
SQUEEZED

Highlights from *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility, Year 1 Results*

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High and rising food prices are no longer a surprise, but rapid price changes and the cumulative effects of five years of price rises are still squeezing people on low incomes: people are working harder and longer but wages are not keeping pace with inflation, so they are adapting where and how they can. The first year results from a four-year study of how food price volatility affects everyday life, described in *Squeezed*, find important changes in people's wellbeing and development in areas of life that policy neglects – domestic care work and informal social safety nets. This report provides reasons to prepare for the next food price spike and recommendations on how best to do so: widen social assistance for the most vulnerable; be ready with temporary spike-proofing action; monitor the real impacts on people's lives and wellbeing; rethink social protection policy to 'crowd-in' care and informal social assistance; and enable people to participate in policies to tackle food price volatility.

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SQUEEZED: THE BACKGROUND

Squeezed is an account of the cumulative pressures of food price rises on everyday life in developing countries, and how they are changing behaviour, relationships, and social organisation in ways that matter for development. While the ‘food crisis’ is no longer headline news, it has not gone away: food prices continue to rise and at times to spike; that this is causing hardship is not in question. For the foreseeable future, development policy and practice is set to continue to focus on how changes in food prices affect people living in poverty in developing countries. *Squeezed* aims to help policy makers think about how to respond to food price volatility by directing attention to the following:

- how people and societies are adapting to food price changes;
- what action could usefully be taken now;
- what aspects of adaptation need better monitoring;
- what needs to be better understood about these complex changes.

Squeezed summarises Year 1 findings from a four-year, mixed-method study called ‘Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility’. This study aims to investigate the impacts of food price volatility on well-being, specifically work, care work, family life, social relations, and support systems. *Squeezed* draws out the major themes from local-level qualitative research in 2012, from 23 locations in the 10 countries being studied. It sets these findings against the background of what has been happening with global and national food security over the past five years. Separate reports of the research findings for each country in 2012 are available, in addition to a detailed account of the research methodology. More information is available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/food-livelihoods/food-price-volatility-research>

Table 1. Countries categorised by undernourishment and income levels

	Low income	Lower-middle income
<i>‘Severe’ undernourishment</i>	Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Kenya	Guatemala and Zambia
<i>‘Moderate’ undernourishment</i>	Bangladesh	Bolivia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Viet Nam

Five years of price rises and spikes

Although failed harvests in 2012 did not result in the price spike that had been feared, world food prices were as high as they had ever been (at, or close to, 2008 levels) for much of the year. High and rising food prices no longer come as a shock, but people are feeling the slow-burn effects of five years’ worth of persistently high and volatile prices. World and national food prices reflected the local experiences that were revealed to us in 2012:

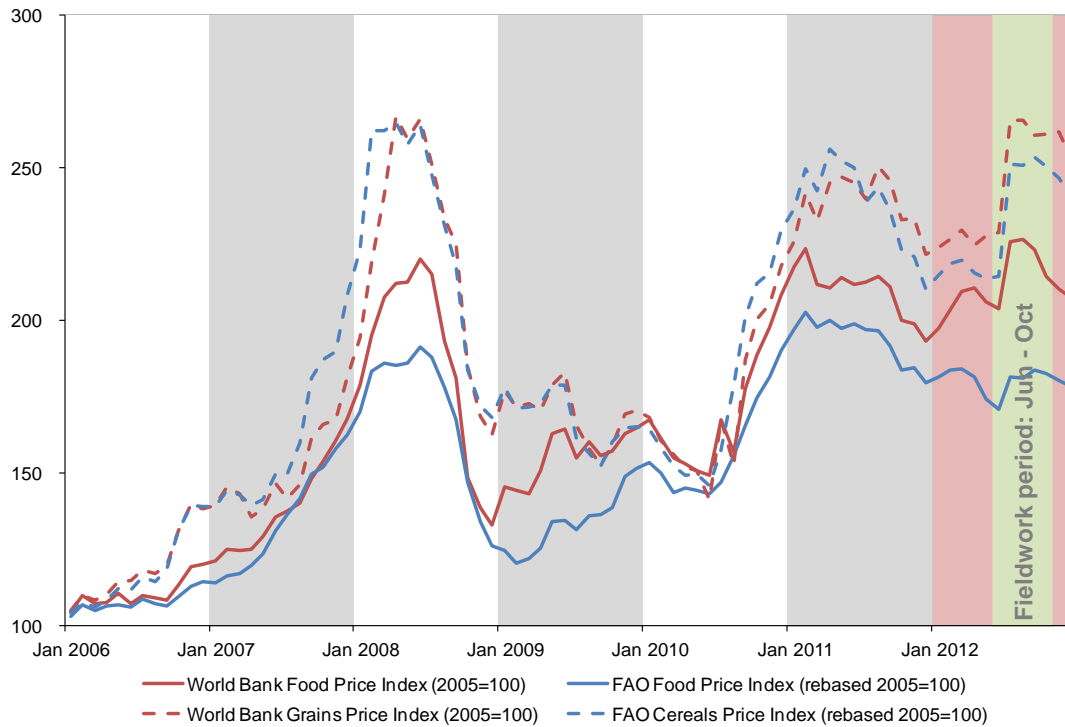
- most food prices (for both staple and non-staple items) rose again for most people;
- rises were not always steep, but the cumulative effects of five years of rises meant that they still hurt;
- price uncertainty remained a concern, particularly for rice farmers.

