

The impact of COVID-19 on children from poor families in Ghana and the role of welfare institutions

Lorretta Domfeh Owusu and Kwabena Frimpong-Manso

Abstract

Purpose – This paper is focussed on answering the following questions: How are poor families surviving in this era of COVID-19? What is life for children from poor families? What has become of their reality? To understand the realities of poor families and children during COVID-19, specifically in Ghana, this paper aims to analyse how COVID-19 has affected children from poor families in Ghana and how welfare institutions can work to provide rapid help to such families.

Design/methodology/approach – COVID-19 is affecting different populations in almost all parts of the world. One group that is likely to experience challenges are children because they have to depend on others for their survival. This study, therefore, provides an expert opinion on the issues that children in Ghana might face because of the global public health pandemic. Nonetheless, this research relied on secondary data from articles, journals, related studies, textbooks and relevant web pages to support the points made in the paper.

Findings – COVID-19 has put a lot of undue economic and social pressure on poor families. Due to these pressures, children from such families are likely to suffer a higher risk of child labour and streetism. Furthermore, they may miss out on the social and economic benefits the school system provides such as the free meals provided for public schools by the Government of Ghana under the school feeding programme.

Originality/value – Admittedly, there have been numerous studies since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. However, this paper is the first paper discussing into detail how COVID-19 has affected children from poor families and addresses how state welfare institutions can leverage on the use of efficient management information system to identify and support poor families during and post-COVID-19.

Keywords Poverty, Children, COVID-19, Families, Ghana, Social welfare information management system (SWIMS)

Paper type Research paper

Lorretta Domfeh Owusu is based at the University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana and Participatory Development Associates Ltd., Accra, Ghana.

Kwabena Frimpong-Manso is based at the Department of Social Work, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana and University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged nations worldwide, affecting both developed and developing countries. This pandemic transcends a global health exigency as it is resulting in a huge global economic downswing (Alon *et al.*, 2020). There is the fear of an imminent economic crisis and recession akin to what happened in 2008 (Nicola *et al.*, 2020). Projections show that unemployment rates will increase by over 10% before the end of 2020, and prices of commodities will also drastically increase (Buheji *et al.*, 2020).

Owing to COVID-19, predictions are that global poverty will increase for the first time since 1990, slowing progress made by the UN Sustainable Development Goal to end poverty by 2030 (Sumner *et al.*, 2020). Though the pandemic has affected all aspects of human life, it has also created distinct realities for people from different communities and backgrounds. The situation in Africa is no different.

Received 18 July 2020
Revised 21 September 2020
Accepted 21 September 2020

As the outbreak of this virus, Africa is witnessing a sterling economic loss as governments face the losses in public revenue, estimated to be 5%, while struggling to provide the needed support for its citizen (Gondwe, 2020). It is forcing persons from low-income families to endure the long-term effects of this pandemic, especially for those with no form of economic, social, health and educational support services (Buheji *et al.*, 2020).

In almost all African economies, the informal sector remains the engine of growth, using between 50%-70% of the population (Haan, 2006). With the lockdown and movement restrictions imposed by governments, this sector has been hard hit. Families who depend on this sector financially have, as a result, experienced a huge reduction in household incomes and consumption (Arndt *et al.*, 2020). Sumner *et al.* (2020), however, asserts that the slightest decrease in household per capita consumption would mean an increase in income-based poverty in the region. This situation might push more families down the poverty line (Mahler *et al.*, 2020).

In discussing poverty, it is impossible not to talk about the family because it forms the basic unit of society around which everything revolves. In situations of poverty, the family, including children are affected. Questions asked out of necessity is, how poor families are surviving in the era of COVID-19? What is life for children living in these poor families? In trying to understand the realities of poor families and children during COVID-19, specifically in Ghana, this paper seeks to:

- Analyse how COVID-19 has affected poor families and children in Ghana.
- Analyse how welfare institutions can function to provide rapid help to such families.

Poverty in Ghana

In 2016, Ghana achieved the target set under the Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty, becoming the first sub-Saharan African country to do so (National Development Planning Commission [NDPC], 2020). The country has over the past decade witnessed a significant fall in the incidence of poverty, from 52.6% in 1991 to 23.4% in 2017 (NDPC, 2020). Despite the significant gains in poverty reduction, many Ghanaian children still experience high levels of poverty. Recent evidence suggests that 73.4% of children in Ghana are multi-dimensionally poor (NDPC, 2020).

