

DISCUSSION PAPER

LIVING WITH COMPOUNDING LIVELIHOOD SHOCKS: HOW AGROPASTORALISTS IN NIGERIA'S DRYLANDS ARE COPING AND ADAPTING

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Young woman harvests vegetables at home, Biu, Nigeria.
Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

Introduction

A year and a half since Nigeria became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to confirm a case of Covid-19 (Adepoju, 2020), farmers and herders across the drylands are still contending with an array of shocks and stresses related to the pandemic. These include: price spikes, stock shortages, labour disruptions and low demand for outputs. Livelihood shocks are undermining the wellbeing of individual households, while also having dramatic impacts on key human development indicators at the national level. For example, one study found that during the country's two-month period of lockdown in 2020, household incomes fell by nearly 25%, leading to a 9% increase in the country's poverty rate (Andam et al., 2020). But critically, Covid-19 is not the only shock affecting agropastoralists in Nigeria. Numerous other challenges are interacting with the disruptive effects of the pandemic, such as incidents of farmer-herder conflict, floods and idiosyncratic shocks affecting individual households.

If unmitigated, compounding shocks can have long-term, destabilising effects, with particular implications for rural livelihoods. A recent Mercy Corps report demonstrates that, in Nigeria, the pandemic has "exacerbated pre-existing conflict dynamics" by driving increased armed-group activity, which has included: "seizing property, preying on farmers, and establishing control over rural areas to carry out a variety of illicit activities" (Mercy Corps, 2021). Compounding shocks can also lead to internal displacement and international migration, particularly among agropastoral populations (Mercandalli & Losch, 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2021). Further research demonstrates the relationship between unmitigated conflict, migration and food insecurity, with particular consequences for rural communities that are often caught up in violence and most exposed to economic volatility (da Silva & Fan, 2017). All of these examples have significant implications for rural livelihoods and household resilience.

Despite these long-term development risks, most formal assistance in Nigeria is not designed with the intention of building livelihood resilience in agropastoral contexts (OCHA, 2021). Further, the limited formal support for rural livelihoods that *does* exist is rarely designed to address the compounding nature of the risks that impact rural livelihoods. Interventions that purport to address the effects of specific shocks, in isolation from other interacting livelihood challenges, may fail to maximise impact and, at worst, may inadvertently cause harm.

Nonetheless, in Nigeria, agropastoralists continue to find ways to cope and adapt their livelihoods. Understanding these strategies – as well as their limitations – is key to supporting and bolstering the resilience of agropastoralist communities to shocks and stresses; equally important is understanding the factors that facilitate these strategies. Participants in this study regularly highlighted the central role that social networks and access to informal support systems play in enabling resilience to shocks and stresses. This finding reflects a growing body of literature on linkages between household social connectedness and resilience in the context of protracted emergencies (Humphrey et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Maxwell et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2018).

This report begins by briefly discussing the effects of compounding shocks and stresses in agropastoral communities in Nigeria. It then presents findings on the ways in which households are coping and adapting to uncertainty and volatility, and examines the key factors that enable them to do so in light of compounding livelihood shocks. The report concludes by highlighting opportunities for aid actors to more effectively support livelihood resilience given layered and compounding shocks and stresses in Nigeria.

UNDERSTANDING HOW SHOCKS AND STRESSES, AND RESPONSES TO THEM, CHANGE OVER TIME: SPARC RESEARCH DESIGN

This study's panel design allows SPARC to look beyond snapshots in time to, instead, observe the ways in which the answers to these, and related research questions, are evolving over time. This longitudinal analysis enables SPARC to help fill key gaps in the resilience literature on the timing and effects of household responses to shocks. It also will allow researchers to build a rapport and trust with participants over time, allowing for the exploration of more intimate topics and likely facilitating more frank and personal observations.

KEY TERMS

Adaptive capacities entail intentional changes to livelihood activities “on an ongoing basis through a process of continuous adjusting, learning, and innovation”, either in anticipation of, or response to, evolving circumstances (Jeans et al., 2017). Adaptive capacities include a household’s ability to take advantage of potential opportunities to continue engaging in livelihood activities in the face of emerging shocks and stresses. This may include: pivoting to new marketplaces, practising alternative methods of cultivation and livestock rearing, or adopting new livelihood activities.

