

POVERTY REDUCTION FORUM TRUST

COVID-19: POVERTY WATCH SERIES



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DORA RURAL COMMUNITY

SITUATIONAL REPORT

31 MARCH - 17 APRIL 2020

BACKGROUND

The Poverty Reduction Forum Trust under its Poverty Watch Flagship is committed to tell the socio-economic situation and daily lived poverty realities in selected locations across Zimbabwe. PRFT continues to undertake this work during the COVID-19 pandemic and offer recommendations for alternative policies and programmes that can transform the wellbeing of poor and marginalized groups during this period. Realizing the burden the pandemic has brought on the people, the Poverty Reduction Forum Trust is committed to track its real and potential impact on poor and marginalized communities and proffer solutions.

This paper focuses on highlighting lived experiences of the Dora Community (Zimunya District, Mutare and approximately 25km from Mutare town) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information presented in this paper was gathered using the 16 Poverty Reduction Forum Community Advisory Committee (CAC) instituted under the Resilient Roots Initiative. The information provided by the committee members was triangulated by PRFT programmes staff through analysis of similar information received on the various online information on the COVID-19 platforms. In observing the Safeguarding and Doing No Harm principles, PRFT encouraged the CAC members to practice social distancing as in accordance with international health standards and solicit information from their mobile phone contacts and observations in their daily interactions with the environment. Further consultations were also done reviewing Government statements and media articles.

Markets play a basic but complex role in rural poverty in times of disasters. The President's directive to allow farmers to continue supplying the informal fruit and vegetable markets with their produce, so as to feed the nation was a welcome move. However, the Dora Community which mainly subsist on vegetable, firewood, river sand and quarry stones selling to nearby residential areas such as Dangamvura in Mutare Urban, are not finding it easy to operate under the new directive. The Sakubva vegetable market which is the main market where the community members sell their produce is opening at 4:00 am and closing at 9:00 am, giving limited time to farmers to sell all their produce. The result has been the inability to sell garden produce by the peasant farmers and failure to obtain consumption goods at low market prices by the rest of the community members.

Transport and market opening and closing time threaten the survival of rural peasant farmers.

Public transport operations were suspended from 31st March 2020 as part of the national lockdown guidelines, with only essential services and government owned public transport allowed to operate. The Dora farmers complain of lack of public transport to transport their produce to the Sakubva market. There is no public transport to ferry their produce to the market given the markets are opening at 04:00am and closing at 09:00am. Information from the Dora Community indicates that some farmers have resorted to transport their produce on foot to Dangamvura which is the nearest urban suburb, approximately 15 km from Dora Ward 5 and 35. They then sell their produce by moving from door to door, exposing themselves to the virus. Measures have to be put to ensure that transport is made available to peasant farmers in rural areas so that they are able to transport their produce to the market with limited hurdles. Farmers may organize themselves into groups to market their produce as a way of limiting the number of people travelling to and from the market.

Hunger and starvation threaten the observance of the national lockdown guidelines by the rural folk.

The community food situation is dire and worsening due to livelihood activities which were stopped in accordance with the national lockdown guidelines. Other livelihood activities such as vegetable, firewood, river sand and quarry stones selling cushioned the agriculture based community in times of climate change induced crop failure. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with poor harvest in Dora community and this has undermined household food security during this period. This coupled with limited disposable incomes available to the community due to the nature of the economic activities which they undertake is making near impossible for the community to fend for themselves during COVID-19 crisis. Data from the community indicates that a 2 litre cooking oil is going for ZWL\$200.00, 250g Kapenta (Matemba) ZWL\$160, 2kg Sugar ZWL\$250.00 and 10kg Meali-Meal going for USD\$ 6.00. The cost of basic goods in the area is unbearable and only serves to aggravate poverty, hunger and starvation. Humanitarian response in the area is also lacking with GOAL International being the notable player that has given a limited number of people in the community food packs with a second round expected by the community soon. The situation calls for more Humanitarian Agencies to assist rural communities who harbor most of marginalized groups disaggregated by age, sex, disability, income, religion etc.

Government response and sense of urgency worrying. The Government has not been proactive in organizing the community and aligning them to government disaster response programs such as the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan. The community acknowledged that the only communication from government to the community only came as an instruction for village heads and councilors to compile list of households in the area and nothing has since materialized from that exercise. Government efforts are concentrated in the urban areas, Harare and Bulawayo which have recorded the highest cases and pose a greater risk of spreading the virus. However, a balance has to be achieved in fighting the virus and this entails the protection of people in rural areas by addressing the most critical and immediate needs targeting most affected districts.

Access to reliable health information key COVID-19 fight strategy. A limited number of people in the community have access to radio sets and smart phones, making radio and online communication platforms such as WhatsApp the two main sources of information to the community. The majority of the people do not have access to other sources of official news such as newspapers, or television. Community members attested that they are largely receiving updates from the radio and WhatsApp and the majority of news is spread as hear-say resulting in a lot of misinformation about the COVID-19 disaster situation. It is worrying that of recent, WhatsApp has been a source of fake news which heightens the need to relook at new ways of how communities can receive official and authentic information with regards to health and COVID-19. There is an opportunity for Government to speed-up the process of allocating space to rural community radios and for social entrepreneurs to capture the opportunity.

Recommendations

1. Government should increase operating time for markets and ensure that farmers and buyers observe social distancing and come up with a model that will allow security forces to administer social distance guidelines at market places. Government should also ensure that government public transport is available at times where communal farmers transport their produce to local markets.
2. We call on the government to monitor unjustified prices increase of basic goods in communal areas. The Government through the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare in coordination with humanitarian agencies should operationalize the Government - UN USD\$715 million Humanitarian Response Plan addressing the most critical and immediate needs targeting most affected districts in a manner that is transparent and accountable.
3. Government should take this opportunity to speed-up the setting up of community based radio stations as part of its communication strategy. This will allow the flow of critical health information on COVID-19 and prepare the communities accordingly.

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