

## Health Science

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## COVID-19 RESPONSE MEASURES AND THEIR IMPACTS IN WORETA TOWN, NORTH WEST ETHIOPIA



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#### Introduction

COVID-19 is one of the most shocking tragedies that impacted the world. It resulted in crisis in health care, socio-economic and political aspects. Ethiopia faced the onset of the crisis with clear strength. It had an excellent long term track record of economic growth, major improvements in infrastructure, poverty reduction and social development (United Nation Ethiopia, 2020).

However, the threat posed by the pandemic in tandem with inter-communal conflicts was assumed to overwhelm the existing strength and capacity of the country. Thus, the country had to take measures to counter and reduce the devastating effects of the pandemic. Covid-19 emergency rules that required a partial lockdown were issued and implemented throughout the country including Woreta. They consist of movement restriction, border closure, restriction of social gatherings, physical distancing, quarantine and isolation, business closure and temporary suspension of secondary or non-critical governmental services etc. Despite these pandemic measures, some key sectors have continued to operate. Economic activities are continuing albeit at a lower level and in a country with a large informal sector and reliance on day-to-day income, a deliberate decision has been taken not to be heavy-handed with a view to restricting a sharp increase in vulnerability (Shigute, Mebratie, Alemu & Bedi, 2020).

The public health measures were helpful to contain the pandemic in many countries (such as Australia and China). But their unintended consequences predominantly in low income and marginalized community settings are emerged and reported in many recent studies that are conducted such as those that are done by Braam et al., (2021) and Nuwematsiko et al., (2022) in Somalia and Uganda respectively.

The nature and depth of impacts associated with the above stated measures are different in the various regions and towns of Ethiopia depending on the unique socio-cultural, economic and political context of the localities. This study tried to explore the impacts of Covid-19 related response measures in Woreta town at the early onset of the disease. Although the attention was made on the immediate and short-term impacts, the effects of Covid-19 are far from being short living. They may rather lingering to affect lives and livelihoods.

#### 2. Research Method

##### 2.1. Description of the Study Area

Woreta town is part of South Gondar Zone. It is located in North West Ethiopia, 620 km away from the Capital, Addis Ababa and 57 km from Bahirdar. It has an area of 78.59 km<sup>2</sup> enclosed by a rice producing Fogera district in all directions. There are four kebeles in

woreta where a kebele is the smallest administrative unit which is similar to sub-district or sub-town. The town is growing and expanding. Parallely, unemployment and lack of income continue to be a challenge for many dwellers who are facing the brunt of pandemic (Alifnur, 2021).

The population of the town is growing fast. In 2007 it was 25,190 (CSA, 2007). In 2020, the population rises to 49,849 in more than 12,000 households. Due to the strategic location of Woreta town, vehicles from various directions (including from areas more affected by COVID-19) come and converge. It is also attracting migrants from the surrounding rural areas. But it has no adequate health facilities (such as quarantine and isolation centers) and adequate health professionals. This pushed some residents to self-quarantine in hotel rooms.

**2.2. Research Design:** The study followed qualitative approach with an exploratory design to investigate impacts of Covid-19 response measures at a district level.

**2.3. Selection of Study Sample:** A total of 30 interviewees were purposively drawn from three groups; health workers, community leaders and ordinary residents. The sample size was thoroughly determined using the principle of "saturation" i.e until additional interviews did not provide additional evidence about the main themes of interest (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

In the selection of residents, attention was given for people whose working and living situation bears an exposure to COVID-19 and its concomitant impacts. Thus, service providers (such as people working in hotels, local drink houses, groceries, shops), and petty traders, teachers, car attendants were included. Interviews were taken place at their place of work and at home or in open spaces out of home. All of them were briefed about the objective of the research and asked to give their consent before interview.

**2.4. Data Collection:** Before starting the research, a verbal informed consent was obtained from all study participants. An attempt was made to anonymize the identity of informants in this paper to maintain confidentiality. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews from September to October 2020. An interview guide was prepared based on an insight gained from literature review. The instrument consisted semi-structured items that were prepared in English language and translated in to local Amharic language to make them easily understandable for study participants. Each interview lasted for about 40-50 minutes. The interview was audio recorded. The data were collected by the researchers and a trained assistant.

**2.5. Data Analysis:** interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in the local Amharic language and translated in to English. Then, transcripts along with field notes were imported in to Open Code 4.02 Software for analysis after they are checked for accuracy. The analysis was done by following framework approach. The approach

is a flexible, rigorous, transparent and useful method for analyzing qualitative data (Furber,2010). It is better adapted to research that has specific questions, a limited time frame (Sivastava and Thomson, 2009).