Livelihood shocks refer to unexpected events that disrupt individuals’ normal livelihood activities. These may include: isolated, idiosyncratic events that impact an individual household (e.g. illness or injury, death of a breadwinner, unemployment) or widespread, covariate shocks, which entail events that impact multiple households in a geographic location (e.g. natural hazards, conflict, price spikes).

Context

This report is one in a [series of publications](#) from the SPARC consortium that will present longitudinal findings from qualitative interviews with a panel of pastoral, agricultural and agropastoral participants in Nigeria, South Sudan and Somalia. Longitudinal research methods are ideal for capturing and analysing changes in behaviour over time (Ruspini, 1999). When employed in the context of evolving and compounding livelihood shocks, longitudinal research allows for more nuanced analyses of the time scale and effectiveness of specific coping and adaptive strategies. Nonetheless, longitudinal studies are still relatively rare in humanitarian and development research (Smith & Blanchet, 2019). This study therefore helps fill an important evidence gap with respect to aid actors’ understanding of pastoral and agricultural livelihoods, and will allow the SPARC consortium to generate timely, programmatic and policy-relevant analysis. SPARC-affiliated researchers will return to research communities to interview panel participants on a semi-regular basis from 2021 to 2025. While the specific topics explored in each distinct round of interviewing will change over the lifetime of the SPARC consortium to address emerging learning priorities, this report, and the study more generally, is guided by three overarching research questions:

1. What are the shocks currently affecting the livelihoods of agropastoral populations in Nigeria?

2. In what ways are people adapting their livelihoods in the face of the compounding shocks and stresses, including Covid-19, and what types of livelihood adaptations are proving more or less successful?
3. What types of formal and informal support or factors are helping people to manage the impacts of major shocks and stresses on their livelihoods?

Qualitative method

The interviews and analysis presented in this report are based on a single round of interviewing¹ and conducted by a team of six Nigerian researchers affiliated with Mercy Corps. The research team spoke with a total of 62 participants, which included a combination of pastoralists, agropastoralists and farmers residing in rural communities in the Nigerian states of Kogi, Benue, Kaduna, Plateau and Adamawa. In an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences of rural livelihoods in Nigeria, participants were sampled to include an approximately even number of men and women in each research community, and every effort was made to ensure diversity in terms of participant age and socioeconomic status. Interviews were conducted in local languages.

¹ While this report is based on a single set of qualitative interviews, future reports will present analysis across multiple rounds of interviewing.

FIGURE 1: AREAS INCLUDED IN THE STUDY



Source: SPARC



Pastoralist tends to his cattle, Tunga, Nigeria.
Photo: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

I. What are the shocks currently affecting the livelihoods of agropastoral populations in Nigeria, and how can aid actors best respond to them?

KEY FINDINGS

- The secondary effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – such as price shocks and shortages of livelihood inputs, like fertiliser – are disrupting rural livelihoods in Nigeria, with consequences that differ by geography, and between different value chains. For example, all states in north-east Nigeria were impacted by shortages in animal feed, while Benue and Adamawa in particular contended with disruptions to their maize value chains.
- Participants rarely perceived Covid-19 to be the most significant shock to their livelihoods; instead they described the impact of compounding livelihood disruptions that included the pandemic, as well as climate shocks and conflict.
- In some cases, the perception that aid actors are singularly focused on addressing Covid-19 at the expense of other livelihood challenges drives resentment and scepticism about the threat the pandemic poses. This may further complicate compliance with public health measures and future vaccination campaigns as the global rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine continues.

Farmers and herders in Nigeria are contending with a diverse array of livelihood disruptions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. These include price shocks and shortages of essential livelihood inputs, such as seeds, fertilisers, animal feed and veterinary health products, as well as a significant reduction in demand for livelihood products in local marketplaces. Research participants commonly attributed these and other market-related disruptions to government restrictions on import and trade, as well as movement and assembly restrictions that limited customers' ability to frequent marketplaces. In other cases, our participants described contending with labour shortages during the pandemic because of restrictions on mobility and gathering, and farmers frequently explained that lockdowns had prevented them from travelling to their fields, which often resulted in lost harvests.

