

# A Heavy Blow

**More than the COVID-19 pandemic itself, the lockdowns to prevent its spread have harder hit Nigeria's unorganized small-scale fishers**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally struck all facets of life in affected countries and the small-scale fisheries (SSF) of Nigeria are no exception. The pandemic has hit the country's small fishers both directly and indirectly. Small operators are the bulk of Nigeria's fisheries sector. They account for 70 per cent of the domestic fish production, and sustain the livelihoods of millions of people in one way or another; the dependence on local fish species for economic and food security is evidently large. SSF provides an accessible, cheap and rich source of protein and essential micronutrients to the rural population. Their impact on social, economic and cultural spheres is immense.

Yet many fishing communities face social, economic, and political marginalization. The reasons are not far to seek. The contribution of SSF to the gross domestic product (GDP) is obscured by poor environmental, social and economic data on the sector. As a consequence, policymakers seldom understand the SSF sector and its worth is grossly under-valued in the national economy.

Nigeria's informal economy, as in most developing countries, has reeled under COVID-19. While the low number of infection cases and deaths relative to developed countries is cause for some relief, the stark reality of fragile healthcare systems raises grave concerns over capacities to deal with the a steep increase in infections. To curb the looming pandemic, the Nigerian government announced a two-week lockdown from 30 March; it eventually stretched to five weeks in Abuja, the administrative centre, Lagos, the economic centre, and the adjoining Ogun State. These states had the highest incidence of COVID-19 in the country

and were most vulnerable to localized infection.

Other emergency steps included the closing of airports for international and domestic flights, and a ban on inter-state movement, social association, and non-essential economic and leisure activities. Several states adopted partial to full lockdowns. As a sequel to the emergency measures, fish and fish products were included in the list of essential commodities. Movement of food and agriculture produce, including that from fisheries, was allowed. Markets of essential commodities were permitted to operate for a few hours on specific days of the week.

The most dire impact on the food security and livelihoods on fishing communities, however, is not from

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the pandemic itself but from the total lockdown. Its effects on the sustenance and well-being of vulnerable households and local economies dependent on local fisheries are far-reaching. The existing social and economic inequalities are under imminent risk of widening, increasing marginalization of the vulnerable.

## Helpless situation

Pa Moses Y Ashade, a prominent fisherman from Badagry in Lagos, shed light on the seemingly helpless situation of the sector. The septuagenarian has decades of experience of fishing in brackish waters, traversing the sea often beyond the Nigerian shore; besides he

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Construction of a planked canoe at Ikosi-Agbowa fishing community, Lagos. Small-scale fishers and fish processors continue to operate during the pandemic but their incomes and profits have declined because of the loss of customers.

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is a former treasurer of the Lagos State Fishermen Co-operative Society. He expressed his disappointment with the “lack of recognition of the sector and the preference for organized aquaculture and industrial fisheries”. He noted the SSF “plays an integral role in the nation’s food system by providing access to affordable fish to the ordinary people, at affordable prices that the organized players cannot offer”.

Fishers and fisheries-based co-operatives lack organizational capacities, he said. The absence of strong leadership to steer an apex organization of SSF at the national level has rendered the sector voiceless, devoid of the power to lobby for helpful policies. Referring to the presence of a federation platform that includes fish farmers, fishermen and other stakeholders, Pa Moses held that the contribution of the SSF sector is yet to be recognized.

Temi, a university graduate, saw opportunity in the smoked fish-supply chain. He assists his mother, Madam Ganiat Olorode, a middle-aged fish trader and processor in the Ikosi-Agbowa lagoon community in Lagos. She owns not fewer than five fishing canoes, and

has four permanent fishermen and contract fishermen working for her. Sharing his experience, Temi said the global pandemic has affected fishing communities in unprecedented ways. “The lockdowns and social-distancing protocols dealt a heavy blow to the communities, as both supplies of fish chain and inputs were disrupted. Supplies of netting materials and spare parts were badly affected and there were spikes in their prices,” he said.

Small-scale fishers and fish processors continue to operate but their income and profits have declined because of the loss of clientele. “Only a few fishermen are inclined to fish, leaving the women, who are more into processing, a limited supply of fish to smoke/dry and sell,” Temi said. The lockdown and movement restrictions also prevented clients from patronising fish vendors. Both fishers and processors lack capacity for long-term storage, and depend on fish traders from distant locations. “The only sets of clients accessible to fishing communities are women in their immediate neighbourhood or proximal communities,” Temi said. In

urban markets, traders bought fish at relatively high prices from fishers at landing sites. Some fish sales such as the sale of crayfish and silver catfish was particularly high at the onset of the lockdown due to the season.

