

Coping with Challenges and Aftermath of COVID-19 among Street Food Catering Operators in Dodoma City: Lessons and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Introduction: Street food catering forms an important part of the food system in urban areas of Tanzania, and other parts of Africa, particularly by providing nutrition for poor consumers and means of livelihood for those who operate them. However, governments have for a long time excluded them from the traditional safety-net measures enjoyed by other traders whenever there is a major economic crisis in the society such as the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. With the devastating effect of COVID-19, it is important to evaluate how the sector reacted and coped during and after the pandemic crisis. This understanding is important if we need to formulate effective recovery policies and strategies. This paper examined the street food catering in Dodoma city in Tanzania. Specifically, the paper sought to determine the characteristics of people who operate such businesses to identify challenges imposed by COVID-19 analyze the adopted coping strategies and attempt to recommend appropriate recovery policies and strategies.

Methods: The study was conducted in Dodoma City. The study area was purposively selected because of its nature of being fast-growing and of its recent status as the national capital of the United Republic of Tanzania. A cross-sectional research design was used to collect data from 113 operators or owners of street food catering places, who were randomly selected. A questionnaire was used to collect data. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data.

Results: Results indicated that the majority of the operators were in age between 25 and 44 years. The most common short-term and long-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering included a reduction in the number of customers and deterioration of trade, respectively. The most common coping strategies included shortening the supply chain, use of cash on delivery and digitalized marketing systems.

Conclusion: Contactless mobile payments have proved to have a clear advantage during the pandemic. more importantly, lowering the money transfer charges. Both the challenges and the resulting coping strategies tend to comply with what has been happening globally concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore much of what has been recommended elsewhere internationally may likely apply to the case of street food catering in Dodoma city and Tanzania.

Keywords: Street food catering, COVID-19 challenges, coping strategies

Introduction

Street food catering plays an important role in cities and towns in many developing countries to meet the food demands of city dwellers (Bouafou *et al.*, 2021). The expansion of such services in Africa is explained by rapid urbanization and the multiple constraints associated with urban life

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such as distance between workplaces and home, poverty, change in women's activities and the emergence of new food styles (Joyce *et al.*, 2020). Additional reasons include lack of adequate means of transport, lack of time for preparing meals at home, and lack of canteens in workplaces (Canet, 1997). For years, the sale and consumption of food from street catering has been researched and given several names including "street food", "popular catering", or "eating out" (Akindes, 1991; FAO, 2009; Steyn *et al.*, 2014; Staatz & Hollinger, 2016; Sousa *et al.*, 2019; Te Lintelo, 2017). Workers, employees, students, schoolchildren, and travellers are known to be the major consumers of such services (Canet, 1997; Te Lintelo, 2017; Sousa *et al.*, 2019; Adjalo *et al.*, 2020; Bouafou *et al.*, 2021). Apart from ensuring food security for low-income urban populations, selling street food has proven to be a viable socio-economic activity providing gainful employment for populations with limited education and skills in Africa (Mousavi *et al.*, 2016; Staatz and Hollinger, 2016; Sousa *et al.*, 2019; Joyce *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 is known to have placed unprecedented stresses on food supply chains worldwide (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2020; WHO, 2020) with bottlenecks in farm labour, processing, transport and logistics, as well as significant shifts in demand (Hobbs, 2020; Bakalis *et al.*, 2020). Most of these disruptions were a result of policies adopted to contain the spread of the virus (OECD, 2020). Hobbs (2020) and Bakalis *et al.* (2020) reported that COVID-19 had effects of demand side shocks on food supply chains including consumer panic buying behaviours or hoarding behaviours by consumers with respect to key items, and the sudden change in consumption patterns away from the food service sector to meals prepared and consumed at home.

Tanzania announced the first case of COVID-19 on 16 March 2020 (Mumbu and Hugo 2020). Tanzania introduced control measures for COVID-19 local transmission which included closure of schools' levels and ban of all public or social gatherings while the subsequent date the order was extended to colleges and higher education for indefinite close (Mumbu and Hugo 2020). Most African governments, including Tanzania, had considered food supply chains to be "essential" and therefore exempted them from 'lockdown' policies (Thurlow, 2020), however, the food systems in those countries have not remained immune to the effects of the pandemic. Severe effects on small-scale commercial food catering businesses in Tanzania have been reported (Mdoe *et al.*, 2020; Kissoly, 2021; Kissoly *et al.*, 2021). Generally, it was observed that most impacts on food systems were indirect, and mainly caused by declining consumer incomes and demand for food, even when farmers, food processors, and traders were exempted from lockdowns (Thurlow, 2020).