The particular impacts of Covid-19 varied by geography and by the value chain in which participants of the same community were engaged. Some of these differences are summarised in Table 1.

Compounding shocks: "Together, they are too much to handle"²

It is clear that secondary impacts of Covid-19 have severely impacted livelihood activities in pastoral communities. But, when participants were asked about the most significant livelihood obstacles they were currently experiencing, they rarely described the effects of the pandemic in isolation;

more often, they explained that Covid-19 was one factor within a system of interacting shocks impacting their livelihood activities. These shocks often included drought, flooding and conflict. For example, numerous farmers in Benue described temporarily abandoning their fields following a particularly intense period of farmer-herder conflict in their community. While they did not attribute the intensification of conflict to the pandemic, they explained that in the aftermath of the violence, Covid-related input price spikes had prevented them from restocking seeds, fertilisers and other inputs, which in turn had precluded them from returning to farming. Participants in areas affected by flooding similarly described the compounding effects of environmental and pandemic-related shocks on rural livelihoods. As one female farmer in Plateau explained: "Because of the pandemic, we were not able to sell in the markets because the customers were too few. And on top of that, there was flooding that destroyed my crops. So, I have just stopped farming completely, partly because of the floods, and partly because of Covid-19. Together, they are too much to handle".

Participants similarly explained that, because of the pandemic, idiosyncratic shocks at the household level – such as illness, death or kidnapping, which under usual circumstances would likely have been manageable – have had devastating consequences for rural livelihoods. Numerous participants in Benue, Adamawa and Kogi described the crippling implications of a relative's

² In-depth interview with female farmer, Plateau, January 2020.

TABLE 1: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAINS IN NIGERIA

Value chain	Most affected research sites	Description of shocks and their impact
Rice	Benue, Adamawa	Covid-19 restrictions on movement have limited aggregators' ability to supply rice to millers. With increases in land border smuggling, there has been an influx of foreign rice brands in the local marketplaces, which undercut sales of locally produced rice.
Maize	Benue, Adamawa	Producers in these value chains are especially exposed to increasing costs of production during the pandemic. Diminished access to quality inputs, including seeds and fertilisers, has caused farmers to rely on recycled seeds, which have lower drought tolerance and higher disease susceptibility than hybrid seeds. This in turn has caused reduced production and lost revenue. Furthermore, restrictions on fertiliser transportation and distribution are major issues in food production, especially in the north-east. In these states as of March 2021, a 50kg bag of fertiliser* was nearly double its pre-pandemic price, having increased from an average price of 5,500 naira (13 USD) to 10,600 naira (26 USD) (COVID-19 Africa Fertilizer Watch, 2021).
Cowpea	Benue	
Sorghum	Adamawa	
Sesame	Benue, Adamawa	Sesame is one of the highest value cash crops in Nigeria. Though Jigawa is known to be one of the highest producing states, other states (including Benue and Adamawa) are increasing their sesame production. Sesame is also brought into the country through the land border between Nigeria and Cameroon. Restrictions of movement imposed during the pandemic have negatively affected sesame production in all states, with many farmers reporting lost production due to delayed harvests. This is unsurprising as sesame is especially vulnerable to such delays because it must be harvested at a highly specific window in the growing season, dried indoors and then threshed.
Cassava	Benue	Cassava value chains were affected by Covid-19 restrictions, particularly because lockdowns prevent producers from supplying tubers to processing companies. Notably, without processing (i.e. drying), cassava has a very short shelf life.
Small ruminants	All states	Animal feed was similarly affected, with reduced maize production and movement restrictions preventing national firms and regional hubs from acquiring sufficient supplies – although areas with heavy maize production were less affected. The combination of these reduced supply levels and uncertainty around the future frequently led to price increases for agricultural and livestock inputs.

