IFPRI MYANMAR

STRATEGY SUPPORT PROGRAM POLICY NOTE 01 APRIL 2020

# Maintaining food and nutrition security in Myanmar during the COVID-19 crisis

## Lessons from India's lockdown

**by Researchers of the International Food Policy Research Institute and Michigan State University**

The recent sudden imposition of a stringent 21-day lockdown in India in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the food security of many vulnerable Indians. These impacts highlight the many challenges that this kind of anti-COVID intervention can pose in other settings where the labor force is mostly informally employed with poor job security and low wages, and where the agri-food systems is similarly informal with widespread use of open-air markets. Myanmar is such a setting.

India's chastening experience with food security during its lockdown suggests the following actions would be imperative for maintaining food security in Myanmar:

- Allow the free movement of all goods. A stable and reliable agri-food system requires free movements of a wide range of food products (including micronutrient-rich fruits, vegetables and animal-sourced foods) as well as essential non-food goods.
- Monitor food markets and agricultural value chains as closely as possible to address problems when they do arise.
- Reduce risk of COVID-19 contagion by improving hygiene in Myanmar's food markets.
- Issue clear directives to police, military, and local authorities not to impede the movement of goods.

The Government of Myanmar should learn from the mistakes made in India and other developing countries. We must recognize that basic food and nutrition security must be maintained at all times through this complex health and socioeconomic crisis.

### Background: COVID-19's health and economic impacts in Myanmar

Myanmar confirmed its first COVID-19 case on March 24th, and as of April 2nd confirmed an additional 15 cases, although the true extent of the virus is potentially much higher given limited testing. As a result, the Government of Myanmar has taken steps to curtail the spread of the virus, including closing land borders, restricting migration, quarantining infected and exposed individuals, encouraging social distancing and improved hygiene behaviors, and instituting partial lockdowns over the Thingyan

festival, including a fairly strict lockdown in Mandalay. Moreover, the State Councilor has not ruled out the more stringent "lockdown" measures witnessed in other countries, although the Government currently favors quarantining affected communities.[1]

At the same time, development experts have cautioned that the high degree of informality in the Myanmar context would render stringent lockdowns potentially perilous to basic food and nutrition security. Already, the Myanmar economy is suffering from the global contraction in economic output, including large-scale job losses in Myanmar's garment and tourism industries, expected reductions in overseas remittances and foreign exchange earnings, and significant expected contractions in domestic services industries (e.g. restaurants, retail). Though difficult to measure accurately, unemployment is on the rise, and disposable incomes are expected to fall in coming months. Moreover, Myanmar has a large number of chronically food-insecure internally displaced persons. Food and nutrition insecurity were widespread even prior to the current crisis. Hence, even without the imposition of more restrictive anti-COVID-19 measures, it is likely that food and nutrition insecurity are already rising further.

A key policy question is therefore how best to prevent deteriorating food and nutrition security in the context of the potential spread of COVID-19, as well as a prolonged economic crisis. In principle, anti-COVID-19 measures should only be enforced up to the point at which the health benefits of such measures no longer exceed their socioeconomic costs, particularly in terms of food and nutrition insecurity, but also non-COVID-19 health costs.

## Why look at India's experience with a COVID-19 lockdown?

The first phase of the COVID-19 contagion hit China hard in January and February of 2020 before affecting other developed Asian economies, such as South Korea and Japan, then Italy, the rest of Europe, and North America. These economies have pursued a mix of large-scale testing and isolation, voluntary social distancing, and more stringently enforced lockdowns, largely with the goal of "flattening the curve" to avoid overburdening local and national health systems. In terms of slowing contagion, these efforts have been met with varying degrees of effectiveness, depending on governance and societal factors as well as the extent of initial exposure and detection. In all cases, however, the measures have come at a large economic cost. However, in more developed economies lockdown measures are at least feasible for extended periods of time because of greater opportunities to work from home, to maintain income, to shop for food online, and to extend social protection measures relatively quickly.

Recently, however, India became one of the first developing economies to impose a stringent 21-day lockdown in the face of COVID-19. In brief, the law stated that individuals could only leave their homes to purchase food and pharmaceutical goods. The law also prohibited any restrictions on trade in "essential" commodities.

Since India's was the first major developing country to impose such a prolonged and strict lockdown, the impacts of this measure on food and nutrition security provides an early illustration of the many challenges that this kind of anti-COVID intervention can pose in other settings where the labor force is mostly informally employed with poor job security and low wages, and where the agri-food systems is similarly informal with widespread use of open-air markets. Hence, it can be expected that some of the problems emerging in India currently will also emerge in Myanmar if it were to pursue a similarly strict lockdown intervention.