World food prices in 2012: the rising trend continues

Following five years of volatile and rising prices, world food prices rose and remained high throughout 2012, at or close to record levels (in nominal terms). Cereals and soybeans drove this rise, as drought and extreme heat in the US and the Black Sea region pushed up the price of maize, soybean, and wheat; rice prices were mostly stable or lower than in the previous year.

Overall, world food prices were slightly less volatile than in the previous five years, and the prices of certain foods such as meat and dairy were a little lower than in 2011.

Figure 2. World food prices, 2006–12



National food prices: a general increase for staple items

National food prices are not only influenced by world markets: market conditions, harvests, climate, and government policies also influence prices at country level. Although rice prices were lower in Viet Nam and Bangladesh in comparison to 2011, this was not the case for Indonesia, despite their record harvest in 2012. Wheat prices were higher in Pakistan and many other countries, and in Ethiopia the price of *teff* (a native grain) rose dramatically. Maize prices were variable across and within countries; the prices varied greatly within Kenya, were stable in Guatemala, and higher than the previous year in Bolivia as a result of tight international supply. As a result of the failed 2011 harvest, millet prices were high and continued to rise in Burkina Faso. In Zambia, a good maize harvest kept prices stable through much of the year, but the effect of high world prices started was felt in the second half of the year.

Box 1. How we are researching Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility

Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility is a four-year study, which employs mixed research methods and multi-level analyses to track the effect of global price volatilities in the everyday lives of 23 local communities across 10 low- and lower-middle-income countries with both 'severely' (over 25%) and 'moderately' (less than 25%) undernourished populations.

