

Introduction

COVID-19 is threatening the food security and long-term livelihoods of the PSNP poor households. PSNP beneficiaries face multitude of vulnerabilities to the pandemic's effect as their coping resources are limited. The FAO report (2020) indicated that social protection systems, in low-income and fragile countries, need to be expanded in response to COVID-19 to protect lives and livelihoods; ensure ongoing access to food; and ensure the resilience of food systems.

In agreement with FAO recommendation, Food Security Coordination Directorate of the Ethiopian government proposed detailed measures to contain the impact of COVID-19 and protect the livelihoods of productive safety net beneficiaries. The measures cover the remaining months of the current fiscal year (EFY 2012/2013) and next phase of the programme. Two of the measures taken are waiver of public work from April – June 2020, and allowing lump sum payment to help beneficiaries cope with possible food gap (FSCD, 2020).

Despite these measures, COVID-19 is worsening the food insecurity challenges of PSNP farmers who do not have any food reserve due to the increasing price of food products and inability to earn additional income through casual labour following mobility restrictions imposed by the government. These chains of problems reinforce each other in a vicious cycle to further devastate the lives of PSNP farmers. As many studies show, poor households face a concrete trade-off between hunger and risking exposure to the virus (Hirvonen et al.; 2020; Ravallion 2020).

This rapid assessment was conducted to better understand how the pandemic affects the PSNP farming community livelihoods who are one of the most vulnerable and chronically food insecure groups even during normal days.

Effect of COVID-19 on PSNP programme operations and its beneficiaries

Harmonized response is required to counter COVID-19 impact on the PSNP programme and beneficiaries. Breaking the vicious circle of chronic food insecurity and livelihood crises needs a joint effective partnership with the government, donors and NGOs. Based on the rapid assessment conducted in four regional states covering 60 BENEFIT-REALISE PSNP woredas the following recommendations are put forward;

- Provide quick food access needed to sustain lives.
- Supply food items nearby their village through basic cooperatives to reduce their movement to urban in search of food items.
- Conduct awareness creation on prevention measures of COVID-19 and provide COVID-19 protective supplies (soap, alcohol and face mask) with necessary orientations /demonstrations to the farmers.
- Ease restrictions with necessary preventive measures to resume the implementation of important off-farm activities that are strong livelihood foundation for the PSNP farmers.
- Put in place credit facilities to mitigate COVID-19 impact on finance and use of agricultural inputs, reported as a major challenge by all the clusters.
- Give attention to female headed households who depend on petty trade and have no other means of livelihood during this pandemic, such as providing permanent direct support.
- Put in place mechanisms to supply water nearby their residence to restrict travel to town and exposure them to infection.
- Revise wage rate us per the current market price for grain.

Methodology

This report is a summary of the findings of eight university clusters (Arsi, Arbaminch, Bahirdar, Odabultum, Hawassa, Mekelle, Haramaya and Woldia). PSNP woredas were selected and discussion guided checklist was used to gather primary data from Regional Bureau of Agriculture Offices (BoAs), Regional Agriculture Research Institutes (RARIs), NGOs, input suppliers, Micro Finance Insinuations (MFIs), PSNP farmers, Development Agents (DAs), safety net focal persons/ experts and directors through face to face interviews and focal group discussions. Secondary data was also gathered through questionnaires.

PSNP pathways affected by COVID-19 and associated measures taken to minimize its impact

A. Permanent direct support component (for sick, elderly, lactating mothers and disabled people)

The permanent direct support receivers under this component are freely supported without public work. They continued to receive direct support/ cash transfer and the same amount of cash across all clusters. Arrangements have been made to pay lump-sum amount to reduce mobility and physical contact.

However, the pandemic has worsened their living conditions as the market price of consumable goods increased and the decreasing in purchasing power of birr decreased considerably because of COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, PSNP payment has not been enough to operate different activities and families used to depend on others like relatives and children remittances for meeting their daily needs

In addition, due to COVID-19 pandemic restriction on mobility and physical distancing measures the delivery of social service, such as Idir, Equb, at household level has been restricted.

B. Public works and the link to social services component (abled body)

PSNP public work is labor-intensive community-based activities designed to provide employment for chronically food insecure people in exchange for labor services with cash payment or food transfer. This pathway is the most directly affected pathway, as reported by the clusters.

Due to the pandemic, public work on natural resources and watershed management are affected in almost all woredas of the clusters. In all the clusters, precautionary measures are in place for public works. Working in large groups is prohibited. Farmers are obliged to take the necessary measures by keeping physical distance, working individually than in groups, proper sanitation (hand washing, use of sanitizers) and working in shifts. Some regional governments have issued directions and implementing precautionary measures.

Mekelle and Arsi reported a complete restriction of public works while in some woredas, Bahirdar, Hawassa, Arbaminch, Woldia, Hawassa and Odabultum university clusters, some mobility is permitted with necessary safety measures.

Hawassa and SNNPR woredas were advised to shift their capital budget (e.g unfinished construction budget) to complete public work activities that can be managed by very small number of farmers, like tree nursery management working in shifts.