Note: This table combines and summarises findings from this study and data collected under the USAID-funded Rural Resilience Activity (RRA) programme, which Mercy Corps is currently implementing in Nigeria.

* The fertiliser price noted above is for NPK 20:10:10.

unexpected illness and death alongside pre-existing hardship related to Covid-19. Due to already depleted savings stemming from Covid-related disruptions to production and income, participants were forced to sell essential productive assets to pay for unexpected hospital and funeral costs. In Benue, a male agropastoralist participant described a similar scenario following his son's kidnapping. Having sustained significant financial losses due to the pandemic, the family's only means of paying the ransom to ensure his release was to sell off all their productive animals.

“The impact of Covid-19 is minor. The big problem affecting our livelihood is cattle herdsman. Other problems are causing us more losses than Covid-19 ever could.”
– Male agropastoralist, Benue

Facing mounting hardship as a result of compounding shocks, of which Covid-19 was only one, participants sometimes described abandoning agropastoral livelihoods entirely in search of new opportunities, often in nearby towns. This is underscored by a rapid assessment conducted by Mercy Corps teams in August 2020. It found that, in states including Benue, Kebbi, Niger and Ebonyi, an average of 3.5 household members participated in farm activities before the pandemic, compared with only 1.7 at the time of the survey (Mercy Corps, 2020). As shocks are ongoing, it is too soon to determine the implications of these changes for household resilience with any certainty – indeed, in the longer term, shifts to off-farm work in towns may turn out to generate net improvements in household wellbeing. What is clear, however, is that in the immediate term, households' capacity to take action and bounce back to conducting agropastoral livelihood activities following a shock is being undermined by the pandemic.

Varying perceptions of risk: “Other problems are causing us more losses than Covid-19 ever could.”³

While the pandemic has undoubtedly impacted rural livelihoods in Nigeria, in some communities – particularly those affected by farmer-herder conflicts – participants frequently explained that Covid-19 was *not* the most urgent, single livelihood disruption with which they were contending. While research suggests that the drivers of conflict in Nigeria are being exacerbated by the pandemic (Mercy Corps, 2021; Adebayo & Oluwamayowa, 2021), our participants rarely made this linkage themselves. In Benue, for example, a male farmer explained: “The impact of Covid-19 is minor. The big problem affecting our livelihood is cattle herdsman. Other problems are causing us more losses than Covid-19 ever could”.

These narratives were often accompanied by a perception that aid actors are singularly concerned with containing the spread of Covid-19 at the expense of addressing other long-standing livelihood challenges. Our research suggests that, in some cases, this perception drives resentment and suspicion towards development actors, and may be entrenching scepticism about the threat the pandemic poses. As a male agropastoralist in Plateau explained: “The Covid-19 that NGOs talk about is in town, not here in the village. We always hear about the virus over and over in the media and from NGOs, but our main problem is peace in the community, not the disease you

speak of. If peace comes and the attacks on our lands reduce, then we will have no problems. My house has been attacked and burnt three times now, but NGOs are only worried about Covid-19”. Notably, the same participants who expressed frustrations with NGOs’ seemingly singular concern with Covid-19 also described particularly vehement scepticism about the Covid-19 vaccine. As one male agropastoralist in Benue explained: “If Covid-19 vaccines were available for me or my household, I would not take it...Only NGOs talk of Covid-19. It is not here in the community. Therefore, why should I take a vaccine? I cannot trust the NGOs now. We need a clear explanation before we can embrace or take any vaccine”.⁴

In addition to fuelling vaccine hesitancy, scepticism about Covid-19-related risks and mitigation measures has implications for compliance with public health campaigns more generally, and may also drive increasing civil unrest and mistrust of the Government of Nigeria. Indeed, a Mercy Corps study described strong linkages between Covid-19 measures, especially lockdowns, and mounting social unrest in Nigeria, with one participant in that study explaining that the pandemic is: “a trigger event that set the spark for protest and large scale contentious action, and [the] government’s insensitivity to what people were going through on a daily basis...is what made it so bad” (Mercy Corps, 2021).