As hinted above, the street food catering forms an important part of the food system in urban areas of Tanzania, and other parts Africa, particularly by providing nutrition for poor consumers and means of livelihood for those who operate them. However, governments have for a long time excluded them from the traditional safety-net measures enjoyed by other traders whenever there is a major economic crisis in the society such as the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, such traders have usually relied on their own informal and traditional means including rotating credit groups and neighborhood associations to offer support in the event of economic shocks and crises (Resnick, 2020). However, with a systemic shock like COVID-19, such ad-hoc social coping mechanisms are likely to be strained. Thus, it is important to look back and evaluate how the sector reacted and coped during and after the pandemic's crisis and therefore recommend ways in which the government and other stakeholders can intervene to support this important sector of the informal economy.

It has recently been shown that different types of businesses in the informal economy sector are disproportionately impacted by the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the associated economic downturn (WIEGO, 2022). Therefore, if we have to design and implement effective recovery policies and strategies, it is important to have a good understanding of the experiences of various types of informal economy businesses that are

commonly operating, and which are touching the lives of many people in our society. This paper is an attempt of such a venture where it seeks to examine the street food catering in Dodoma city in Tanzania. Specifically, the study intends to determine the characteristics of people who operate such businesses identify challenges imposed by COVID-19 within the business sector analyze the adopted coping strategies and attempt to recommend appropriate recovery policies and strategies.

Methodology

Description of the study area

The study was conducted in Dodoma City, which is the newly crowned capital of the United Republic of Tanzania. The city is among the most rapidly growing cities in the country since it is now a focal point for government activities. Dodoma is a small city located in the middle of Tanzania with a population of 765,179 based on 2022 national population census (URT, 2022). The city was announced as the capital of the United Republic of Tanzania in 1973 during the era of President Julius K. Nyerere. Prior to this decision, Dar es Salaam on the east coast of Tanzania was the capital city. Dodoma was chosen so the capital is located centrally within the country, and to diversify social and economic development. However, most government functions remained in Dar es Salaam until the official move in 2016. Since that time, Dodoma has experienced a rapid influx of people, not only of civil servants relocated from Dar es Salaam, but also from other parts of Tanzania in search of emerging economic opportunities. The city was purposively selected for the study because of this characteristic of rapid growing.

Selection of respondents

A cross-sectional research design was used in this study, and the sampling unit was the individual street food catering operator. Dodoma City was selected purposively since it is rapidly urbanizing following the shift of government activities from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma in 2016. Four categories of street food catering operators were distinguished, namely Street Restaurants, Roadside food vending, Marketplace food vending, and Bus Stand food vending. A short description of each category is given in Box 1, while Table 1 shows the sampled individuals. Through observation, sixteen localities were identified to have a high concentration of street food catering places in the city of Dodoma, and therefore were purposively selected to be the focal points of the study. Within each selected locality, operators of street food catering places (mostly owners or managers) were proportionately selected randomly from a sampling frame which was constructed by listing all the operators within the locality. A total of 113 respondents were sampled and interviewed for the study (Table 1).

Box 1: Description of the different categories of surveyed street food catering places

- *Street Restaurants*: these are small eating places selling mostly breakfast consisting of tea with bread, fried buns or chapatis, and famous beef, goat, or chicken soups. They also include lunch meals of staple dishes such as famous maize ugali, rice or cooked bananas served together with sauce relish of meat, beans, and vegetables. Fried potato chips with eggs and/or roasted meat has also become popular. Soft drinks such as industrial sodas and bottled water are also available. Street restaurants provide facilities for sitting usually fabricated wooden or plastic benches with makeshift tables. Apart from being located along busy streets, they are also found in some specialized places such as near offices, schools, and construction sites.
- *Roadside food vending*: Unlike the Street Restaurants, these do not provide sitting places, and therefore much of the food or dishes served are for take-aways. Some of them are mobile whereby the commodities are sold from push carts or carried in special containers. Soft drinks such as sodas and bottled water are also common.
- *Marketplace food vending*: These are like the Street Restaurants except that these are specialized in crowded open marketplaces. Most of the customers here are the traders in those marketplaces who spend long hours in their businesses – and therefore tend to have permanent clients.

- *Bus Stand food vending:* These have characteristics resembling those of both Roadside as well as those of Marketplace food vending. While they sell take-away foods to the passing-by Bus passengers, they also serve quite a big number of individuals who earn their living by doing various businesses at the Bus stations ranging from taxis (including ‘boda boda’ and ‘bajaj’), shoe shining, and other vendors such newspaper boys, ticket clerks, etc.