## What's happening in India's food system in the wake of the 21-day lockdown?

The first adverse impact on food security from the announcement of the 21-day lockdown was a large-scale exodus of informal workers from major cities, including Delhi. The lockdown implicitly prohibited

[1] See https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rather-lockdown-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-says-communities-myanmar-may-face-quarantine.html

informal workers from travelling for work, while major construction sites, factories, and service jobs were effectively shut down overnight. Faced with the threat of a complete loss of earnings, most informal workers opted to leave cities and towns to return to their rural homes where they could at least be guaranteed some basic level of food and housing security. However, with the suspension of many transport services, this exodus largely took place on foot in swelteringly hot conditions. These mass movements increased the risk of COVID-19 contagion through crowding on roads and bus stops, but also resulted in severe and immediate food and water insecurity. Tens of thousands of people have left Delhi alone, with similar migrations from other major cities. Many of those on the move are families travelling with young children.

Less well documented by the international media are some of the severe problems that the lockdown is imposing on the agri-food system. However, a recent article by Indian agricultural economist Dr. Sudha Narayan details a wide range of harmful effects of India's 21-day lockdown on the country's food system based on personal interviews and media reports.[2] It could be that some of these problems pertain to unclear guidelines in federal policies, some to misunderstanding or over-zealous enforcement by police and local authorities, and some to state-level interpretations of the federal mandate. Some of the problems mentioned include:

- Closure of some formal wholesale markets, leaving farmers stuck with their harvests with no outlet to sell.
- Reports of police extortion of traders transporting produce, imposing heavy fines or bribes for supposed violations of the lockdown. One farmer organization was pushed to suspend its activities. One state government suspended its procurement of agricultural produce altogether.
- Major disruptions to private e-commerce and micro-delivery firms, with shipment being stopped at state and city limits and harassed by authorities. Several firms suspended operations altogether, counterproductively forcing consumers to engage in more face-to-face interactions with traditional vendors.
- Reports of consumers being harassed by authorities while venturing out to shop for groceries.
- Reports of traders being harassed by authorities while purchasing and selling products and facing difficulties in hiring workers, who are afraid to violate the lockdown's rules.
- Rising uncertainty about food availability, resulting in volatile prices. In some cases, farmers are seeing a sharp decline in prices (halved in some cases) because logistical risks deter traders from procuring produce from farmers. This risk is reportedly leading farmers to delay harvests, which could result in shortages later in the year.

## What are the lessons for Myanmar?

Even if India's lockdown is successful in slowing down COVID-19 containment, there is now a substantial consensus – and acknowledgement by Indian government authorities – that the 21-day lockdown in India was poorly implemented with insufficient foresight for the livelihoods and day-to-day realities of informal markets and informal livelihoods. However, several Indian state governments also showed either foresight (to protect food markets) or hindsight (to correct over-zealous implementation of the lockdown). There are lessons from these state-level interventions for Myanmar too.

For example, Dr. Narayan reports that Tamil Nadu state issued guidelines that explicitly allow for all goods carriers to operate, while Telangana state issued a separate order that seed production, testing, storage, and transport remain unhindered, in preparation for the next agricultural season. Interestingly, neighboring countries, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, took much more

[2] Narayanan, S. 27 March 2020. "Food and agriculture during a pandemic: Managing the consequences." https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/agriculture/food-and-agriculture-during-a-pandemic-managing-the-consequences.html

moderate measures, quarantining only infected localities (as Myanmar is considering), or giving more advance warnings of restrictions on movements potentially to give informal workers time to decide where they are best placed to ride out a prolonged lockdown and depressed economic situation (Bangladesh). Of course, these more moderate approaches carry a risk of accelerating contagion of COVID-19.

India's chastening experience with food security during its lockdown suggests the following actions would be imperative for maintaining food security in Myanmar:

- **Allow the free movement of all goods.** In principle it may seem attractive for the Government of Myanmar to only allow movement of "essential" goods, but the Indian context shows that implementation of such a measure is fraught with hazard in a highly informal economy with relatively weak local governance and rule of law. For example, local authorities in India deemed only staple foods and oils essential foods. But a stable and reliable agri-food system also requires free movements of a much wider range of food products (including micronutrient-rich fruits, vegetables and animal-sourced foods) as well as essential non-food goods: fertilizers, pesticides, seed, mechanization or agricultural extension services are all essential for future food production. But more generally, a highly informal economy needs free movement of all sorts of many other goods just to maintain incomes. As just one example, farmers need phone credit to access microfinance, to access market information services, e.g. prices, or to call traders to arrange sales of their products.

