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Tackling the interplay between food security and COVID-19 containment within informal settlements:



FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

CITY POPULATION: 1,202,000ⁱ

With 68 informal settlements housing 35% of its population, the city of Freetown is addressing the additional challenges of implementing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) containment measures in densely populated communities with low or no personal savings or food reserves. By providing emergency food packages to communities and quarantine homes in informal settlements, the city of Freetown has been addressing immediate food security needs and enabling individuals to follow COVID-19 containment measures. Through an urban farming initiative, the city will support sustainable access to nutritious food and build resilience to future crises.

COVID-19 exacerbates existing inequalities

While COVID-19 spreads around the world, the negative impacts of the pandemic are being disproportionately felt by those living in vulnerable situations. Without targeted interventions to address the specific challenges faced by these groups, existing health inequalities will widen.

Living conditions within crowded informal settlements are already a significant issue for health, and COVID-19 exacerbates this risk. Virus containment measures such as physical distancing, handwashing and self-isolating can be difficult or impossible in situations where access to water, food and space are limited. These barriers to behaviour change can reduce the effectiveness of the containment measures, leaving this population disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19.

The impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity

Sierra Leone is already one of 25 countries identified as at risk of significant food security deterioration as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP).ⁱⁱ The number of people facing acute food insecurity in these countries is predicted to almost double to 270 million before the end of 2020 without an acceleration of protection programs. Food security is worsening due to COVID-19 as a result of household purchasing power declining from loss of income and remittance, and disruptions to food production and supply chains. There is also concern that overwhelmed governments, increased political instability and aggravated conflict dynamics caused by the pandemic will exacerbate the situation further.

Food insecurity is a major challenge to COVID-19 containment. In Sierra Leone, the size of the challenge was highlighted in a national survey carried out in April, where only 12% of respondents answered that they could gather food for one week or more. 60% answered that they could not sustain 'lockdown' or movement restrictions for more than three days at a time.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the capital city of Sierra Leone, around 30% of Freetown's 1.2 million residents have an available family income of less than 1 USD per day and 47% do not have direct access to running water.^{iv} Improving individual food and water security is an urgent challenge for Freetown, as a human rights issue but also as a threat to containing COVID-19. Understanding that food insecurity is a risk to COVID-19 containment and will be aggravated by the pandemic, Freetown City Council – led by Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer – has been working with partners to address immediate needs, as well as investing in long-term initiatives to build resilience.

Emergency food provision

Leveraging lessons from their experiences during the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak, the city has been rapidly implementing social protection interventions to protect those most vulnerable. In April during a national 3-day order to stay at home, the city government provided 6000 households in three informal settlements with emergency food packages.^v

Freetown has been providing its quarantine residences with food packages.^{vi} These donations supplement national government provisions and support and encourage residents in following quarantine measures. Through the [Partnership for Healthy Cities](#)—a global initiative funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, in collaboration with the World Health Organization and Vital Strategies—Mayor Aki-Sawyer has shared early experiences and lessons learned during the pandemic response, with other cities in the region and globally. With support from the Partnership, Freetown is monitoring public awareness and perceptions of COVID-19. Findings from their knowledge, attitude and practices (KAP) survey are being used to develop targeted risk communication for specific audiences within the city.



Source: Freetown City Council

Training and resources for urban farming

With a view to tackling the long-term issue of food security and sustainable access to nutritious food, Freetown City Council has made urban farming a critical component of their [COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan](#). During the ongoing pandemic, communities in informal settlements will be supported to grow their own vegetables, beginning with training by extension officers of individuals and youth groups on planting, watering and how to make compost. Freetown City Council will provide seeds of fast-growing food crops, in addition to soil and tools. Each new urban farmer will be given small, reusable holding equipment to grow their vegetables. Work is underway to make water available outside of rainy season.

Food security is a critical component of the COVID-19 response

Cities facing the dual crises of acute food insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the prospect of further deterioration of food insecurity, must preserve and strengthen existing nutrition programmes. Local governments should consider new social protection measures to protect vulnerable populations who are at increased risk of economic hardship due to the pandemic, which may negatively impact access to healthy food at a time when it is most needed.

Key Resources for COVID-19 and Food Security

- [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition](#); United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition
- [The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting people's food environments: a resource list on Food Systems and Nutrition responses](#); United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition
- [FAO-WFP Early Warning Analysis of Acute Food Insecurity Hotspots](#)
- [FAO Q&A: COVID-19 pandemic – impact on food and agriculture](#)
- [PAHO Promoting health equity, gender and ethnic equality, and human rights in COVID-19 responses: Key considerations](#)
- [WHO Healthy at Home: Healthy Diet](#)
- [Scaling up COVID-19 Outbreak Readiness and Response in Camps and Camp Based Settings](#); jointly developed by IASC / IFRC / IOM / UNHCR / WHO

ⁱ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision, custom data acquired via website. (<https://population.un.org/wup/>; accessed 11 July 2020)

ⁱⁱ FAO and WFP. 2020. FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots: July 2020. Rome. (<https://www.wfp.org/publications/fao-wfp-early-warning-analysis-acute-food-insecurity-hotspots>; accessed 21 July 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Research brief: Preliminary Results from Rapid Survey to Inform COVID-19 Response in Sierra Leone. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab (United States), Institute for Governance Reform (Sierra Leone), and Sierra Leone's Directorate of Science, Technology & Innovation and Ministry of Finance's Research & Delivery Division. (<https://mitgovlab.org/results/preliminary-results-from-rapid-survey-to-inform-covid-19-response-in-sierra-leone/>; accessed 11 July 2020)

^{iv} Freetown City Council COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. Freetown City Council. (https://fcc.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FCC_COVID-19-Preparedness-and-Response-Plan_270420.pdf; accessed 21 July 2020)

^v Mayor Aki-Sawyerr, On Behalf of Freetown City Council, Donated Cooking Provisions to Some of Freetown's Most Vulnerable. Freetown City Council. (<https://fcc.gov.sl/mayor-aki-sawyerr-on-behalf-of-freetown-city-council-donated-cooking-provisions-to-some-of-freetowns-most-vulnerable/>; accessed 21 July 2020).

^{vi} FCC Makes Supplementary Food Support to 142 People in Quarantine. Freetown City Council. (<https://fcc.gov.sl/fcc-provides-supplementary-food-support-to-eight-quarantine-homes-with-support-from-goal-and-care/>; accessed 21 July 2020)