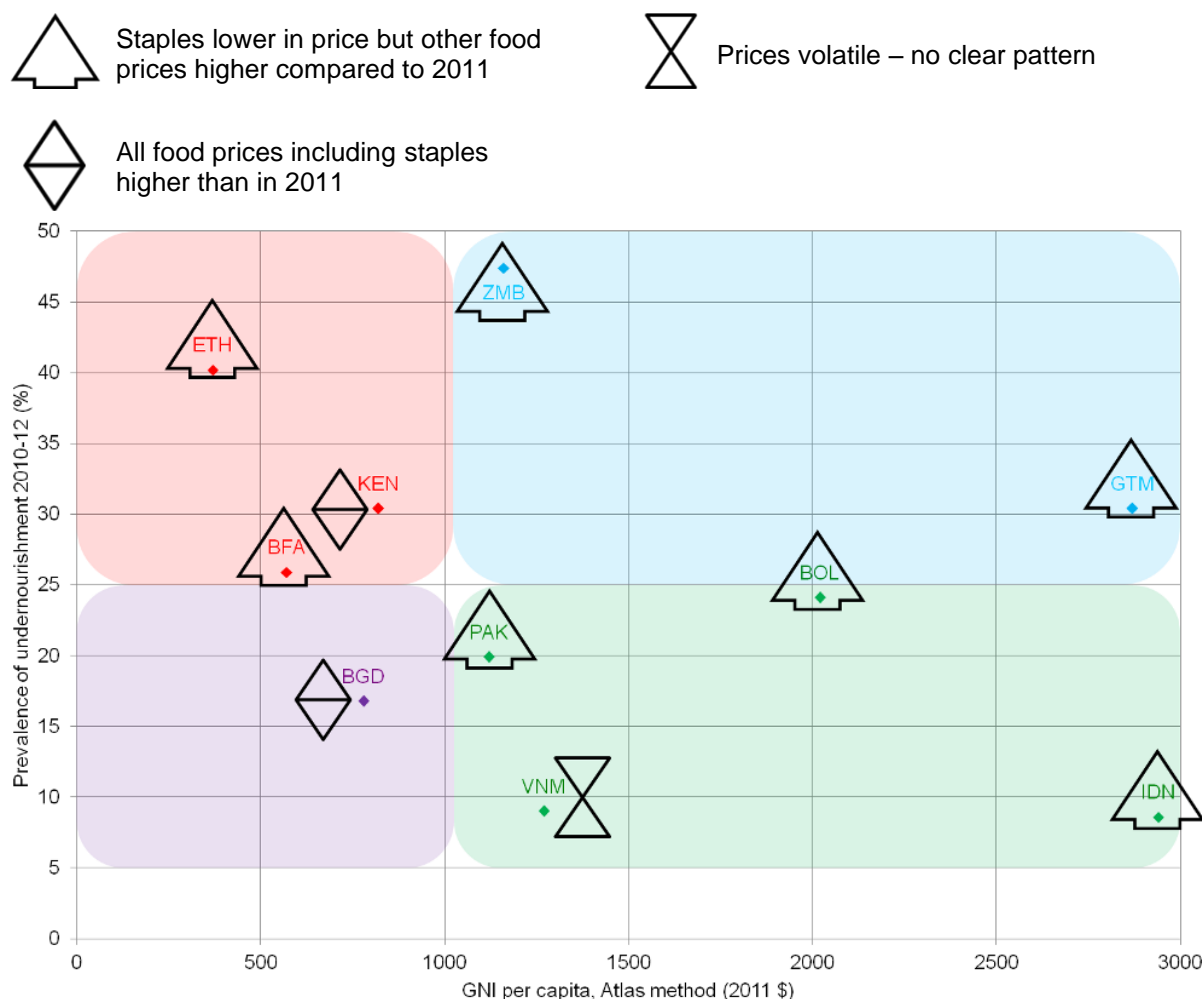
The first set of results from the study, presented here, focus on how prices were changing in 2012 and on local evidence about how people and societies were responding. In future years we will include analyses of how people across the countries were experiencing these changes.

A paper on the methodology, annual country reports, and other project outputs is available here: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/food-livelihoods/food-price-volatility-research>.

Local food prices: varied patterns and cumulative effects

Local food prices increased significantly after 2007, and this increase continued into 2012 in most of the 23 communities in which we conducted research (see Box 1). In most of these locations, almost all food prices had increased. In the Bangladeshi and Kenyan communities, some staples had reduced slightly in price, while all other items became more costly; in Viet Nam, some types of rice were lower in price in 2012 than the previous year, though in general prices fluctuations varied and there were no clear patterns. On the whole, although slightly more varied, local experiences of food prices generally reflected the situation at national levels.

Figure 3. Reported price changes in research communities in the past year



Source: Analysis of source interviews and focus group discussions

Some of the more positive elements of that picture are that:

- apart from *teff* in Ethiopia, most food price rises were comparatively modest last year;
- people can and do change what they buy, to take advantage of whatever is cheapest;
- people are now used to rapid food price changes, and do their best to plan for them.

But more negatively:

- the effects of food price changes pile up over time – a price rise is not paid once, but daily;
- people do not live on staples alone, and high-value nutrient-rich foods and items people like also became more expensive, in some cases significantly so;
- food price rises are pushing up other prices, and the overall cost of living was a concern across the board.

Precarious times

Everyone now expects prices to rise, but nobody knows by how much or when. Growing, procuring, and preparing food absorb such a lot of human effort that uncertainty about the cost of feeding one's family is making the already precarious lives of those living on low and irregular incomes, ever more so (see Box 2).

Box 2. 'The budget is ruined': food price volatility makes planning for the future difficult

People are finding it harder to budget and plan, making it difficult to aspire for the future. Prioritising the future of their children remained a top priority to families despite this uncertainty. When questioned on how she is coping with changes in certainty, Mrs. R, a 28-year-old handicrafts-business owner and mother of three from Kabwata (Lusaka, Zambia), replied:

'Things are just the same. The problem is that the prices fluctuate – they go up and down. These fluctuations have been going on for a long time. Definitely the budget is ruined, so we adjust the budget. But there are certain things we prioritize – education comes first, then food, then shelter and clothing.'