Similar to other countries, Ghana is experiencing its share of challenges associated with COVID-19. The cases rise daily, with over 23,000 as of July 2020 (Abu-Bashal, 2020). The situation is plunging a lot of poor families into deeper poverty. Restriction of movements as a result of lockdown is affecting businesses, especially those in the informal sector, which uses over 60% of Ghanaians (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2014). While fearing to contract the virus, many people cannot afford to stay at home because the longer they do so, the lower their incomes and chances of survival. Increasing prices of essential commodities have worsened the situations for many people, especially informal sector workers, who mostly earn lower than the national average (GSS, 2014).

Government interventions to address poverty in Ghana

Over the years, several social protection programmes have been implemented in Ghana to empower and support the poor and vulnerable households at risk of social exclusion (Abukari and Kreitzer, 2016). The biggest and most far-reaching of these social protection programmes is the Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP). LEAP began in 2008, and it gives a bi-monthly cash transfer ranging from GHC 64 to 106 (US\$12–18), to uphold poor households including those elderly caregivers of orphans and vulnerable children (Abdulai *et al.*, 2019). Over 213, 000 households are currently benefitting from LEAP (Sackey and Remoaldo, 2019). Other programs include the national health insurance scheme which offers universal access to basic health care and the school feeding that gives children in disadvantaged public primary schools a nutritious hot meal to lessen hunger and malnutrition.

Issues affecting children in poor families during COVID-19

For many families, household income and consumption have reduced because of COVID-19, forcing them to manage on the little they have accumulated before this pandemic. As savings diminish, members of affected households face the risk of dying out of hunger and not the virus (Mahler *et al.*, 2020). For children from poor and affected households, life has become bleak and seemingly difficult. Coupled with the temporary closure of schools in the country, the plight of many children from poor families has worsened. Staying at home means not only are children from poor families constrained but they also miss out on the social and economic benefits schools provide.

The closure of schools obstructs not only learning, it is equally widening inequities, which is affecting underprivileged children unfairly (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). To a large extent, the closure of schools has put an undue economic burden on impoverished households. Remote learning through digital technologies and online study platforms is limited to only those who can afford internet data, smartphones, tablets and computers (Armitage and Nellums, 2020). Also, many children living in impoverished families whose survival depends on free meals provided for them by the Government of Ghana under the school feeding programme are missing out on one of their biggest means of survival. Many families have had to limit the sizes or reduce the number of meals during this pandemic (Amoatey *et al.*, 2020).

Schools also function as a medium of supervision for children. Evidence from the 2014 Ebola epidemic points to how school closure increased school dropouts, streetism, child labour, child trafficking and child abuse (Armitage and Nellums, 2020). A review conducted by the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) on their Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems posited a direct correlation between a decrease in household income and an increase in child labour (International Cocoa Initiative [ICI], 2020). The study further showed that child labour rates increased by 13% when schools were on vacation and holidays (ICI, 2020). This is alarming for children, especially those in farming and fishing communities, as adults regularly involve them in their economic activities [Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), 2014].

Over the years, the major advocacy point and strategy for ending child labour have been the push for children to be in school (International Cocoa Initiative, ILO, and UNICEF, 2018). However, in an era of school closures and loss of income due to declining demand for goods because of reduced incomes in the urban areas' farmers may struggle to hire farmhands. The possibility of children being used for their labour even by their parents and guardians is very high. In addition to this, the current economic situation will compel several children in these areas to find work to support their families (Leadholm, 2020).

In Ghana, many children from low-income families eke out a living for themselves, and even sometimes their families, by working on the streets. Over 90,000 children are reported to be on Ghanaian streets, engaging in various activities such as windscreen cleaning, assisting adult beggars and head portering (Participatory Development Associates, 2020). With the harsh economic realities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot more children out of the necessity to survive are likely to be forced into the streets.

The increase in child labour and street-ism is not only detrimental to the well-being of children but also increases their risk of contracting the virus. It is, however, worrying that these children have to endure this. As the outbreak of this pandemic, welfare institutions, specifically state-owned, have failed to develop a well-coordinated approach in reaching out to these children because of the lack of pro-activeness and weak structures.

What can welfare institutions do

Both the state and non-state institutions have, over the years, been committed to championing child protection in Ghana. However, the continuous dissociation between the laws and

practice, the lack of a well-integrated welfare system, inadequate resources and capacity for effective service provision, remain a blockade to Ghana's progress in child and family welfare (Krueger *et al.*, 2013). The lack of pro-activeness in managing child and family welfare makes it overly expensive to support families and children in times like this (Owusu *et al.*, 2020). For what is worth, COVID-19 presents a good opportunity for governments to prioritize and stay ahead of child and welfare issues during and post-COVID-19.