Table 1: Categories of the surveyed operators of street food catering services in Dodoma City

Category of street food catering service	Male	Female	ToTAL (%)
- Street Restaurants	8	3	11 (9.74%)
- Roadside food vending	15	15	30 (26.55%)
- Marketplace food vending	14	22	36 (31.86%)
- Bus Stand food vending	14	22	36 (31.86%)
TOTAL	51	62	113 (100%)

Data collection, processing, and analysis

Primary data were collected using questionnaires which were administered through face-to-face interviews to the sampled owners of the street food catering places. Quantitative data were analysed using the computer software IBM SPSS Statistics Version 23 whereby descriptive statistical analysis was conducted.

Results

Characteristics of the surveyed street food catering operators

The mean age of the surveyed operators of street food catering was 33.7 years (with a maximum and minimum of 57 and 19 years, respectively, and a standard deviation of 8.4). The majority (76%) of the operators were of the age between 25 and 44 years old. Sex distribution between males (46.9%) and females (53.1%) was even. The mean household size was 3.6 (maximum of 13 and minimum of 1, with a standard deviation of 2.3). The mean number of employees for each business owner was 7.3 (maximum of 25 and minimum of 1, and standard deviation of 5.1). The majority (77%) of street food catering operators had secondary school education or above. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the surveyed business owners.

Table 2: Characteristics of the surveyed operators of street food catering places

Characteristic	Frequency	Per cent
Age in years		
Teenagers (less than 20)	1	0.9
20 – 24	13	11.5
25 – 29	30	26.5
30 – 34	20	17.7
35 – 39	19	16.8
40 and above	30	26.5
Total	113	100.0
Sex		
Male	53	46.9
Female	60	53.1
Marital status		
Still single	31	27.4
Married	80	70.8
Divorced or widowed	2	1.8
Total	113	100
Highest level of education attained		
No formal education	2	1.8
Primary school	31	21.2
Secondary school	52	46.0
Non-university college	12	10.6
University	16	20.4

Total 113 100

Short-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering

Operators of street food catering were asked to report various short-term challenges of COVID-19 in their businesses (Table 3). The results show that almost all of them (99.1%) complained of a reduction in number of customers. Other reported major concerns included a reduction in profit, limited operations of distributors, decreased sales and a shortage of working capital.

Table 3: Reported short-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering

Challenge	Frequency	Per cent
Reduction in the number of customers	111	99.1
Reduction in profit	110	98.2
Limited operation of distributors	110	98.2
Decreased sales	108	96.4
Shortage of working capital	108	96.4
Absent of employees	86	76.8
Product expiry	52	46.4

NB: Percentages do not add to 100 because of multiple responses/answers

Long-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering

Again, the owners of the street food catering places were asked to report the most common long-term challenges they were facing with respect to COVID-19 in their businesses. Results in Table 4 show that almost all of them (99.1% and 97.3%, respectively) were concerned about the reduction in trade relationships and supply chain destruction. Other reported challenges include job cuts and prolonged debts.

Table 4: Reported long-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering

Challenge	Frequency	Per cent
Reduction in the trade relationship	111	99.1
Supply chain destruction	109	97.3
Job cuts	78	69.6
Prolonged debts	77	68.8

NB: Percentages do not add to 100 because of multiple responses/answers

Coping strategies with COVID-19 in street food catering

Results in Table 5 show that most of the interviewed operators of street food catering reported shortening of the supply chain (97.2%) and employing cash on demand (94.7%) to be the most used coping strategies against COVID-19. Other reported coping strategies include the use of digitalized marketing through mobile phone applications and receipt payment via bank. More than forty per cent of the interviewed operators of street food catering (Table 5) reported to have turned much focus on using digitalized marketing through mobile phone applications.

Table 5: Reported coping with COVID-19 among operators of street food catering

Coping strategy	Frequency (N = 113)	Per cent
Shortening of supply chain	110	97.3
Employ cash on demand	107	94.7
Use of digitalized marketing through mobile phone application	47	41.6
Receipt payment via bank	39	34.5

NB: Percentages do not add to 100 because of multiple responses/answers

Discussion

Characteristics of the surveyed street food catering operators

Results in Table 2 show that the majority were in the age group known to be most economically productive in Tanzania (Assenga *et al.*, 2013). Sex distribution between males and females was even, implying that, unlike other kinds of informal businesses, street food catering is not gender biased, that women can also have good access.

Short-term challenges of COVID 19 on street food catering

The reduction in the number of customers (Table 3) implies that either customer hesitated to eat in those places to avoid crowding as required by 'social distancing' measures to prevent COVID-19 pandemic spread, or customers had less money to spend. Globally, there has also been a clear change in consumer behaviour or purchasing habits due to COVID-19 whereby the number of visits to hotels, restaurants, and other eating-out places decreased significantly (Bakalis *et al.* 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Nan, 2020; and Saini *et al.*; 2020). The decreasing number of customers might also be a result of more people preparing meals at home for themselves and their families (Hobbs, 2020; Bakalis *et al.*, 2020).