It is a step by step, rigorous analysis that begin by familiarizing oneself with the data. Based on this, the researchers have familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading and note taking.

The notes are then organized to give a theoretical frame work, a combined set of recurrent ideas. Using the framework, the researcher has developed codes. After coding the first few transcripts independently, a two-way discussion was made to arrive at a consensus about further codes. Then coding was done on the whole body of text or the raw data.

Next, similarly coded items were collected and put in to a matrix with headings and sub-headings. Three main themes were developed including; social impacts, economic impacts and political impacts. Finally, the data were synthesized and interpreted.

### 3.Results and Discussion

#### Covid-19 Related Rules and Their impact

Although there were prior Covid-19 related ministerial directives and local Covid-19 measures, the five-month emergency proclamation issued in April provided a more formal and standardized system of response. The emergency proclamation No.3/2020 required physical distance of at least two adult strides in banks, market places, transport stations, shops, pharmacies or any other place of public service. It also requires providing sanitary materials for customers in service giving institutions; arranging safe working condition for employees, selling products and services at reasonable price. On the other hand, it contained prohibitions such as meeting, hand shaking, detainee visiting etc. (Council of Ministers,2020).

In Woreta town, Covid-19 directives and local measures were enforced up on schools, night clubs, pool houses, groceries, khat and shisha houses that were closed in March 2020. Shops, cafeterias, restaurants, hotels and local drink centers were ordered to apply physical distancing. In order to enforce physical distancing and stay at home principles, actions were taken in March 2020; inter-city cars were banned, flour mills were closed and marketers were forcefully dispersed by a civil police force which is locally called "denb askebari" because these areas were places of concentration for people. Before the ban, a short warning was announced from the Mayor that shocked dwellers because the time limit was very brief to get prepared. People had to purchase and prepare basic food items within the given span of time.

Emergency pandemic response measures such as business closure, physical distancing and movement restrictions had several impacts which can be generalized in three themes; social impacts, economic impacts and political impacts.

#### 1. Social Impacts

Covid-19 measures affected the provision of social services. In addition to the temporary suspension of secondary or non-critical governmental services, basic services like education were interrupted. The measures brought many social problems such as lack of access to health care, social stigma, unemployment, crime, food insecurity and increased women's work load.

**Lack of Timely Access to Health Care Equipment:** Covid-19 measures created a pressure on quick access to medical inputs by disrupting the supply chain. Closure of borders and transit safety regulations created difficulty for purchasing and transporting food and medical equipment. In Ethiopia, almost all consumables for diagnosis and the test kit itself depend on the international market under national import permit and regulations. To get minor but vital

items in the local market is difficult. As a result, the Ethiopian Food and Drug Authority (EFDA) and other agencies are practicing substantially fast-tracked approval process of COVID-19 related products, yet each process of procurement should pass through the existing legal procedures (getting hard currency, shipment, certification, EFDA registration and customs clearance) which take longer than one's expectation (Mulu et al., 2021).

The logistics cluster of National Disaster and Risk Management Commission was faced with limitation in supplying emergency provisions. When it comes to Woreta town, the provision of medical equipment was short and irregular due to lack of budget and weak supply chain. For instance, there was a low stockpile of hand hygiene materials (alcohol and sanitizer). There was no supply of medical masks and full protective gowns as well as materials to furnish quarantines and isolation centers. There was no consistent supply of laboratory kits from upper government organs. Therefore, the Rapid Response Team got difficulty to collect COVID-19 samples (Alifnur, 2021). Instead of mass Covid-19 testing, only selective testing strategy was followed.

**Social Stigma:** Interview results show that health extension workers were exposed for stigma for wearing face mask in their home-to-home anti-pandemic campaign. Cases of stigma against foreigners and non-local Ethiopians were surfacing in the reports of humanitarian partners (such as OCHA, 2020). In addition, the way the measures were applied further promoted stigma. The first person tested to be positive on June 16, 2020 was publicly embarrassed and stigmatized when he was forcefully taken by security forces from his working place and admitted to a former military camp in Bahirdar for isolation. His family members also faced stigma until their Covid-19 test results were known to be negative and announce to the people by them.

**Unemployment and Crime:** Increased unemployment and cases of crime were additional problems posed by Covid-19 rules. Despite findings by recent studies (such as Harris et al., 2021) showing recoveries, loss of employment increased particularly at the onset of the pandemic. Unemployment rates plunged at the onset of the pandemic in April 2020, with 8% of respondents losing their job. Of these 63 % cited Covid-19 as the main reason. Job loss was more sever in urban areas (20%) than in rural areas (Azeze et al., 2021). The problem is pronounced among unskilled and semiskilled labor. In Amhara region, where Woreta town belongs, a 12-month average unemployment level for the unskilled and semi-skilled labor increases by 2.6% and 1.7% respectively, while the unemployment level for the skilled labor rises by about 1.2% (Tilahun and Getachew, 2020).