  On a more practical level, the scope for local authorities to mis-apply central government directives is likely to be a significant risk in a country as diverse as Myanmar and is fraught with hazard for the efficient functioning of food markets. It is appropriate to discourage unnecessary travel and movement, but the costs of inhibiting food markets and income-earning activities in a way that severely increases food insecurity will cause a wide range of economic and social problems, thus exacerbating an already difficult situation.

- **Proactively look to address problems in agricultural value chains, both on and off the farm.** One urgent step is to more closely monitor agricultural value chains, to start a dialogue with traders, farmers, wholesalers and retailers to understand any emerging constraints they face in the context of both health-related risks and economic turmoil caused by government health measures or depressed demand for agricultural goods. For example, in China, an IFPRI research team showed that the livestock sector was the most harmed by the lockdown as producers struggled to access the feed supplies needed to keep animals alive.[3] India is also facing serious concerns about a major shortfall in consumption of poultry and dairy and consequent impacts on farmers and traders.[4] In Myanmar we cannot yet predict which sectors and which actors along the value chains will face the most severe problems, but it is critical to monitor food markets and value chains as closely as possible to address problems when they do arise. As just one example, we already knew at the end of January that agricultural exports to China had been severely reduced by COVID-19.[5]

- **Reduce the risk of COVID-19 contagion through food markets.** COVID-19 started in a food market in Wuhan, and there is admittedly scope for it to continue to spread through food markets because of overcrowding and poor hygiene conditions. However, poor people in both rural and urban areas purchase the vast majority of their food from open air markets, including nutrient-rich foods that provide the essential nutrition needed to help prevent or mitigate all sorts of infections. Although closing such markets should be resisted as much as possible, the Government of Myanmar could explore steps to improve hygiene in markets, such as safely disinfecting open-air markets when they are closed, installing additional soap and

[3] Zhang, X. 26 March 2020. "Chinese livestock farms struggle under COVID-19 restrictions." https://www.ifpri.org/blog/chinese-livestock-farms-struggle-under-covid-19-restrictions

[4] See https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/lockdown-effect-low-consumption-of-milk-poultry-worries-ministry/articleshow/74937545.cms

[5] See https://www.mmtimes.com/news/melon-trading-muse-border-halted-amid-coronavirus-fears.html

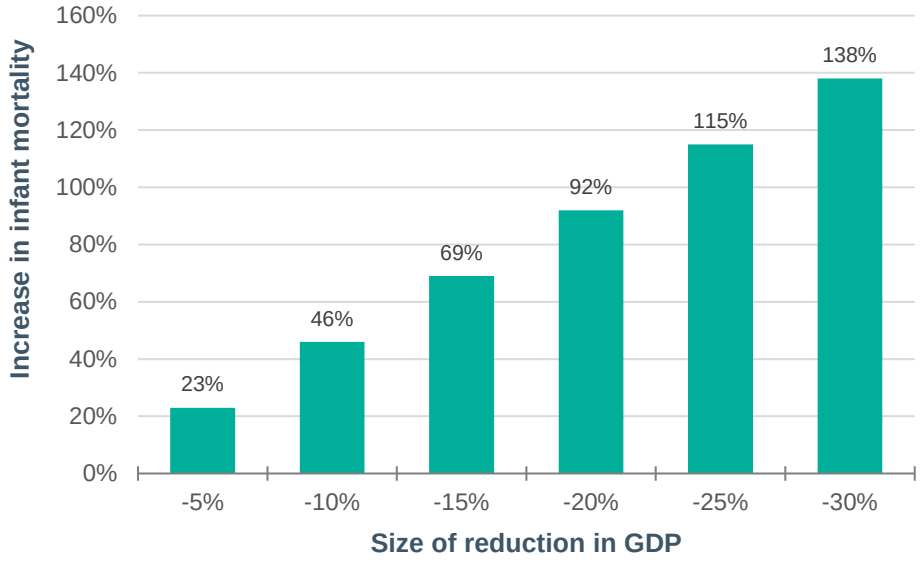
handwashing stations, extending market and shop hours to prevent overcrowding, or regulating entrance into markets (although this would be logistically challenging).