Cattle graze in the bush, Adamawa State, Nigeria.
Photo: Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps

³ In-depth interview with male agropastoralist, Benue, January 2021.

⁴ In-depth interview with male agropastoralist, Benue, January 2021.

Accounting for interacting shocks when designing and implementing interventions

These narratives should not serve to discredit other rigorous research that identifies Covid-19 as a driver of conflict in Nigeria; nor do they imply that NGO interventions designed to address the livelihood consequences of the pandemic are ill conceived or unnecessary in areas affected by other shocks and stressors. They *do*, however, highlight the critical importance of accounting for and mitigating the pandemic's impact on rural livelihoods in Nigeria through interventions that account for Covid-19's interaction with a combination of upstream and downstream shocks and stressors. This includes using systems-based

approaches when designing interventions in support of livelihood resilience and also when communicating intervention logic to participant communities. One example of such an approach might entail increasing support to market actors, especially those engaged in agricultural value chains, to help them continue to provide goods and services that agropastoralists depend on for food and livelihood security. By more explicitly accounting for Covid-19 as a factor in a wider system of livelihood shocks and stresses, aid actors can communicate in ways that are more relevant to community-level perceptions and priorities. This should be a particular priority when it comes to approaching the continuing challenges in the battle against vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria.



Animal health workers inspect a goat, Gombe State, Nigeria.
Photo: Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps

II. How are people adapting their livelihoods in the face of compounding shocks?

KEY FINDINGS

- Agropastoral coping strategies include: the cultivation of crops with lower-priced inputs, a return to traditional fertiliser and medicines, reduced cultivation and herd splitting.
- Adaptations based on livelihood portfolio diversification were common responses to compounding shocks, including off-farm activities such as informal trade, transportation and small-scale artisanal mining.
- Younger, healthier, wealthier and better-connected individuals are perceived as better able to adapt to shocks and stressors, while older and disabled individuals are often excluded from informal support through social networks.

In the face of compounding shocks, participants described making changes to their livelihoods that fall into two broad categories:

- Coping strategies based on existing agropastoral practices;
- Efforts to diversify agropastoral livelihood portfolios, often to include off-farm activities.

Agropastoral coping strategies

Changes to existing agropastoral livelihood activities often included the reallocation of resources towards value chains whose inputs were less affected by price shocks. For example, the high cost of fertiliser led some participants to stop cultivating fertiliser-intensive crops (e.g. cucumber and capsicum) and instead focus on crops requiring less expensive inputs (e.g. maize and bitter leaf). Other participants described returning to

traditional techniques to supplement or entirely replace expensive and difficult-to-access commercial inputs. The high prices of commercial fertiliser, for example, led some participants to rely on cow manure produced at home, while others described supplementing animal feed with chaff, fish carcasses and salt in order to stretch their supply. Similarly, as a result of trade disruptions and border closures due to Covid-19, the availability of veterinary medicines sharply decreased. To cope with unaffordable prices and limited supply, some participants turned towards traditional medicine to treat livestock disease and illness. One participant explained how he reserves drugs for severe cases: “[W]e use traditional medicine to treat some sicknesses before they get severe because, since the lockdown, we cannot afford drugs. So, we have a variety of roots we use. These days, we only resort to drugs after trying our very best with traditional medicine for severe cases”.⁵

COPING OR ADAPTING?

Changes to livelihoods due to shocks and stresses are often classified as either coping strategies or adaptive strategies. Coping strategies exist on a shorter time scale, comprising short-term changes in response to shocks. Adaptations are longer-term strategies that cannot be reversed as easily, and signal more permanent, transformative approaches to dealing with change. Since the time scale of changes and the effects of Covid-19 are still unknown, in some cases, it is difficult to determine how to categorise the livelihood changes described by participants within the coping/adapting dichotomy. Future rounds of SPARC research will investigate the longer-term implications of the livelihood strategies participants are employing in the context of compounding shocks and stresses.

⁵ In-depth interview with male pastoralist, Kogi, January 2021.

