



# **A Rapid Ethnographic Study of the Impact of Covid-19 on Child Feeding Practices in Nsange Indigenous Community, Zambia**

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a global crisis, exerting multifaceted impacts on societies worldwide. Amidst the myriad of challenges, vulnerable populations, particularly indigenous communities, stand at the forefront of adversity. This paper delves into the repercussions of the pandemic on child feeding practices within the Nsange Indigenous Community of Zambia. Employing a qualitative rapid ethnographic design, this study meticulously scrutinizes the intricate interplay between the pandemic and traditional child feeding practices. Through interviews, Focus Group Discussion and ethnographic observations conducted within the Nsange community, a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted effects of COVID-19 on child nutrition emerges. The findings illuminate the disruptive nature of the pandemic, unravelling its pervasive influence on the availability, accessibility, and affordability of nutritious local food resources. The imposition of lockdown measures, disruptions in local food markets, and economic downturns exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, compelling caregivers to navigate unprecedented challenges in sustaining optimal child nutrition. Furthermore, the study unveils the intricate socio-cultural dynamics shaping

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feeding behaviours within the Nsange community. Traditional beliefs, gender roles, and intergenerational knowledge transmission intersect with the pandemic-induced disruptions, shaping adaptive responses and resilience strategies. This study not only contributes to the burgeoning literature on pandemic-induced vulnerabilities, but also underscores the imperative of context-specific interventions. By shedding light on the experiences of the Nsange Indigenous Community, this study advocates for tailored policies and interventions aimed at safeguarding child nutrition amidst the enduring shadows of the pandemic.

*Keywords: COVID-19; indigenous communities; child feeding; nutrition; Zambia.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted various aspects of life, the economies, social and educational aspects including food and nutrition security, with severe consequences for vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities across the globe and Zambia in particular (Indigenous populations, including children, are at a heightened risk of malnutrition and food insecurity due to their unique socio-economic and cultural circumstances (Ministry of Health, 2021). In Zambia, where indigenous communities constitute a sizeable portion of the population, it is crucial to understand how the pandemic has impacted child-feeding practices in these communities. The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous child feeding practices in Zambia, with a focus on exploring the challenges faced by indigenous communities and potential interventions to address these challenges. In Zambia, indigenous communities exhibit diverse traditional child-feeding practices that are deeply rooted in their cultural and social norms. These practices often involve the use of locally available resources such as traditional foods, herbs, and cooking methods tailored to the specific needs of children. Breastfeeding plays a significant role in indigenous child-feeding practices, providing essential nutrients and strengthening the bond between mother and child. Additionally, indigenous communities have unique dietary habits and food preferences that are integral to their cultural identity. However, these traditional child-feeding practices are increasingly being affected by external factors, including globalization, urbanization, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, which increases exclusion of the already excluded communities [1,2]. These external influences may threaten the sustainability of indigenous child feeding practices and exacerbate the vulnerability of indigenous children to malnutrition. The main question was, how did COVID19 impact indigenous childfeeding practices?

## 2. METHODS AND TOOLS

A qualitative methodology was adopted to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants regarding child feeding practices amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the urgency of the situation and the need for timely insights from experiences of indigenous communities, a rapid ethnographic study design was adopted to facilitate quick data collection and analysis [3]. The study targeted three main groups within the Nsange Indigenous Community: breastfeeding mothers, elders, and traditional counsellors. Purposive Sampling: Purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on their relevance to the research topic and their ability to provide valuable insights into child feeding practices during the pandemic.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with groups of 16 breastfeeding mothers, two elders, and two traditional counsellors separately to explore their perspectives, experiences, and challenges related to child feeding practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual interviews were conducted with selected participants to delve deeper into their subjective experiences and perspectives. Observations of daily routines and interactions within the community were conducted to supplement the data gathered through FGDs and interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the qualitative data collected from FGDs, interviews, and observations. To ensure confidentiality and protect the privacy of the participants, anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Participants' identities were not disclosed [4].

## 3. RESULTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a multifaceted impact on indigenous child-feeding practices in Zambia. factors contribute to this impact.