A 40-year-old woman from Bekasi (near Jakarta, Indonesia) explained:

'I'm fed up with prices rising – I'm confused as to how to control my money!'

Food price volatility made saving and planning particularly difficult for people like rubber tappers in Banjar, Indonesia, and rice farmers in Nghệ An Province and Tri Tôn District in Viet Nam, for whom the costs of living rose while earnings dropped. Those able to save were doing so to protect against future price hikes and medical costs, highlighting the expectation that price rises would continue. In Nessesmentenga in rural Burkina Faso, a religious teacher explained that, despite the severity of the food crisis, local people had reduced their overall expenditure on food to save for malaria treatment later in the year.

Saving and planning may be considered luxuries for those living on the very edge of survival. Young women working in the informal sector in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, explained how food price rises affected the rich and poor differently: people with good incomes and savings would be fine, but those who depend on daily work for their survival could be pushed over the edge. As one interviewee phrased it: *'it is like facing death day-to-day'*. In Nessesmentenga, people rarely discussed their inability to save; instead, conversation focussed on the need to sell livestock or to draw down on their assets because the food situation had become so serious.

WORK AND WAGES

Earnings are up – but not as much as inflation

On the positive side, most people reported earning more, in many cases much more, in nominal or cash terms over the previous year. Formal sector workers saw the highest increases in pay, mostly due to minimum wage legislation; however, in several countries, many public sector workers still struggled with the rising cost of living. Export sector workers all recorded increased wages, although working conditions often declined according to many workers. Most daily wage labourers reported pay increases, particularly in the construction, transport, domestic, and agricultural sectors (see Box 3), but some unskilled occupations were being mechanised, pushing wages down. In rural Chikwanda, Zambia, labourers explained that wages had remained low despite food price rises (employers disputed this). Agricultural earnings are harder to establish, but were clearly down in 2012 for rice farmers in Viet Nam and rubber

planters and tappers in Indonesia. Farmers everywhere described how the volatile rising costs of inputs eroded their earnings and made it difficult to plan cultivation.

Table 1. Reported rises in average agricultural wages

Agricultural wage labour rates were said to have increased in most of the communities in the study.

<i>Rural Bangladesh: agricultural daily wages</i>	2010: BDT 120-130 (\$1.47–1.59)	2011: BDT 150–200 (\$1.83–2.44)	2012 peak season: BDT 300 (\$3.66)
<i>Cianjur, rural Indonesia: half-day wage rates</i>		2011: IDR 22,000 (\$2.34) for men IDR 18,000 (\$1.92) for women	2012: IDR 25,000 for men (\$2.66) IDR 20,000 for women (\$2.13)
<i>Rural Dadu District, Pakistan: daily unskilled wage rates</i>		2011: PKR 150 (\$1.61)	2012: PKR 250 (\$2.68)
<i>Rural Dadu District, Pakistan: daily skilled wage rates</i>		2011: PKR 500–600 (\$5.35–6.42)	2012: Up to PKR 700 (\$7.49)
<i>Gulshan-e-Iqbal Town, Pakistan: daily wages</i>		2011: PKR 300–350 (\$3.21–3.75)	2012: PKR 400–500 (\$4.28–5.35)

Despite these increased earnings, people did not feel their income had increased with the rate of inflation; few people could demonstrate that they were materially better off, and most ate less and experienced a reduced standard of living than in previous years. Many people had changed jobs, often to meet the rising costs of living, and there were several reports of increased migration. The pressures to earn a living were pushing some people into less secure and sometimes dangerous work. Price rises and a lack of alternative options had pressed some people into returning to hazardous mining work (Bolivia), taking up gold mining (Burkina Faso), jungle fishing amid tigers and pirates (Bangladesh), and sex work (Kenya and Zambia). Those who were not facing hazardous conditions said that their occupations were now less secure – contracts were shorter, conditions of work less generous, or work was less reliably available as wages had risen.