- **Ensure that police, military and other local authorities have clear directives not to impede the movement of goods.** Even with clear directives from the Government allowing food trade, there is a valid concern that some local authorities may still discourage movements of food and non-food commodities. It is critical to issue clear directives to police, military and local authorities not to impede the movement of goods.

Myanmar is facing a potentially severe and protracted health crisis, but it is also facing an economic crisis that may be more severe, and potentially much more protracted. We know that COVID-19 could result in a large number of deaths, but it should also be remembered that severe economic crises also result in deaths from the combination of severe malnutrition and preventable diseases. Published research from India, for example, shows that even ordinary economic downturns significantly raise child mortality rates,[6] whilst similar research from other developing countries also shows close connections between economic shocks and child health and nutrition outcomes.

The COVID-19 crisis is no ordinary crisis, with loss of economic output (GDP) likely to go into double digits in the short to medium term. Figure 1 draws results from India to show the estimated percentage increase in infant mortality predicted by different economic recession scenarios. Infant mortality in Myanmar currently stands at 36.8 deaths per 1,000 infants. The first bar in Figure 1 shows that a 5 percent decline in GDP would predict a 23-point increase in infant mortality, or an extra 8.5 deaths per 1,000 infants. However, at the other extreme a 30 percent reduction in GDP (a massive recession) would predict a 138 percent increase in infant mortality, or an extra 50 children per 1,000 dying, which is clearly calamitous.[7]

**Figure 1. Predicted percentage increases in infant mortality associated with alternative reductions in GDP in Myanmar, based on historical data from India**




Source: Author's estimates from Bhalotra's (2010) study of the impacts of state-level economic shocks on infant mortality in India.

[6] Bhalotra, S. 2010. "Fatal fluctuations? Cyclicality in infant mortality in India." *Journal of Development Economics* 93 (1): 7 19.

[7] Of course, these estimates come from historical data in India, which has different cultural norms and health infrastructure, though a somewhat similar disease environment. It may be that the susceptibility of Myanmar infants to economic shocks is different. Even so, the loss of child life associated with major economic downturns is potentially very large in Myanmar. This impact of the pandemic should be a very real concern for policymakers deliberating on how far anti-COVID-19 measures should go in reducing economic activity and what can be done to mitigate the worst economic impacts of such measures.

Moreover, beyond infant or child mortality, deep and protracted losses in income will also increase child stunting prevalence [8] and micronutrient deficiencies (such as anemia) [9] due to decreased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and animal-sourced foods. The impacts of this "hidden hunger" and retarded child growth and cognitive development may not be noticeable immediately, but will result in worse schooling outcomes, lower productivity in adulthood, and reduced human capital accumulation and long run economic growth.[10]

## Conclusions

In summary, there is a serious risk that mismanaged efforts to stem contagion through a full-scale lockdown could dramatically increase food and nutrition insecurity in Myanmar, and even adversely affect political security when the poor have no recourse to alternative livelihoods. Currently, however, there is still a window of opportunity for the Government of Myanmar to learn from the mistakes made in India and other developing countries; we must recognize that basic food and nutrition security must be maintained at all times through this complex health and socioeconomic crisis.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was undertaken as part of the Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity (MAPSA) through the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). Funding support for this study was provided by the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets and the United States Agency of International Development (USAID). This Policy Note has not gone through IFPRI's standard peer-review procedure. The opinions expressed here belong to the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of IFPRI, MSU, USAID, PIM, or CGIAR.

[8] Haddad, L., H. Alderman, S. Appleton, L. Song, and Y. Yohannes. 2003. "Reducing child malnutrition: How far does income growth take us?" *World Bank Economic Review* 17: 107-131.

[9] Block, S., L. Kiess, P. Webb, S. Kosen, R. Moench-Pfanner, M.W. Bloem, and C.P. Timmer. 2004. "Macro shocks and micro outcomes: Child nutrition during Indonesia's crisis." *Economics and Human Biology* 2: 21-44.

[10] Hoddinott, J., H. Alderman, J.R. Behrman, L. Haddad, and S. Horton. 2013. "The economic rationale for investing in stunting reduction." *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 9: 69-82.

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The Myanmar Strategy Support Program (Myanmar SSP) is led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in partnership with Michigan State University (MSU). Funding support for Myanmar SSP is provided by the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets; the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT); and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This publication has been prepared as an output of Myanmar SSP. It has not been independently peer reviewed. Any opinions expressed here belong to the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of IFPRI, MSU, LIFT, USAID, or CGIAR.