In Haramaya, even though there is no official restriction on public work, participation is decreasing due to fear of COVID-19. In Tigray, compensation plans are devised to pay the non-worked public workdays in the planting season through digging plant hole and seedling transporting and planting. In Arbaminch, the PSNP participants are taking advantage of the slack time to engage themselves as daily labourers in the private-owned banana and onion farms, to generate income.

There are also changes in payment modality arrangements. The remaining monthly payment for both direct and public work beneficiaries was decided to be paid all at once in order to reduce mobility.

C. Livelihoods component (crop-livestock, off-farm activities)

The PSNP livelihood component is rated as the second most directly affected pathway next to the public works pathway in all regions reported by university clusters. Because of the mobility restriction, farmers were not able to sell their produces in markets at competitive prices, as before. All clusters reported farmers were forced to sell their farm products (grain and vegetables) and animals produce at cheap prices in all the woredas /clusters.

In Odabultum, the prices of milk and khat (cash crop) were reduced by half. The demand for milk products declined considerably, due to lack of transportation to reach further market areas and inability of traders and brokers to travel to farm-gate market. In Tigray, farmers who are engaged in animal fattening were not able to sell their animals for a better price in nearby urban centers due to limited market opportunities. Vegetable and perishable crops were also dumped due to the lack of transportation facility. All these affected the income/ saving and livelihoods of the households. On the other hand, commodities used for daily lives were bought at higher prices as there is a shortfall of supply of consumable commodities in the market. Regular markets were suspended and trade flows of food commodities and other necessities were disrupted causing food shortages in the local market, further impacting food security.

D. Off- farm activities

The restriction of movement is directly affecting off-farm employment severely. Off farm activities are the sole income/ cash generating activity PSNP farmers depend on for their livelihoods. Due to the labor mobility restrictions and no additional income PSNP farmers are now unable to afford to buy improved agricultural inputs for the coming cropping season. This is in addition to the shortage and high transportation cost that is already limiting agricultural inputs that come from woreda towns.

Youth rural-urban migration has been a means of supporting PSNP livelihoods. Youth used to migrate to the nearby town/ city to support families by sending money to buy grain, seed and fertilizers,

among others. However, this trend has now reversed. Youth are now back home with their families in rural areas and becoming dependents who share the resource of the households. This has depleted the resource base of the PSNP households leading to livelihood insecurity and food poverty.

The provision of technical support was also curtailed. In Woldia, youth groups vocational and skill training were postponed because of COVID-19. Business plan preparations, technical training on financial literacy, income generation activities and loan collection and provisions were also affected in Arsi.

Coping mechanisms used by PSNP households

Most of the interviewed PSNP households have restricted themselves at home, reducing movement to market, and avoiding community gathering and labor-intensive activities in their areas. However, because of their poor resource reserve, day to day living is becoming a challenge.

As an immediate measure, they are trying to sufficiently manage their PSNP cash transfer and any other resources they have by reducing their daily food consumption amount, reducing frequency of meals per day, participating in daily labor work and borrowing cash and goods from friends and relatives.

In addition to these coping mechanisms, to offset the decline price of their products and increasing prices of daily commodities respondents in Oromia region Haramaya and Odabultum University clusters sell firewood /charcoal and khat and engage in handcrafts activities to generate cash income.

Specific COVID-19 challenges faced by PSNP farmers

1. Due to shortage and high cost of transportation that resulted from COVID-19 mobility restrictions, farmers are forced to sell their products at lower market prices. For instance, in Mekelle, farmers engaged in fattening were not able to sell their animals and only few succeeded to sell at lower prices. Vegetable products were also wasted. Similarly, in Amhara region Bahirdar cluster reported cheaper selling price of crop and livestock and households were unable to sell wood and wood products.
2. Massive urban-rural youth unemployment due to transportation restriction and limited on off-farm activities is increasing household dependents worsening household food shortage increasing economic and social stress.
3. In Oromia Arsi University cluster, mobility restriction is severely impacting PSNP female households as off-farm activities such as petty trade for generating incomes are affected.
4. PSNP farmers usually are engaged as daily labourers in towns to finance land preparation, rent oxen and buy input (seed fertilizer and chemicals). Less income means inability to buy improved agricultural inputs for the coming cropping season. Odabultum University cluster reported seed support through PSNP was ceased in West Harerghe.
5. Lack of credit facility was reported as a major challenge by all the clusters. Absence of local credit (grain and money from local traders) due to the absence of trust was also reported by Odabultum.
6. There is a mismatch between community traditional lifestyle and proposed prevention measures of the COVID-19. For instance, social distancing and no handshaking in some places such as Derashe woreda in Arbaminch area, where people mourn by shaking hands during funerals is causing cultural clash. Lack of applying social distancing, in khat chewing ceremonies, in Odabultum and reluctance to apply other safety measures like washing hands properly in Haramaya, increasingly

expose PSNP householders to COVID-19 infection.

7. Restrictions on informal social support systems like Idir, Ikub, Guza/Debo, Afosha that pull community members together to discuss social and economic matters in large groups, is further increasing PSNP households vulnerability.

