

WHO IS FRAGILE WHO IS NOT?

Deconstructing vulnerability: capturing the resilience of a group of market sellers at the Rubavu Cross border market, Gisenyi (Rwanda)

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Figure 1: Ready to cook goods are very perishable and cannot resist in the market

(Source: GER)

COVID-19 has exposed systemic fragilities in societies across the globe, exposing a range of vulnerabilities, associated with the risk of a loss of income, food insecurity, insecure housing and lack of access to health care and education. Whereas the tendency is for the Global South, to be overwhelmingly associated with disaster management and the need to develop sustainable strategies to respond to a crisis, COVID-19 has exposed dangers often ignored related to growing inequalities and the dynamical way vulnerability can shift to include groups in areas of the world previously not considered at risk (Lancet, 2020). The devastating impact of Covid-19 is undeniable.

At the time of writing, The World Health Organisation and The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control estimate 2.5 million people across the globe have died from the disease.

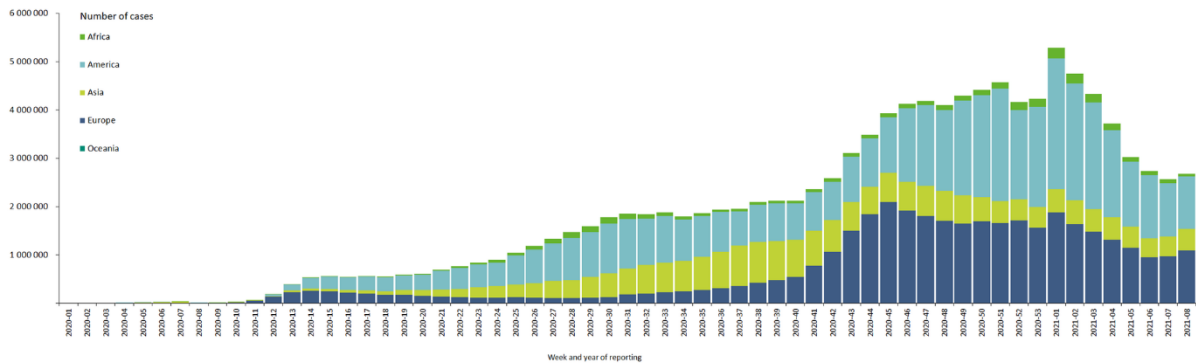


Figure 2: Distribution of COVID-19 cases worldwide, as of week 8 2021

Whilst policy responses are integral to minimising vulnerabilities associated with Covid-19, there is less attention on the agency demonstrated by communities in response to the vulnerabilities exposed. There is growing evidence of the important role communities play through self-organising and engaging in building and/or strengthening social networks and involved in an array of social support strategies (REF). Moreover, communities working together have been at the forefront of advancing strategies and demonstrating community resilience and ways of helping each other meet material needs to survive the pandemic.

As two researchers working in the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University, we had the opportunity to conduct a small exploratory study in partnership with the Global Initiative for Environment and Reconciliation (GER), a Civic Society Organisation, based in Rwanda, which is part of the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Founded in 2015, the organisation mission is to contribute to peacebuilding, reconciliation and improving environmental conditions in Rwanda and around the Region. Working in partnership with GER, we set out to capture the experiences of a small group of subsistence sellers of fresh farm produce at the Rubavu Cross-Border Market in Gisenyi, Rwanda. Our aim was to gain an insight about people's understanding, awareness and perception of hazards, in light of COVID-19, to consider how people were responding and the factors and motivation used to sustain livelihoods and meet their daily food intake, health and wellbeing and that of their families and wider communities. Covid-19 presented an opportunity in real

time to capture how a community came together and developed coping strategies. The study provides an opportunity for learning about how a specific group who are part of the local food system in Rwanda responded during the early stage of a global pandemic.