Livelihood portfolio diversification

The reduction and suspension of agricultural activities are frequently paired with efforts to diversify agropastoral livelihood portfolios to include off-farm activities. Informal trade in local marketplaces emerged as a popular new activity in response to the effects of Covid-19, as did other commercial activities, such as transport-bike riding. Female participants also described starting or expanding new businesses, such as soap production or selling clothing. In Plateau, participants indicated that male community members are frequently turning to artisanal tin mining as an alternative to agropastoral activities.⁶ One participant stated: "Tin mining has been done since the days of our forefathers so that is where we got the idea from. [Before Covid-19 and the floods] we were not doing it because farming was more profitable. We had to go into it because of the floods that happened".⁷

The long-term implications for household resilience that stem from agropastoralists' efforts to diversify livelihood activities during the pandemic period are yet to be determined. Should diversification strategies fail, households may face even greater hardship as a result of having redirected their limited resources away from farming and herding towards off-farm endeavours that ultimately proved fruitless. Conversely, research from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana that predates the pandemic showed that agropastoral households that were able to diversify livelihood portfolios beyond climate-dependent activities were better able to recover after climatic shocks such as floods (Majekodunmi et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2016). If the same holds true in Nigeria, livelihood diversification observed in response to the pandemic and other shocks may lead to long-term improvements in household resilience.

GENDER AND COMPOUNDING SHOCKS AND STRESSES

Compounding livelihood shocks and stresses, including Covid-19, have distinct implications for men's and women's livelihood activities, and may strain traditional gender roles. For example, movement restrictions implemented by the Nigerian government during the early stages of the pandemic caused men to spend more time at home with their wives and children, sometimes leading to domestic tensions or disputes. One male farmer in Kaduna explained that due to the pandemic: "You have to remain within the walls of your house. Men are supposed to be outside working, but instead we are home with [our] wives doing nothing. You hear your wives insulting the children for misbehaviour, and they insult us men too. Soon, trouble starts between you and your wife".*

Within the context of compounding shocks and stresses, especially those related to the pandemic, various participants also described shifting labour patterns among women. For example, women with a history of engaging in agricultural livelihood activities frequently described pursuing new, off-farm activities for the first time, involving day labour and petty trade. Other women, including some who had no history of working outside the home, described directly engaging in agricultural livelihood activities for the first time, in order to make ends meet. Female participants explained that their engagement in livelihood activities outside the home often requires negotiations with male family members. One participant convinced her hesitant husband that she should work as a day labourer on a nearby farm during the harvest season to earn extra income so the family could buy food and soap: "It was a tough decision because my husband didn't agree at first, but I cajoled him. What he's bringing isn't enough and we have children to cater for".**

* In-depth interview with male farmer, Kaduna, September 2020.

** In-depth interview with female trader, Kaduna, December 2020.

⁶ Plateau boasts particularly accessible deposits of tin ore, cassiterite (Ebikemefa, 2020).

⁷ In-depth interview with female farmer, Plateau, January 2021.



Woman displaced by conflict sells vegetables in the market, Gombe State, Nigeria.
Photo: Tom Saater/Mercy Corps

Differing adaptive capacities: “All fingers are not equal”

What determines who is more easily able to cope and adapt to compounding agropastoral livelihood shocks in Nigeria? Known predictors of wellbeing, such as wealth and physical ability, emerged as important determinants of adaptive capacity. Participants often used the phrase “all fingers are not equal” to explain how differences in age, physical ability and wealth are central to a household’s ability to adapt to change. Younger and healthier individuals are reportedly more able to shift livelihood activities in response to shocks. In contrast, elderly or disabled individuals may be more likely to struggle to cope and adapt without additional help. Additionally, those with relatively high farm yields or herds were widely perceived as more capable of adapting to shocks and stressors. As one male pastoralist in Plateau explained: “There are some people in this community who have up to ten cattle and other people who have only two cattle. There are some who can afford to buy two bags of fertiliser while some can only buy in bits. Although all of them are in need of more to sustain them[selves], the people with more, or [those who] are able to afford more, are more likely to overcome these challenges easily”.⁸

Participants also explained that relative wealth can open doors to unions and other community associations that allow access to further support. One participant explained the importance of unions for those working in grain storage: “[T]he people that are not in any union find it hard to bounce back because they have small capital and they buy and sell in small quantities. Joining the union requires money, so the people in it have money and buy goods in large quantities”.⁹ Age, physical ability and relative wealth thus influence an individual’s capacity to adapt and their ability to access social networks and shared resources. Indeed, participants also overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of informal social networks, especially connections with family and kin, as an extremely important determinant of adaptive capacities, which is discussed in the next section.