PSNP support needed and provided during COVID-19

PSNP farmers are traumatized by the pandemic. With increasing number of vulnerable households, more than other times, there is fear of starvation and hunger. With limited off-farm activities, the potential of income-generating activities are affected and farmers do not have money to buy food items, edible oil, salt and other consumable products. Most are entirely dependent on grains stored at home.

A women group discussant having more than five family members from Odabultum stated that, "In previous years, we used to generate additional income through selling vegetables and Khat to cover family expenses, now it is not possible to do that and the family is consuming sorghum grain stored at home from last year. As last year's sorghum production was low, and we have no money to buy edible oil, salt and other consumable products, we fear hunger will come soon."

PSNP farmers didn't get notable and sustainable support so far other than the usual transfer. In Tigray, Mekelle cluster reported that farmers are demanding credit access, however there is no such arrangements in place yet. In some PSNP woredas of Amhara region, Bahirdar University cluster reported, agricultural input distribution is given to those PSNP farmers who are able to pay 25-50% of the credit for input distribution. In SNNP, at Hawassa University cluster, PSNP farmers requested for cash support to buy food for additional household members and for protective materials such as soap and hand sanitizer/ alcohol. However, only one woreda-Bona Zuria of Sidama, has provided households with food items, such as

cooking oil and wheat flour and some woredas have made efforts to avail hand washing and sanitizers in some gathering areas.

In Oromia, Arsi University cluster reported, few households received agricultural input grants such as seed and fertilizer from BENEFIT-REALIZE programme. In Odabultum University cluster, there was seed support from NGOs like World Vision and Catholic Relief Service. Whereas there was no specific support given to the PSNP communities in Haramaya, East Hareghe areas.

Food access, agricultural inputs access and timely provision of agricultural inputs, interest free credit, cash to buy food to cover additional households members who migrated back home, extension services and livestock distribution, are reported as urgently demanded commodities/services by the cluster/ respondents in the study regions. There is also a huge demand for protective materials such as soap, hand sanitizer/ alcohol and masks as poor farmers cannot afford to buy them.

Support on job identification and creation that takes COVID-19 into consideration and support for existing business to continue functioning within COVID-19 context are highly crucial. Women and youth are most susceptible in both livelihood and health.

Impact of Reversal of migration due to the mobility restrictions

In all the clusters there is a reversal migration. The hospitality industry, floriculture and construction business where most of the in-country migrant workers are hosted were all severely hit by the pandemic. Due to this, most in-country youth migrant workers lost their jobs and returned to their families in rural areas. In addition, due to the closure of colleges and universities, students returned to their rural homes. All these put pressure on the PSNP households resulting in increased number of family members putting shortage of food leading to livelihood crises and depletion of assets. In some places, violence against women is increasing as told by some respondents in Kucha woreda in Arbaminch.

Similarly, it is common to see youth gambling sitting in every corner in Saesie Tsaeda Emba Saz kebele, Tigray. This shows the need to timely take proper measures to create other means of survival for the youth to prevent them from engaging in criminal and offensive activities endangering peace and the stability in the communities.

Changes on the number of targeted PSNP households

Even though, the number of smallholder farmers that need support in food and income is increasing due to COVID-19, there is no change in the number of targeted PSNP beneficiaries in all clusters, except SNNPR. As reported by Hawassa University cluster targeted PSNP households for this year have increased by 10 percent from the last year. The increment is in both direct and indirect support raised due to man-made and natural calamities such as fire, flood and disabilities.

Changes in PSNP payment (public work, direct transfer, credit or loan for off-farm)

The amount of PSNP payment for beneficiaries stayed the same in all clusters. There is no loan or credit arrangements made to smoothen consumption or compensate for limited off-farm activities to reduce the impact of the pandemic on PSNP households in all the clusters.

Change in PSNP payment modalities

All clusters except Mekelle in Tigray and Arsi in Oromia made cash payments in person face to face, taking necessary COVID-19 precautions (social distancing, sanitizer, soap & water) and following the orientation from the government like reducing the number of farmers served per day, arranging in advance through phone communication and keeping physical distance. In Mekelle and Arsi, cash payments were transferred through a bank account. When payment is made in kind; food items are transferred in person.

Transfer of some month payments was also made in advance as reported in Hawassa, Odabultum and Haramaya University clusters. This is mainly to reduce mobility and risk of infection and to help beneficiaries cope with difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Haramaya, all beneficiaries received payment regardless of attendance. There is also reported delay in payment in Arbaminch because of transportation problems.

References

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BENEFIT-REALISE - Realising Sustainable Agricultural Livelihood Security in Ethiopia (REALISE) aims to contribute to sustainable livelihoods through the introduction of improved farming practices, innovations and social experiments to strengthen the current Productive Safely Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia. <https://benefitrealise.org/>. It is one of the five programmes under the umbrella of the Bilateral Ethiopia-Netherlands Effort for Food, Income and Trade (BENEFIT) Partnership (ISSD, CASCPAE, ENTAG, SBN and REALISE).

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