Box 3. Money is not what it used to be

The way people think about money has changed as its value has become less reliable. People use proverbs and dark humour to make sense of what is happening. In Karachi, Pakistan, a 45-year-old mother of six, whose husband is a daily labourer, noted that:

‘Earlier there was barkat in money but now there is not barkat [literally ‘blessings’; in this context it means that more could be done with the same amount of money in the past]. When we came here [seven or eight years ago], our wages were 150 rupees and now our wages are 500 rupees and yet we cannot meet our household expenses. We used to be able to lead a good life with honour in 150 rupees. We used to get more work because, in money and everything else too, there was so much barkat. Inflation used to be very low (...) Inflation is so high now, how can one be happy when a thing which used to cost just one rupee now costs five?’

Future farmers?

Instead of flocking to farming as prices rise, the view of agriculture is that it has become much less certain over the past few years; as a result of price volatility, farmers can never predict exactly what they will earn. Low earnings were also a factor because the cost of living has risen so steeply in recent years. Farmers also face the uncertainties of agricultural input costs and the effects of climate change. Precariousness is making agriculture a less attractive livelihood option for the younger generation, challenging the assumption that high food prices will attract people into farming. This topic will be explored in a full-length paper to be published in mid-2013.

HOME LIFE: STRETCH OR STARVE?

How well people organise their family lives has a great influence on their wellbeing. *Squeezed* has found that there are particular causes for concern, especially with how people cut down on food and other household consumption, and with the time they invest in unpaid care work for family members. Despite this, we witnessed remarkable capacities for adaptation and innovation that social policies and programmes could be better equipped to support.

What were people eating in 2012?

People in the research communities were continuing to try to curb their spending on food and other items in 2012; this was the case for not only the poorest participants but also some of the more prosperous, middle-class families among the key informants. How people were coping will come as no surprise and it broadly reflected a familiar continuum:

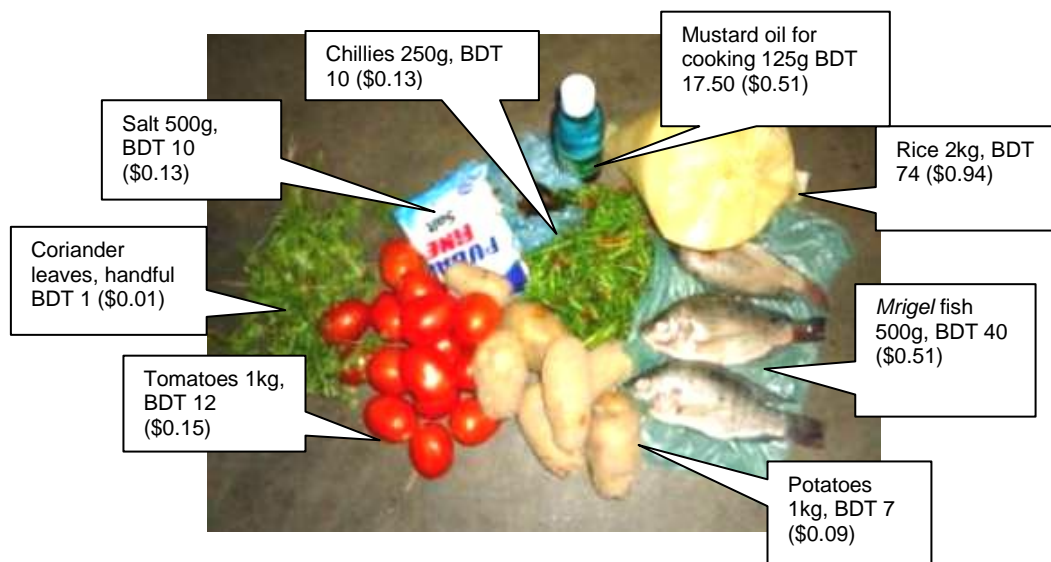
- cutting back on more costly and preferred foods
- substituting
- cutting down on quality and diversity (particularly protein-rich meat and fish)
- shopping in bulk for discounts
- growing, gathering, and processing own food
- shopping in small quantities to manage daily incomes
- borrowing, begging, or claiming food without payment
- cutting down on portions
- cutting out meals
- some family members going hungry
- all family members going hungry.

In the countries with levels of undernourishment classified as 'severe' by FAO standards, people within the research sites reported employing a variety of the above coping strategies.

People in the Bangladeshi community recovering from a cyclone and in the Pakistan communities were also using a wide range of coping mechanisms (both countries are 'moderately' undernourished). In Bolivia, Indonesia and Viet Nam, people were rarely going hungry, but were more likely to have had to cut down on quality and to substitute.