⁸ In-depth interview with male pastoralist, Plateau, January 2021.

⁹ In-depth interview with male farmer, Adamawa, January 2021.

III. How are farmers and herders relying on their social networks to manage the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis and other major shocks on their livelihoods?

KEY FINDINGS

- Informal support – particularly the exchange of information, food, labour, advice and emotional support – was critical to adapting to both small- and large-scale shocks.
- Participants reported that informal support was key to making important livelihood adaptations, particularly in the absence of government support.
- However, levels of support varied across research sites, with some communities experiencing the secondary impacts of Covid-19 on their livelihoods more acutely than others, straining the ability of their social networks to extend support.
- Access to sources of informal support is not equal and, at times, is determined by one's social identity and willingness to engage in social norms related to reciprocity.

In Nigeria's drylands, where governance structures may be weak and formal safety nets absent, agropastoralists depend on their own social networks to cope and adapt to crises, often more than they depend on external assistance.¹⁰ While the extent and nature of such informal livelihood support has shifted in the context of Covid-19 and compounding shocks, participants often described turning to their own communities, including family and kin but also livelihood-based connections and neighbours, for diverse forms of support that enabled adaptive livelihood capacity.

Types of informal support

The types of informal support that agropastoralists described sharing and receiving varied between research sites. Cash gifts and loans extended between socially connected households have traditionally been an important source of livelihood support, particularly for households experiencing idiosyncratic shocks. Generally, however, participants noted that this financial support had decreased substantially due to resource scarcity during the pandemic, as households were forced to allocate their limited capital to their own household needs. As one participant in Kogi explained: "People might not be able to help out in terms of money loans, like they used to, because of the current financial situation we are all facing

as a result of the pandemic. A lot of people are struggling to feed and take care of their basic needs and more often than not, they do not have anything left to render help or support to others who are in need".¹¹ For especially economically insecure households, decreases in terms of informal financial support represents the loss of a key resource for coping and adapting their livelihoods in the face of multiple sustained shocks.

However, as the prevalence of cash sharing and loans has decreased within communities, other forms of informal support have become more important and increasingly shared. For example, during the pandemic, participants described: increases of labour and food sharing (especially in Kogi and Adamawa); participation in farming co-ops (especially in Plateau); and membership in local money-saving schemes (in Benue). Participants also emphasised the importance of livelihood advice and information shared within social networks. Guidance from kin and known colleagues was often deemed most trustworthy, and participants frequently attributed the success of their adaptation efforts to guidance received from their social connections, especially in the face of rising prices and interruptions to the flow of farming/herding inputs. For example, as described in the previous section, participants rearing livestock reported that the rise in the price of

¹⁰ Other research emphasises the role these informal support networks play in buttressing household resilience, especially in the context of protracted crises. Mercy Corps' Currency of Connections research series from South Sudan demonstrated that the more socially connected households were, the better able they were to diversify their diets (Kim et al., 2020). Moreover, they were found to be more optimistic about their ability to cope and recover in the face of future shocks. Similar linkages between social networks and household resilience were found in north-west Syria, where social capital was essential to accessing income-generating opportunities (Howe et al., 2018). Households that had stronger connections with those outside their community had better food security outcomes, higher expenditures and better housing conditions overall.

¹¹ In-depth interview with male farmer, Kogi, December 2020.

antibiotics forced them to switch to the use of traditional medicines to combat animal diseases – a change made possible through the sharing of knowledge and information among community members. The informal support and resources accessed through these connections were especially critical as households contended with rapidly emerging, layered shocks. A household's capacity to cope and adapt was, in part, dependent on its ability to access and leverage both tangible and intangible resources that were available through their social networks.

