardware but also government supply of data of interest to farmers that agricultural extension and private suppliers of advice (e.g., Anderson, 2020a) can package for farmers. If these networks are available to poor farmers and workers, they can use them to find the market prices of their crops and inputs and also to access information about how they can protect themselves and their families from COVID-19. If civil society organizations, the press and political parties are active, farmers may also have more power to hold their local political representatives accountable for their promises by finding out how they are actually voting and perhaps sharing information about their representative's lifestyles.

## **Conclusion**

This Brief has sought to indicate the strong potential relevance of food policy analysis for a time of pandemic in leading to policy making that can help to avoid problems of food insecurity. Achieving food security for populations has long been an important aspect of food policy analysis. As food supply chains are compromised by a pandemic and the restrictive requirements introduced to attempt to contain it and save lives, such policy analysis is arguably even more important than in more usual times. Donors thus need to be attentive to building and maintaining the capacity to conduct such analysis and inform policy makers at both national and international levels. Of course, there are also issues of capacity sustenance in other sectors such as health and education but, to answer the question in the title, the conclusion is "Yes", and indeed food policy capacity is an issue worthy of close attention at this time.

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