How did 2012 differ from any other year? Having visited some of these people for research purposes since 2009, we can answer this by looking at their typical shopping baskets. The purchases of Mrs. B from Kalyanpur, Bangladesh, in 2011 and 2012 can be seen in Picture 1 and Picture 2; in February 2011, her family spent BDT 184.50 (\$2.34) on two days' worth of food, but growing children, seasonal differences, and changing prices meant she spent BDT 290 (\$3.68) on shopping for one day in July 2012. Furthermore, the contents of her basket were of a lower quality than in 2011. At 2011 prices, her 2012 shopping basket would have cost only BDT 208 (\$2.65) and the higher quality produce she bought in 2011 would cost BDT 344 (\$4.38) at current prices. Mrs. B had replaced mustard oil, traditionally used in Bengali cooking, with cheaper, mass-produced soybean oil, and the fish she was sold as 'pomfret' in 2012 was in fact illegal piranha.

Picture 1. Mrs. B's food basket in Kalyanpur, Bangladesh (February 2011)



Total spending (to last two days): BDT 184.50 (\$2.34).

Picture 2. Mrs B's food basket in Kalyanpur, Bangladesh (July 2012)



Total spending for one day: BDT. 290 (\$3.68)

Food habits are changing

That families were coping in these time-honoured ways is not surprising; people will always find ways to optimise how well they can eat. But it is striking that these short-term coping measures are being used not only by the poorest, but also by wealthier households, and that they have become fairly routine. Other important findings are that:

- people seem to be trying ever harder to grow, gather and process their own food, even though this takes up a lot of time, land and water, all of which are valued and scarce;
- as with the recent horsemeat scandal in Europe, people in developing countries are worried about the safety of the food they can afford to eat. Food hygiene and freshness, adulteration, unknown varieties (such as the previously mentioned piranha sold as pomfret), and unregulated chemical fertilizers and pesticides are some of the concerns people raised.

With spices, vegetables, onions, oil and meat increasingly unaffordable, many people have been relying on processed food additives. When asked what they cook when money is scarce, people cited using Maggi bouillon cubes, instant noodle seasonings, Nam Ngu (cheaper variety) fish sauce, and Royco sauces, among others, as alternatives to fresh items to add flavour. Although few of these items are likely to have high nutritional value, seasonings make it possible for cooks to make cheap and monotonous food taste better on a tiny budget, as many are extremely cheap, widely available and trusted, as they are produced by large national or multinational corporations. Furthermore, most of them store well and are popular with children.

Paid work crowds out unpaid care work

The squeeze on families' budgets has meant that more women in our research communities are trying to find ways to contribute to the household income. This is a striking finding, given that the sites include places in which women's public mobility is prohibited. Paid work or self-employment that women reported having taken up in the past two to three years included gathering and processing fuel, subsistence work on family farms, paid agricultural labour, petty trading, food vending, laundry work, sex work, childminding, domestic work, street sweeping and other occupations. In Viet Nam, only women who were considered too old, frail, or with very young infants were not in paid work. In Pakistan and rural Bangladesh, despite strong social norms against women's mobility, many were in, or looking for, paid work outside their homes. In Zambia, public sector workers including nurses were said to be moonlighting as street vendors to bring their incomes in line with living costs. There were very few women who were not currently, or in the recent past, earning an income, and cost of living rises were widely cited as a driving factor.

If food price volatility is making paid work more essential for many more women, there will be questions about what this means for women's empowerment and their labour force participation, as well as for the segmentation of labour markets by gender. It is less likely to raise questions about who does the unpaid care work that keeps families fed, clothed, clean, and generally looked after when they are young, old, or sick, because such activities are still largely invisible to development policy. However, care work draws on time, effort, resources, and relationships, usually of women, and rapid food price rises tend, on average, to increase the level of care work required to achieve the same level of human development and wellbeing.

Additional pressures to earn have squeezed women's available time, as they are working longer, harder hours to manage household care and income-earning work. Public policies can be better designed to support people when they are trying to earn incomes to help manage food price rises. Other findings that are relevant for thinking about how policy and practice can help people manage better include that:

- Older family members and, to a lesser extent, older children (mainly girls) were said to be taking on a larger share of the care burden, in particular childcare for young grandchildren.
- Relationships between older family members and older children were often under strain; in some cases, support with unpaid care work was an additional burden that older people struggled with.
- For some men, being unable to provide adequately for their families caused great pain and some damage to masculine identities as providers; this in turn caused some tension and even conflict between couples. However, in some families, men and older boys were said to be taking a more active role in the household when women were occupied with work.
- Relationships between parents and children also suffered, as parents became stressed with their inability to meet their children's needs and worried about their future education and prospects.