In woreta, Covid-19 response measures led to contraction of the labor market which in turn increased the number of unemployed people. In addition to increased unemployment due to contraction of the labor market, there were unemployed people due to layoffs. For example, 117 workers were reduced from Rib Irrigation Project. Some of them were living in woreta town and joined a community of job seekers while others forced to sell their productive assets.

According to the mayor, there were 4735 registered job seekers in the town at the time of data collection. But other unregistered job seekers were also coming from neighboring rural districts observed catering for wage labor in Fogera rice farms.

Every morning job seekers collectively stand together in labor markets found in kebele 01 and 02. But only some of them succeed in getting jobs. Regarding this, Mr. kasahun has a lot to say. He is 36 having two children. He regularly visits the crowded labor market in the hope to get job but he successfully gets a job every three day on average with a daily wage of 140 birr. Though the crowded situation is risky, getting a job is a primary issue to him than Covid-19.

Besides high unemployment, deviant gambling and criminal acts

were also magnified in the streets of town. In early March, crimes of theft and assault were repeatedly perpetrated than before particularly in kebele 03. Thus, the local police attempted to disperse unemployed migrant job seekers from their area of assembly as well as from establishments that provide rental boarding service to them which are called "medeb betoch". According to the local police the dispersal was done for two purposes i) to protect transmission of the pandemic ii) to reduce crime of theft and assault that was being carried out at that time. But the action was not successful.



Job seekers standing at a labor market in woreta, kebele 02, around Mezegaja area- September 2020.

**Food Insecurity:** Food security was endangered for many poor people in the town due to inability to buy food. Mrs. Mesayit (name changed) is an old woman living in kebele 04. She is a destitute living in abject poverty. She has no constant means of income. When she gets domestic (home based) jobs, she works for minimal wages. In the demise of job, she suffers lack of food. Her 15 years old daughter has dropout from school in 2019 due to poverty. For the worst, Covid-19 measures denied her wages and increased her food insecurity. Mrs. Mesayit said that "I engaged in cotton spinning activity at my home and earned 100 birr by which I purchased a small amount of grain for the coming Ethiopian New Year holiday. In the usual times, we have nothing to eat except wetted corn".



A photo showing a destitute in kebele 04, September 2020

The interviewee was desperate about her future food security status and called for an emergent assistance. A study in Bangladesh by Das et al. (2020) similarly founded that around 90% of studied households were suffering from different grades of acute food insecurity during the lockdown. Households in urban settings were severely affected.

Food insecurity on vulnerable groups was sever. The vulnerable groups identified by the mayor include the destitute (whose number is not given), the orphans (319), the aged (380), the disabled (85), street children (231), beggars (43) and commercial sex workers (70). Such groups of people are not adequately supported although there were attempts to distribute meals for short time. For instance, only 689 children and elderly were assisted by the local Women, Children and social affairs office in collaboration with its partners. The rest were not addressed. Earlier to this, attempts were made to send street children back in to their respective families and places of origin.

It is known that, a National Resource Mobilization Initiative has been established (Baye, 2020). The country's main social safety net (8 million beneficiaries), the PSNP which caters rural areas is working

actively (Shigute, Mebratie, Alemu & Bedi, 2020). To this end, sharing meals, soaps/sanitizers, clothes and oil has been conducted at federal, regional and grass roots level including in the study community.

In woreta, both formal and informal community protection systems were activated. Although Covid-19 has weakened dweller's economic power, the participation of people was widely observed in social assistance to the poor because of a favorable cooperative culture. Besides, these community's informal protection mechanisms, the Mayor Office raised donations in-cash and kind from the community and zonal administration. The collected contributions were distributed to poorest households even if the distribution's fairness was questionable.

**Increased Work Load of Women:** Female health extension workers who dominate the grassroot health workforce were busy in their job since the beginning of Covid-19 response.