“The informal support I am getting from community members has been more beneficial than the government support because it is just a one-time thing compared to the community support, which is continuous.”
– Female farmer, Plateau

Participants stressed that this informal support played an especially essential role in the face of weak and absent formal governance structures. Thanks to a dearth of formal public services, informal support has facilitated a safety net that has been crucial in light of compounding livelihood shocks, including the pandemic and ongoing conflict. A herder in Kogi explained how the absence of government services has necessitated informal support: “The total lack of government intervention in our livelihood has made it mandatory on us to rely on each other for help and support...We have been able to and are constantly trying to help each other without the government's intervention”.¹² Another farmer highlighted a key difference between formal and informal support: “The informal support I am getting from community members has been more beneficial than the government support because it is just a one-time thing compared to the community support, which is continuous”.¹³ The weakness of ‘linking’ social capital – i.e. communication and connections with individuals who represent formal sources of power, like the government – is echoed in other assessments of social systems in north-east Nigeria (Mercy Corps, 2018), pointing to the absence of sustained government support in the face of ongoing shocks and stresses.

Limitations to informal support

Despite participants stressing the importance of social networks in enabling their livelihood adaptations, interviews revealed that not all community members have equitable access to these informal support networks. While participants noted that those who have or know others with greater financial means are better situated

to withstand shocks and stresses, there are a number of vulnerable groups who struggle to access informal support. Participants pointed to the elderly, internally displaced people (IDPs) and people with disabilities as being particularly excluded from these networks of support. These findings echo the existing literature on social exclusion in Nigeria, which finds people with disabilities, migrants and IDPs to be some of the population's most at risk for social exclusion (Birchall, 2019).

However, limitations to informal support are not restricted to social identity. A number of participants emphasised that community engagement is key to accessing informal support, and spoke indirectly to reciprocity practices. Many explained that people in their community had to give support in order to get support later on, during a time of need. Those who are perceived as selfish or unwilling to support others are unlikely to receive support from others in their community when in need.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by agropastoralists in Nigeria's drylands are numerous. If unaddressed, compounding shocks, including but not limited to the Covid-19 crisis, threaten to undermine the long-term resilience of agropastoral livelihoods in Nigeria's drylands. In many cases, shocks affect households within the same community in dramatically different ways. The perception that aid interventions are singularly focused on curtailing the spread of Covid-19, to the exclusion of other long-standing livelihood challenges, risks driving resentment and scepticism towards aid actors within targeted communities. Yet agropastoralists in Nigeria's drylands are turning to an array of coping and adaptive strategies in response to these compounding shocks. However, only time will tell if these strategies are short-term coping mechanisms, meant to weather unprecedented volatility, or a signifier of more permanent adaptation changes in the composition of rural livelihoods in Nigeria.

SPARC's next phase of research

In the coming months, SPARC researchers in Nigeria will continue to conduct interviews in the same research communities in order to better understand the longer-term implications of the adaptive and coping strategies discussed here. Longitudinal analysis in future reports will examine dynamics and the longer-term implications of these strategies for household resilience and wellbeing in agropastoral contexts. Similar studies from our corresponding longitudinal research in [South Sudan](#) and [Somalia](#) will also be produced.

¹² In-depth interview with male herder, Kogi, January 2021.

¹³ In-depth interview with female farmer, Plateau, January 2021.

Acknowledgements

This discussion paper is published through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crisis (SPARC) programme, which is supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The authors wish to thank the team of Mercy Corps-affiliated researchers who conducted the interviews that informed the analysis in this report. They are: Salma Aliyu, Msugh Atser, Hadiza Esma'eel, Shadrach Gideon, Oluwafemi Olajide and Gbenga Olatunji.

We are also grateful to Jon Kurtz, Simon Levine, Dr Jeeyon Kim and Sheilla Osondu-Iheke who offered helpful reviews of earlier drafts of this report. Finally – and most importantly – we are grateful to the participants in this study, who took time away from their busy schedules to answer our questions.

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Fund manager



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This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.