To ensure the utmost protection of poor children in this period of COVID-19, there is the need to strengthen existing social protection programmes with enough funds and resources. Social protection programmes such as the LEAP programme and District Assembly Common Fund, instituted by the Government of Ghana to empower poor households financially have seen many setbacks and lapses. The challenge of insufficient funds and the difficulties beneficiaries encounter when accessing complimentary services have long watered down the impact of these programmes (Sackey and Remoaldo, 2019). Fortunately, the President of Ghana on 27 March 2020 announced the release of GHC1bn (US\$1m) from the country's COVID-19 fund intended for poor households and businesses. However, the obvious question, who gets what and the fair sharing remains unanswered.

In situations like this, an important step is to develop a well-coordinated plan to ensure the identification and timely support of poor families, especially those in the rural farming and fishing communities who have been made poor by the pandemic and do not already benefit from the existing social protection programmes. To achieve this, there is a need for an accurate database of vulnerable and poor families – which would provide an easy means of identifying poor households. While the Ghana Statistical Service over the years, through the Ghana Living Standard Surveys, has tried to identify poor people, this has proven to be of little help. The shortfalls in the distribution of money to beneficiaries of the LEAP programme proves the inefficiency of the existing management information system. Thus, there is the need for a proper mechanism for data management.

Fortunately, the Government of Ghana established a National Household Registry (NHR), under the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) in October 2015 (Daily Graphic, 2015). The chief aim was to establish a single national household register from which social protection programs will select their beneficiaries. While this was to ensure fair and timely distribution of social protection interventions directly to the poor and vulnerable households, the unit has since been redundant. Nonetheless, now is a perfect time to put to use the data collected since its establishment.

Furthermore, the MoGCSP developed an information management system, the Social Welfare Information Management System (SWIMS), to capture accurate data for child protection and social welfare services (Otieno *et al.*, 2020). This system is aimed at strengthening an interconnected delivery of social services across various sectors (e.g. social protection, child protection, education and health). This SWIMS is to operate on an open-source case management software, developed by UNICEF called Protection Related Information Management System (Otieno *et al.*, 2020).

The NHR and SWIMS are brilliant, and if properly developed and used, can serve its purpose, especially in this period of COVID-19 and beyond. They do not only provide the opportunity to easily manage, identify and support poor children and families in this COVID season, it also provides an opportunity to generate and integrate unique identification for poor children and families across all sectors of social welfare. Government of Ghana should prioritize immediate investment and rolling out the SWIMS and support the work of the Ghana National Housing Registry to facilitate the identification of poor households and easy distribution of relief services.

Once the system is in place, the welfare institutions can use it to facilitate several strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on children living in poor households. Firstly, to address the effects of reduced household incomes and consumption, the government must increase

the amount of the LEAP grant beneficiaries receive as most of them have lost the incomes that complemented what they got from the grant. Also, those who have become poor because COVID-19, must be enrolled onto the LEAP programme so that they can get the grant to reduce their financial burden. Secondly, poor households, especially those with very young children, can be provided with food rations or the school meals can be reinstated even before schools resume to mitigate the adverse impact of food insecurity. Thirdly, given that academic engagement helps to prevent child labour and trafficking, especially in the rural areas, provision of community radios in the communities where many children from poor families live will enable them to benefit from radio learning lessons for primary and junior high schools launched by the Ministry of Education.

