Tracking Data and Evidence on the Indirect Impact of COVID-19 on Selected Nutrition Outcomes, Interventions and Policy Responses

Monthly Update - February 2021

The Technical Assistance to Strengthen Capabilities (TASC) project compiles monthly new data and evidence related to the indirect impact of COVID-19 on selected nutrition outcomes in order to support strategic decision-making of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Topics covered by this resource tracker include: nutritional status, breastfeeding practices, diet diversity and practices, availability and price of nutritious foodstuffs, delivery and coverage of nutrition-related interventions, global policy and responses, and gender, equity and social inclusion. Sources identified comprise mainly of peer reviewed papers, surveys, grey literature. Where relevant, information from webinars, blogs, and various informal communications has been included as well.

February 2021 headlines

- In 10 low and middle-income countries (LMIC), population-level malnutrition may have played a role in increasing the risk of fatal COVID-19, as suggested by the coexistence of a high burden of malnutrition and elevated mortality among COVID-19 cases.
- Micro, small, and medium-sized food enterprises, operational in nutritious foods value chains such as legumes, dairy and vegetables, have experienced severe negative impacts due to COVID-19 and associated restrictions.
- Rising food prices, reduced incomes and stricter COVID-19 restrictions are prolonging acute food insecurity for the poor in several African countries.
- It is likely that school closures have led to a further slight increase in the number of children missing out on school meals in January 2021.

The February 2021 version of the evidence tracker contains source descriptions of 14 documents published in January 2021. Summaries of this new evidence have been described in the attached core document.

Some highlights are:

- A peer reviewed article from Frontiers in Nutrition suggests that malnutrition may be related to increased rates of fatal COVID-19 in areas with an elevated burden of undernutrition. Malnutrition in this instance, is quantified using the indicators for underweight, stunting and/or wasting, and years lived with disability (YLD) attributed to iron and vitamin A deficiencies and high body mass index (BMI). In ten LMIC, population level malnutrition, estimated using the 2019 Global Burden of Disease, may have played a role in increasing the country's vulnerability to fatal COVID-19, as suggested by the coexistence of a high burden of malnutrition and elevated mortality among COVID-19 cases. The most affected are low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel strip, as well as Yemen in the Middle East and North African region. Nordhagen et al. reports how the pandemic and associated restrictions affected micro, small, and medium-sized food enterprises. Negative impacts on operations were most severe for companies working in processing, crop farming, retail, catering and food service sectors, particularly in value chains for nutritious foods, including legumes, dairy, and vegetables.

- Country-level analysis by FEWS NET shows that reduced household disposable income and food market uncertainties have increased household food insecurity in Uganda and Rwanda. In Kenya, rising food prices and newly introduced COVID-19 restrictions are prolonging acute food insecurity for many, especially for poor urban households.
- Updates from an ongoing surveying exercise by 60 decibels reveals that 20% of households experienced a decrease in food consumption as a result of COVID-19 between October and November 2020. In comparison, 10% of households have seen an increase.
- Early results from the World Bank's series of rapid response phone surveys on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 indicate declining levels of employment, income losses, worsening food security, and loss of human capital across Sub-Saharan Africa.
- The most recent data collected for Kenya's High Frequency Monitoring Dashboard (measuring socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the country) reveals that in January 2021, adults and children in urban and rural households have skipped meals during a period of at least two days in the week prior to January 18, 2021.
- Numerous modifications have been made to community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) of children under five during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the most frequent being the introduction of the measurement of mid- upper arm circumference by caregivers (referred to as "Family MUAC"), followed by modifications to scheduled follow-up appointments for treatment. Learnings from these adaptations have been documented and have led to practical recommendations for improvement, such as procuring sufficient MUAC tapes for wider distribution to maximise coverage or identifying storage alternatives for families unable to safely manage the larger ration sizes that accompany less frequent clinic visits (Wrabel, 2021).
- The latest estimates from WFP's Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures suggest another slight increase in the number of children missing out on meals at school at 267 million globally, 49% of which are girls. This is up from previous estimates of 264 million in January and of 246 million in December, though significantly lower than the 369 million observed at the peak of global school closures in April 2020. The number of countries that have found alternative solutions to reach school children with meals remains at 79, compared with 58 countries in September 2020.
- UNICEF and WFP estimate that in 2020, 39 billion in-school meals have been missed globally during school closures by children who were benefiting from school feeding programmes pre-crisis. Fifty two percent of school-meals missed were in LMIC (Borkowski et al., 2021). Children are estimated to have missed an average of 4 out of 10 in-school meals they would have regularly received, with children in some countries missing 9 out of 10 in-school meals.
- The UN Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020 report calls for greater investment in primary data collection, especially for the measurement of the impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition. In order to be better prepared for and to build resilience to future disasters and pandemics, the report recommends that governments should invest in stronger disaster preparedness, early warning and response systems. The report reiterates the importance of the inclusion and protection of the most vulnerable populations in responses to COVID-19, as the virus disproportionally affects those experiencing poor health and malnutrition, the poor, women and children, the chronically sick and old, those living in fragile or conflict-affected states, minorities, refugees and the unsheltered.

This document was produced by the TASC project, to summarise new data, evidence, and intelligence on the indirect impacts of COVID-19 on nutrition, as well as policy responses to address these impacts.

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