As governments around the world took up social distancing policies, many consumers engaged themselves in stockpiling behaviours in anticipation of movement restrictions and fear of disruptions to food distribution systems (Hobbs, 2020). The results in Table 3 agree with the rapid socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19 in Tanzania that was conducted by a team of researchers from ESRF. Accordingly, the government's decision to close schools for 30 days did cut off the essential market of a specific group of traders, including small restaurants that earn most of their income from sales made to school children and students (ESRF, 2020).

Long-term challenges of COVID-19 on street food catering

Reduction in trade relationship and supply chain destruction in Table 4 have been reported by ESRF (2020) who reported the sale of agricultural crops in Tanzania to various domestic and foreign markets was disrupted affecting both small- and large-scale farmers. Job cuts and prolonged debts imply that although Tanzania did not lock down hotels, restaurants, pubs, or other hospitality services, still many employees lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings in Table 4 are also in agreement with those reported globally.

Saini *et al.* (2020) reported that dairy farmers in America had to dump 3.7 million gallons of milk every single day because of disrupted supply routes due to the coronavirus. Similarly, Vavra (2020) and Nicola *et al.* (2020) reported that social distancing, self-isolation, and travel restrictions have led to a reduced workforce across all economic sectors and caused many jobs to be lost worldwide.

Coping strategies with COVID-19 in street food catering

Shortening the supply chain (Table 5) can be described as reducing the processing time required for supply chain activities (logistics, information, cash flow and design process), something that gives the trader higher profit margins. The interviewed respondents reported to have resorted to buying many of the materials they use in their businesses such as firewood, charcoal and raw food commodities (maize and wheat flours, sugar, rice, banana, cooking oil, vegetables, and fruits, etc) directly from the producers rather

than going through some agents or middlemen. On the other hand, the use of cash on demand, which is also known as “collect on delivery”, “cash on delivery,” or simply COD, is a payment method in which customers don't pay for mailed goods until they have received them. This system tends to enhance consumer confidence, especially for companies that have not yet earned strong brand recognition. Most of the interviewed respondents were adopting home delivery to avoid crowding, and therefore maintain the required social distancing. As one interviewed respondent in one of the sampled Street Restaurants remarked: “A client would call me through my mobile phone to order his/her meal of fried potato chips with roasted beefsteak or fried eggs, I then wrap it nicely with an aluminium foil and put it in a shopping bag. With a little fee, the parcel is given to a waiting motorcycle delivery boy”. Digitalized marketing through mobile phone applications (Table 5) was among the coping strategies used by street food operators.

Tanzania Mainland has five companies that provide mobile phone services, and each of them also provides electronic money transfer services. The mobile phone companies together (with their money transfer services) include Vodacom (MPesa), Tigo (TigoPesa) Halotel (HaloPesa), Airtel (AirtelPesa) and the Tanzania Telecommunication Company Limited (TTCL) with TTCL-Pesa. Respondents reported using the electronic money transfer services in doing their business by making payments to their suppliers of goods they require, and in receiving payments from their customers.

The findings agree with the international experience that effective implementation of short food supply chains coupled with cash-on-delivery could offer an additional mechanism to cope with the issue of food resilience during the resulting COVID-19 lockdowns (Bakalis et al., 2020). Globally, it is reported that consumer practices have changed because of physical distancing (commonly referred to as social distancing) and e-shopping; and there has been an overall increase in the use of online platforms to order food, which have served as an alternative to closed restaurants (Bakalis et al., 2020).

Conclusion and recommended appropriate recovery policies and strategies

As highlighted earlier, the street food catering business in urban areas of Tanzania, and the rest of Africa, is critically important for two reasons. First, it is part of the food system in urban areas where it provides nutrition and food security for many poor individual consumers, and secondly, it is a means of economic and livelihood support for those who operate them. Therefore, the government of Tanzania and its development partners should ensure that the sector is well supported against any emerging economic crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a compiled compendium by IFPRI researchers titled “COVID-19 and Global Food Security”, the use of social safety nets is strongly recommended in coping with the challenges of the pandemic (Gilligan, 2020). Accordingly, evidence from past research on the design, implementation, and effectiveness of social assistance programs during economic crises are used to provide guidance whereby several points are emphasized as follows: *To strengthen and expand targeting* where safety nets often exclude a high proportion of the poorest portion of the population should expand coverage and make efforts to reach those who face substantial livelihood risks and have limited social support; *to invest more in mobile via* subsidizing mobile phone ownership and lowering the money transfer charges.

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