References

- Abdulai, A., Abubakari, A. and Martey, J. (2019), "Is social protection in Ghana a right?", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 29 No. 8, pp. 1064-1074.
- Abu-Bashal, A. (2020), *Coronavirus Cases in Ghana Top 23,000: Country Reports 641 Cases over the past 24 Hours*, Anadolu Agency, 10 June.
- Abukari, Z. and Kreitzer, L. (2016), "Social protection in Ghana: old challenges and new initiatives", in Drolet, J. (Ed.), *Social Development and Social Work Perspectives on Social Protection*, Routledge, New York, pp. 213-234.
- Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J. and Tertilt, M. (2020), "The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality", Working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Amoatey, C., Collins, E. and Husselman, M. (2020), "How Ghanaians are coping with COVID-19: five lessons from the RECOVERY survey", available at: www.poverty-action.org/blog/how-ghanaians-are-coping-with-covid-19-five-lessons-recovr-survey (accessed 20 September 2020).
- Armitage, R. and Nellums, L.B. (2020), "Considering inequalities in the school closure response to COVID-19", *The Lancet Global Health*, Vol. 8 No. 5, p. e644.
- Arndt, C., Davies, R., Gabriel, S., Harris, L., Makrelov, K., Robinson, S., Levy, S., Simbanegavi, W., van Seventer, D. and Anderson, L. (2020), "Covid-19 lockdowns, income distribution, and food security: an analysis for South Africa", *Global Food Security*, Vol. 26, p. 100410.
- Buheji, M., da Costa Cunha, K., Beka, G., Mavric, B., de Souza, Y.L., da Costa Silva, S.S., ... Yein, T.C. (2020), "The extent of COVID-19 pandemic socio-economic impact on global poverty. A global integrative multidisciplinary review", *American Journal of Economics*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 213-224.
- Daily Graphic (2015), "Gender ministry sets up national household registry, 23 July".
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020), "Rapid risk assessment: outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): increased transmission globally – fifth update", available at: www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/rapid-risk-assessment-outbreak-novel-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-increased (accessed 20 September 2020).
- Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) (2014), "Ghana living standard survey round 6", available at: https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/Living%20conditions/GLSS6_Main%20Report.pdf
- Gondwe, G. (2020), "Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on Africa's economic development", available at: <https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2834> (accessed 19 September 2020).
- Haan, H.C. (2006), *Training for Work in the Informal Micro-Enterprise Sector: Fresh Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa*, Springer, Dordrecht.
- International Cocoa Initiative (2020), "How will the COVID-19 crisis affect children in cocoa-growing communities?", available at: <https://cocoainitiative.org/news-media-post/how-will-the-covid-19-crisis-affect-children-in-cocoa-growing-communities> (accessed 19 September 2020).
- Krueger, A., Thompstone, G. and Crispin, V. (2013), "Learning from child protection systems mapping and analysis in West Africa: research and policy implications", *Global Policy*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 47-55.
- Leadholm, K. (2020), "Covid's darkest effects: How the pandemic may fuel child trafficking in Ghana", available at: <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/covids-darkest-effects-how-pandemic-may-fuel-child-trafficking-ghana> (accessed 20 September 2020).

Mahler, G.D., Lakner, C., Aguilar, R.A.C. and Wu, H. (2020), "The impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) on global poverty: why Sub-Saharan African might be the region hardest hit", available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest> (accessed 20 September 2020).

National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) (2020), "Multi-dimensional child poverty in Ghana. Accra: national development planning commission", available at: www.ndpc.gov.gh (accessed 20 September 2020).

Nicola, M., Alsafi, Z., Sohrabi, C., Kerwan, A., Al-Jabir, A., Iosifidis, C., . . . Agha, R. (2020), "The socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19): a review", *International Journal of Surgery*, Vol. 78, pp. 185-193.

Otieno, P., Mutwiri, J. and Antwi-Boasiako, E.W. (2020), *An Assessment of the Prerequisites for a Social Welfare Information Management System in Ghana*, MEASURE Evaluation, University of NC.

Owusu, D.L., Annor, M.P. and Dzato, G. (2020), "Ghana's child welfare system and COVID-19 pandemic", available at: www.pdaghana.com/index.php/news/pda-news/1164-ghana-s-child-welfare-system-and-covid-19-pandemic.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

Participatory Development Associates (2020), "The state of child protection in Ghana", available at: www.pdaghana.com/index.php/pda-reportsz/item/62-the-state-of-child-protection-in-ghana.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

Sackey, P.K. and Remoaldo, P. (2019), "Ghana's livelihood empowerment against poverty (LEAP) programme is leaking: irregularities watering down the impact of the flagship LEAP programme", *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol. 5 No. 1, p. 1627789.

Sumner, A., Hoy, C. and Ortiz-Juarez, E. (2020), "Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty", Working paper, WIDER, United Nations University.

Further reading

Nogales, R., Oldiges, C., Dirksen, J. and Alkire, S. (2020), "Multidimensional poverty and COVID-19 risk factors: a rapid overview of interlinked deprivations across 5.7 billion people", Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford.

Smith, J.P. (1988), "Poverty and the family", *Divided Opportunities: Minorities, Poverty, and Social Policy*, pp. 141-172.

Sparks, D.L. and Barnett, S.T. (2010), "The informal sector in Sub-Saharan Africa: out of the shadows to foster sustainable employment and equity?", *International Business & Economics Research Journal (IBER)*, Vol. 9 No. 5.

Corresponding author

Loretta Domfeh Owusu can be contacted at: lodomfeh@pdaghana.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com