SOCIAL RELATIONS: MONEY MATTERS

In settings as diverse as urban Bolivia and rural Ethiopia, people explained that food price rises were contributing directly to the monetisation of everyday life: people worried increasingly about cash, which pushed out other priorities.

That social relations are becoming more individualistic and commodified is not a new notion, but the clarity with which people linked clear and distinct changes in their social relations to changes in food prices suggests a paradigm shift. Several examples illustrated how social dynamics had changed, demonstrating how relationships had become less collective as people were putting their individual or household income streams first. Social relationships were being affected by high food prices in the following ways:

- The bases for solidarity, particularly within occupational groups, have changed. Older forms of cooperative or exchange labour were being replaced with more cash transaction-based relationships in some places—most notably in Ethiopia. This change predates 2007, but volatility and high prices seem to have sped up the process. Yet new forms of solidarity were also found among some occupational groups, and these were specifically in response to food price changes and the need for wages to keep pace with inflation. They included some examples of labour organisation at industry or national level in Bangladesh and Bolivia.
- Social lives, particularly how and how much people are celebrating, mourning, worshipping, and participating in collective public life, have been adversely affected. There is a definite, although possibly temporary, decline in public social life. This is because cash for everyday needs is taking priority over cash for gifts, subscriptions, entertainment, personal grooming, etc. Weddings and funerals are becoming smaller events, rather than the community-wide festivities or gatherings that they were only recently.
- Family and community support are still important, but informal social protection systems have been unable to cope with sustained, shared experiences of food price uncertainty. Most people still rely on family and neighbours for help in the first instance, but many more now prefer state help because it comes without stigma and the need for reciprocity.

Picture 3. A wedding in Pirhuas, rural Bolivia



Box 4. How food prices affect your social life

Mrs. S, 22, from Kalyanpur, Bangladesh told us about the implications of increased food prices in an interview:

She bought a set of clothes for her daughter one year ago. 'After then I could not buy anything more for her (...) She now puts very little oil in her hair, as the prices have doubled recently (...) But at present [soap's] price has gone beyond her reach. Now she cannot even wash her clothes properly as there is no soap. She cannot even join any social events like weddings as she cannot buy gifts for the ceremony. So, being ashamed, she does not join such ceremonies. We cannot arrange any social programme as we are poor. How can we do so when we cannot even eat properly (...) the rich arrange birthdays, [and] marriage days, but we can't. We are busy only to win our bread in order to live'.

The views of two blacksmiths in an focus group discussion in Nessemtega, rural Burkina Faso spoke of similar issues:

'When someone in the family dies, and we do not have the means to celebrate the funeral, we wait for the year of abundance to celebrate and sometimes we can celebrate many funerals because it depends on the capacities [of the family] (...) Now we do not celebrate receiving any more [on] the seventh wedding day, to avoid spending.'

Mrs. S, a widowed 55-year-old cleaner from Banjar in rural Indonesia, used to attend women's weekly gatherings in her village, with a personal donation of IDR 10,000 at each meeting. But in her current economic condition, it has been two years since her last attendance at a social gathering. Other social activities that she finds burdensome are the wedding receptions in the village, for which at least one family offers an invitation each week. Automatically, Mrs. S should prepare at least IDR 10,000 as a donation for each invitation. On this, Mrs. S explains that *'you can only imagine if I receive two or three wedding invitations in within a week. How can I provide for the donations? I only allocated IDR 10,000 to spend, yet I need IDR 30,000 for all those invitations. This often confuses me'.*

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT SPIKE

Popular politics of food price spikes

People on low and precarious incomes in the ten countries covered by this research had clear and well-formed views on the causes of food price volatility. They expect their governments to protect them, and while many understand that global markets influence local prices, they still believe that governments should curb local and national grain speculators and hoarders, and should tackle the regulatory failures that are widely believed to push prices up. Other perceived contributory factors included fuel price rises, dependence on food trade instead of self-reliance, climate change, taxation, failures to invest in agriculture and demographic changes.