"we are doing every task in the kebele including one that is not related to our profession, there are continuous campaigns for the last five months, so we have no (ample)time for sitting in office and conduct meetings and giving services at office. We have three phases of covid-19 campaigns in different times, we also had measles immunization campaign, we had family health campaign which is still not completed. It was rather interrupted due to the new round covid-19 Community Based Surveillance campaign." A health extension in kebele 01

Women were also burdened at home due to child care. In Woreta, there were about 15000 students of various levels during the onset of the pandemic. But the absence of remote learning opportunity, made them remain at home for seven months due to Covid-19 control measures in 2020. Nearly half of the students were enrolled in six primary schools, six kindergartens, two special need centers and three "O class" educational establishments. Especially, the closure of kindergartens created an additional child care responsibility for women who had to attend immature children and toddlers at home. This was unsuitable for Women government employees and petty traders. Similar results by Harris et al. (2021) showed that girls and women were seen to bear the greatest burden of increased household chores and care for children/siblings or ill relatives during the pandemic.

## 2. Economic Impacts

### **Business Decline and Loss of Income**

Woreta is a town having an expanding small-scale business. However, business owners were the victims of public and government responses to COVID-19. The restriction of movements and market regulation measures resulted in declined volume of sales and associated low profit of many shops and other business owners.

In relation to this, Tilahun and Getachew (2020) found that both voluntary partial lockdowns by the public and regional government's announcement of stay-at home measures have resulted in a major loss of sales turnover of many small and medium businesses in the service sector. They particularly stated that the urban poor in Amhara region faced up to 3.5 percentage points loss in their income.

Similarly, a study in urban area of Kampala (Uganda) revealed that during the lockdown and after, several businesses in the community collapsed and others had reduced performance in terms of customers and income generation. Collapse of business was attributed to some people using up the capital for food to survive during the lockdown and reduced performance attributed to most people having no money to buy from the business vendors (Nuwematsiko et al., 2022). Likewise, a study in Somalia founded that, almost all participants faced loss of income primarily as a result of strict public health measures (Braam et al., 2021).

**Inflation and Illegal Businesses:** The increment in the price of food items is a well-recognized happening during Covid-19. Yet, Harris et al. (2021) stated that there was no clear evidence that food prices increased as a result of the pandemic, as food price inflation was high even in the years preceding the pandemic. In the case of woretta, it can be argued that Covid-19 related market control measures aggravated inflation. In the town, market regulation measures were correspondingly taken to check hikes on the price of basic food grains. Price quotas were imposed on basic food items. But they were not continuous and effective. According to interviews, the market control measures were exposed for corruption. Some merchants who violated price quotas were punished and their business was temporarily closed. But they were shortly allowed to restart their usual business in a "corrupt way". According to Mr. Abraham, a resident in kebele 02, the move was politically motivated in which merchants opposing the prevailing political establishment were targeted.

The failure of market regulation highly affected the poor and the vulnerable groups and exposed them for socio-economic problems. Anecdotal evidences support this as follows;

"The market is scaring us, everything is overpriced, they closed illegal business centers for some days, but they re-opened them. Food grains are expensive, for instance teff costs 4250 birr per quintal", a resident in kebele 03

The local level price hikes were attributed to the behavior of both residents and merchants. In the early period of the pandemic, residents who have better income purchased basic food stuffs and accumulated them for fear of future market irregularities. Merchants also hoard the food items and illegally transported them to other cities in search of better prices.

Moreover, shops were illegally hiding food commodities such as oil, pasta and flour powder. Transport service providers on their part unlawfully increased fares in a way that bitterly troubled dwellers. Many owners of service giving businesses such as groceries continued work covertly despite the ban. completely shut up their service center had formally complained to the government. To solve the problem, the government made up to 25 % tax deduction until they are re-opened again.

### 3. Political Impacts

The Covid-19 related measures had political consequences by igniting the already warm political tension in the area because local people have varying interpretations of the intention behind those measures.

**Politicizing and Manipulating Covid-19 Measures:** On the one hand, the local administration has blamed individuals for denying Covid-19 and politicizing Covid-19 measures. Conversely, some residents viewed Covid-19 related measures as wrongly manipulated by the ruling administration to cover its weaknesses. For instance, an interviewee claimed that "Covid-19 is used as a tool to divert people's attention away from the plight of Amhara people outside the region in politically motivated inter-communal conflicts that indicate leadership failure". In addition, covid-19 related market regulation measures were reported to target merchants opposing the incumbent administration.

### Conclusion

This study analyzed the socio-economic and political impact of the Covid-19 related measures. It revealed that COVID-19 related restrictions have latent consequences by aggravating previously existing volatile social, economic and political conditions. Thus, microbusiness and informal sector employees shall be specially supported. local community, government and civic organizations have to work to maintain the habit of helping one another by nurturing the existing community protection mechanisms that support the poor and vulnerable. To avoid Covid-19 social stigma, a participatory communication strategy shall be adopted. The

government has to ensure the poor family's access to long term social assistance by avoiding corruption and mismanagement of food aids. In order to build public trust on the administration, it should not politicize Covid-19 measures.

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