Background

In recent years, as part of its post-disaster recovery success story, Rwanda is identified as an interesting and important case study to understand the concept of resilience in developing economies (Parker, 2015). The country reportedly made great strides in an ongoing effort to reduce poverty, gender equality; working towards achieving environmental sustainability, improving food production, education and public health. Moreover, leading up to the pandemic Rwanda was acknowledged as one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa. We are mindful that, at this present juncture, much remains in flux and unknown about the impact of the pandemic on the progress reported due to the potential fall-out resulting from COVID-19. The Rwandan government actions, in line with that taken in countries in the Global North and South, has seen the implementation of a range of measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. Controls likely to have adverse and multifaceted impacts on its citizens and economy. Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (2021) review of a small group of men and women involved in food production across 18 African nations, notes that lockdown decision precipitating the closure of borders have adversely affected the cross-border trade between communities leading to negative social and economic ramifications. However, he also identifies positive outcomes: how communities have responded and how Covid-19 has simultaneously been a catalyst creating new opportunities too.

Communities Self organising in response to COVID-19

Our exploratory study engaged with men and women for whom community resilience has been the cornerstone to growing success in surviving multiple hazards. Hence, prior experiences of natural and manmade hazards (instability, Ebola, now Covid-19) means they had experiences of having to be resilient in order to maintain local livelihoods, directly or indirectly. The study set out to explore people's knowledge, awareness and perception of hazards, strategies to adapt to the hazard and enabling factors and motivation to sustain livelihoods. Our partners in Rwanda conducted face-to-face and virtual interviews with

subsistence sellers of farm produce at Rubavu Cross-border market in Rwanda. The data was transcribed by the Coventry University team and analysis carried out together.

There is a long history of cross border market and trading in this area. However, the market has recently undergone development following a joint venture, supported by the Ministry of Trade, Trade Mark East Africa with funding from DFID and the Embassy of Belgium. Today, the RUBAVU Cross Border Market (CBM) is a multipurpose facility with almost 200 spaces dedicated for trading goods, cold rooms to store produce, crèche, warehousing, banks and forex bureaux, sanitary facilities as well as service parking.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig.5

(Source: KT Press)

Hence, Fig 3, 4, and 5 show a market that is new in structure but built on a legacy in which historically, there has been cross border exchange activities. Importantly, this cross-border market plays a vital role in terms of supporting feeding individuals, families and communities on both sides of the border and the contribution it makes to the local economy.

Talking with subsistence sellers

Interviews conducted offer a useful insight into how Covid-19 has affected the everyday lives of a small group of men and women and, the ways the subsistence market sellers of fresh farm produce have organised and responded to the COVID-19 crises. Three key themes emerge from the interviews, illuminating participants' awareness of the impact of life-limiting and contagious hazards and, readiness to implement strategies to survive and sustain livelihoods and maintain health and well-being. The data demonstrates a readiness to adapt and implement changes as a means of safeguarding themselves, families and wider communities. We suggest that the data gathered offers a learning opportunity and tells us much about community resilience in this small group of participants.

Conceptualising community resilience: resistance, care, and action

(a) Awareness and responding to the hazard

During the interviews, participants often spoke about COVID-19 in connection to previous experiences of dealing with a hazardous situation:

.... compared to Ebola, Covid-19 is by far more complicated. With Corona, it is a hardship for everyone, including our DR Congolese neighbours. There are few market-goers from both sides of the border..., we are all struggling. It is difficult, but, we are patient and we shall beat Covid-19 the same way we did with Ebola.

(Butcher at Rubavu Cross-border market).

This meant prior experiences and an understanding of the importance of their role in both controlling the spread but also safeguarding themselves, their families and the wide community informed awareness and responses to COVID-19:

We have to get out of the house and unravel, look after each other and protect each other from the virus because we must stop it from spreading in order to get our livelihoods back. Like the Ebola outbreak, we have the necessary information on how to protect each other from the virus. But, Corona is more dangerous than Ebola - with Ebola, we knew and understood what to do and were able to move around as long as

we followed the guidelines. The concealed nature of Corona is causing unselective hardship. (Market seller of fresh produce at Rubavu Cross-border market).