People value social protection to help cope, but the usual complaints about the targeting, generosity and quality of assistance, and overall responsiveness persist. Community and family assistance may be easy to access and cheap for the government, but it is not sustainable in a time of food price rises. People therefore prefer help from their governments over informal social support, because it is less shameful and avoids personal obligations; in any case, fewer people can help their friends and family in a time of price rises.

How to prepare for the next spike

What are the messages from this research for policymakers and practitioners about how to prepare for the next food price spike? Governments, aid agencies and other development actors need to recognize the major shift that has occurred in the way people on low incomes relate to the food system. There is every reason to think that this shift is permanent and requires policy responses on a number of levels. There are three key areas of action that will help protect people against the next price spike.

What needs immediate action

1. Spike-proofing and inflation-indexing social protection systems:

- Ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable people already have social protection – a price spike is not the time to start developing schemes for the poorest. The most vulnerable include people who earn little or nothing, including older, disabled, and chronically ill people, displaced people, orphans, and women with infants. Action for these groups should include unconditional cash or food transfer schemes, e.g. old age or disability pensions, child or maternity benefits and school feeding programmes, and similar regular programmes.
- Temporary cash or food transfers or subsidies (depending on local market and administrative conditions) should be widely rather than narrowly targeted, self-targeting, sensitive to quality and preferences, regular and predictable, and automatically triggered by price rises. Some combination of fair price shops organised through agents, direct open market sales of subsidised food, and temporary cash transfers is an ideal option.
- Inflation-indexed social protection and assistance programmes allow programmes to adjust to real changes in needs. Inflation-indexing social protection should highlight the hardship among people in more 'flexible' or informal forms of employment, and needs to include the development of a methodology for assessing the cost of basic needs that is properly sensitive to the consumption needs of those on low incomes.

2. Managing food price volatility better:

- Global and national policymakers need to do more to measure the social costs of adjustments to food prices, to inform efforts to mitigate price spikes through food reserves management, to regulate anti-competitive grain trading, and to raise resources to implement or strengthen universal social protection.
- Global and national food security policies need to take the challenge of farming in the future seriously. There is no evidence that high food prices are making farming an attractive and profitable occupation, at least for small-scale farmers. It is therefore essential to kick-start investment in small farms and sustainable and resilient agriculture to increase food production sustainably, and enable people to lift themselves out of poverty. This also needs finance for climate adaptation and mitigation, prioritizing help for small producers.
- Food security policymaking processes need to be more open and engage the public in a wide discussion about food price volatility. People have a (rarely respected) human right to participate in the development of their social protection policies. Research institutes, think tanks, and civil society should take on the responsibility of public engagement around food policy in an era of globalized food markets and international price volatility.

3. Policymakers also need to recognize, measure and support unpaid care work:

- Social protection programmes need to be care-sensitive, taking into account the unpaid work women already undertake, and the value this has for families, societies and nations.
- They need to do more to measure and assess the impact of unpaid care work on development.

- Policymakers need to identify and support the needs of substitute carers, in particular the older people and older children (especially daughters) who are most likely to be shouldering the unpaid care burden as adult women take on more paid work. Investing in child-care provision could have great potential for early childhood development, gender equality, employment for women, etc.

4. Better monitoring:

- Policymakers need to consider the prices that people are actually paying for food baskets and other basic living costs, rather than just staple food item prices.
- They should also consider diversity on the plate: being able to substitute foods when prices are high has been an important coping mechanism – even if people do not necessarily like what they have to eat. Therefore, it is important to monitor whether prices of all types of food rise sharply at the same time. It is also important to consider whether people are buying more processed foods because they are often cheaper and easier to prepare.
- Policymakers need to monitor real wages and earnings; e.g. are people facing increased precariousness and taking on greater risk or less stable incomes? Is there rising inequality? What does women's increased involvement in paid work mean for unpaid care work?
- They should investigate the circumstances under which forms of social protection can crowd-in good social relations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oxfam and IDS have embarked on a four-year research project to better understand the impact that food price volatility is having in different communities across the world. The project aims to fill the gap in evidence and understanding of the impact that volatile food prices are having on the lives of people living in poverty in rural and urban areas, including personal income and finance, health, social, family, and security. This national research report is a contribution to that project.

This research report was commissioned to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. It does not necessarily reflect Oxfam or IDS policy positions. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Oxfam or IDS.

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