Women in the SSF value chain multi-task and are the pillars of their households. The pandemic has threatened their emotional, economic and physical well-being. They rely mostly on social capital to access fish as processors or traders. In the hierarchical female-centric fish supply chains, women like Madam Ganiat do not feel the pinch, unlike other categories of fish traders down the ladder. The conventional fish traders depend on road transportation, which is inadequate and does not optimally service the needs of the populace. During the lockdown, there were fewer fleets of commercial vehicles and these operated below carrying capacities due to the government directives of maintaining 2 m of social distance. This drove up the transportation fares, adding to the overall prices of fish. Transporters and fish traders, particularly those plying inter-state, were often harassed by overzealous enforcement agents.

At the home front, the women faced a double burden as care-givers and wives; children not going to school meant the minors needed more attention. Women worried more about food insecurity while still facing headlong numerous household chores. While access to fish was not a serious issue, access to other staple foodstuffs posed a challenge due to low purchasing power; the exceptions were fishing households engaged in agricultural activities to augment food access, directly or indirectly.

### **Hand to mouth**

The worst affected are the fish vendors down the ladder. Prior to the pandemic, these women and their households lived on a meagre income, and were unlikely to have savings of any type, living hand to mouth. They are the most vulnerable and frequently face domestic violence.

In response to the economic hardship, the Federal Government rolled out some relief measures. Against the backdrop of an estimated 90 mn

indigent Nigerians, it is perceived that only a fragment would benefit from the distribution of food packages and cash transfers. Many people in the informal sector lack bank accounts and other requirements to access targeted credit facility for vulnerable households. Furthermore, the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill lacks a provision for individuals/employees in the informal sector. Even if implemented properly, it will exclude small-scale fishers because most are not captured in the taxpayers scheme; this implies livelihood losses in the event of a prolonged pandemic.

At the state level, some part-time fishers benefitted from soft loans during the planting season, coinciding with COVID-19, for crops like cassava and plantain. Although targeted at residents to prevent panic-buying and to provide access to food supplies during the restriction period, the temporary markets set up provided alternative avenues for fishers and farmers to sell their produce. Co-operatives could at best only provide thrift savings for members. At the onset of the lockdowns, they were also mandated to issue identity cards to members to allow unhindered movement of their goods.

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Pa Ashade and Temi insist the sector needs more government support at all levels. Pa Ashade said both men and women in SSF are have suffered particularly due to the pandemic. With nostalgia, he identified the 1980s as the most memorable years for the SSF, the period during which the Federal Government implemented several projects with technical assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). These helped upgrade rural fisheries and improve the living conditions of fishers. The state government of Lagos provided support to men and women in the sector.



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A fish processor's kitchen in Ikosi-Agbowa fishing community, Lagos. Both fishers and processors lack capacity for long-term storage, and depend on fish traders from distant locations.

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Temi is optimistic about the fishing business picking up after the pandemic. He would like to see the Federal Government address challenges of empowerment with modern fishing equipment, access to finance, and linkage to the international market for the sector. He sought greater involvement and a proactive approach from fishing organizations to protect the interest of members and the market against unforeseen drawbacks.

As the lockdowns gradually ease up, the return to normalcy will be slow because the pandemic is persistent. The fate of SSF in the post-pandemic era depends on current coping mechanisms. One can only hope that the resilience of men and women in the sector will pull them through this turbulent period. 3

#### For more

<https://www.plaas.org.za/african-small-scale-fisheries-in-the-time-of-covid-19-a-nigerian-perspective/>

**African small-scale fisheries in the time of Covid-19: Voices from the continent – A Nigerian perspective**

<https://fish.cgiar.org/news-and-updates/news/fish-and-aquatic-food-systems-covid-19-updates-nigeria>

**WorldFish COVID-19 Updates: Nigeria**

<https://fish.cgiar.org/news-and-updates/news/worldfish-discussed-covid-19-impacts-nigerian-aquaculture-community>

**WorldFish discussed COVID-19 impacts with Nigerian aquaculture community**