Participants spoke about how the economic impact was having a significant impact on their livelihood and their capacity to support their families:

Corona has sent our livelihoods on hold, and we are fighting back. At present, we can't bank on our selling fresh farm produce for one's progress. However, by selling tomatoes, at least I get something to take home. Motivation: feed and meet my family basic needs. (Female primary school teacher and market seller at Rubavu)

(b) Resisting the virus or fighting for survival?

Participants shared how they felt it was essential that they took responsibility and find ways of responding to the situation. This often included adapting their usual ways of working and employing new ways to meet their needs:

... We come here because we must keep our market stalls operating.

(Female, Market Seller of Fresh Produce).

They were fully aware that they were potentially exposing themselves to the risk of getting COVID-19, but the 'risk consciously weighed up against the negative outcomes that would result from doing nothing:

.... Why risk our lives by coming to the market? To support each other and keep our hopes alive believing something good is going to happen.

(Female, Market seller of fresh produce).

.In addition, a sub theme in the data is participants reflecting on the future thinking about; longer-term changes, ways of reducing future economic risks to their livelihoods and looking for ways of diversifying their activities:

Who knows what the future holds? We are looking for alternative means so our livelihoods do not depend on cross border exchanges (Male, butcher).

(c) Adjusting and learning from the crisis

As previously noted, the Rubavu Cross Border Market is a thriving market and plays an important role in the local *economy*:



Figure 4: At least 40,000 and 45,000 people cross Rwanda's border with DR Congo known as Petite Barrière from 23 cooperatives in Rwanda and 12 Associations in DR Congo (Source: KT Press, 2018)

Because of the lockdown-induced loss in income, I sometimes miss lunch or dinner. Now that the lockdown has been eased slightly, we are able to haggle, gain some cash, thereby able to put basic food on the table. Once the border re-opens, money will come because Congolese

will come here and Rwandese will go to DR Congo then all of us will have something to do. I am not here to only earn a living, but for my own mental wellbeing too. For the few people able to work, the earned income is spent wisely for I am not sure of getting it tomorrow: e.g. instead of paying for transport, I trek home, and spend the money on my family basics; we replaced fancy food e.g. rich sauces, roast, delicacies etc. with basic foods.

(d) Plans for the future?

First, survive Corona and keep our market stalls operating. (Male, market seller – butcher).

When the market closes at 17h00, I sell from around the market so to make some extra money to take home. I do not mind how little I earn as long as I have something to take home. One needs to survive (Female, Market seller of fresh produce).

With the pandemic, things have changed; we have learnt the importance of savings.

(Female, market seller).

The data highlights communities demonstrating resilience, and ways of managing and coping in a very challenging situation.

(e) Learning from subsistent sellers at Rubavu Cross-border market

This exploratory case study based on interviews with a small group of men and women subsistent sellers of fresh produce at the Rubavu cross-border market provides valuable insight from a group whose experiences are largely invisible due to how the experiences of communities on the ground in Africa is reported. Covid19 has had an impact on agricultural and commercial industries in bordering regions like Rubavu District that rely on heavy movements of people from Rwanda to DRC and vice versa. We suggest that hearing directly from communities on the ground provides a more detailed picture of the daily impact of Covid-19. Allowing for an understanding beyond the morbidity and mortality statistics, which dominate public discourse to the agency employed daily on the ground. The findings

demonstrate the agency employed daily by communities, their determination, adaptability, resilience and hope for tomorrow. A self-driven community at the front line of responding (*e.g. adapting food habits, daily routines etc.*), learning (*e.g. the importance of saving*), and exploring a workable approach to mitigating the impact of hazards and associated vulnerabilities (*e.g. looking for alternative livelihoods/reduce dependency on cross-border activities*). We further observe community ownership of the roles of responder and agent of change exercise some control over their own lives. However, the agency demonstrated by participants in our study does not absolve the state and other key decision makers from having effective channels of communication with communities about how communities can minimize risk and safe guard themselves from contracting and spreading COVID-19.

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