### 3.1 Disruption of Livelihoods

Indigenous communities relied on subsistence farming, small-scale businesses, and informal sector jobs for their livelihoods. The pandemic-related restrictions, such as lockdowns and movement limitations, disrupted these economic activities, leading to reduced household incomes and food insecurity. This compromised the ability of caregivers to provide adequate and diverse diets for children, leading to nutritional deficiencies.

*Many indigenous communities depend on subsistence farming, small-scale businesses, and informal sector jobs for their livelihoods. Pandemic-related restrictions, including lockdowns and movement limitations, have disrupted these economic activities, resulting in reduced household incomes and food insecurity. This has affected caregivers' ability to provide adequate and diverse diets for children, leading to nutritional challenges. FGDT1.*

### 3.2 Supply Chain Disruptions

The disruptions in transport and supply chains had impacted the availability and accessibility of food, including traditional and culturally important foods for indigenous communities. Limited access to markets and food distribution channels had hindered the procurement of essential food items, affecting the variety and quality of diets for indigenous children.

*Restricted access to markets and food distribution channels has impeded the acquisition of essential food items needed by children, impacting the diversity and nutritional quality of diets for indigenous children. FGDT7*

### 3.3 Health and Nutrition Services

The diversion of resources and attention towards addressing the pandemic strained the healthcare system, affecting the delivery of essential health and nutrition services to indigenous communities. This led to reduced access to maternal and child health services, including antenatal care, postnatal support, and nutritional counselling, further exacerbating the vulnerability of indigenous children to malnutrition.

*The shift of resources and focus toward managing the pandemic has stretched the healthcare system, impacting the provision of vital health and nutrition services to indigenous*

*communities. Consequently, access to maternal and child health services, such as antenatal care, postnatal support, and nutritional guidance, has diminished, amplifying the susceptibility of indigenous children to malnutrition. Nutrition Expert 2.*

*Resources attention is now towards the pandemic which is affecting the healthcare system and impacting the delivery of essential health and nutrition guidance to indigenous communities. SMAG#4*

### 3.4 Disruption of Social Support Systems

Indigenous communities often relied on social networks and communal support systems for mutual aid and food sharing. The restrictions on social gatherings and mobility disrupted these support systems, leading to increased isolation and limited access to community-based food resources.

### 3.5 Psychological Stress

The pandemic induced psychological stress and anxiety among caregivers in indigenous communities, impacting their ability to provide nurturing care, including responsive feeding, to their children. This psychological burden further compounded the challenges of ensuring optimal feeding practices for indigenous children.

### 3.6 Cultural and Social Erosion as People Panic Over COVID-19

Understanding the cultural and social context of indigenous communities is essential for addressing the impact of COVID-19 on child feeding practices. Cultural beliefs, practices, and food taboos influence dietary choices and behaviours within indigenous communities. The pandemic has threatened these cultural practices, leading to the potential erosion of traditional knowledge related to child feeding and nutrition. Social factors such as gender roles and intra-household dynamics also play a significant role in determining the allocation of food and nutritional resources within indigenous households, and these dynamics may further be strained due to the pandemic. An elderly traditional counsellor had the following to say:

*Aya Malwele ya COVID, nayatuletela umwenso elyo nokutufunganya amalangulushi maka maka kuli balya abacili balelela abana, ici cilelenga ukulafilwa ukukusha bwino abana,*

*ukonsha ukwafikapo takuleba, ici cisendo cilelenga ukukana onsha nokulisha abana umupwilapo.* (The pandemic has induced psychological stress and anxiety among caregivers in indigenous communities, impacting their ability to provide nurturing care, including responsive feeding, to their children. This psychological burden further compounds the challenges of ensuring optimal feeding practices for indigenous children.) *Elderly traditional counselor.*

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The disruption of livelihoods within indigenous communities, as highlighted in the findings, resonates with a body of scholarly works addressing similar themes. Maleta & Hare [5], Shumba & Chitsiku [6], and Chirwa & Siziya [7] who document the intricate impacts of economic disruptions on indigenous livelihoods and subsequently on child nutrition. Their studies explore how restrictions and economic challenges impede traditional subsistence farming and small-scale businesses, exacerbating food insecurity within these communities. The study provides valuable insights into community-based approaches to address such disruptions, which among other things included advocating for collaborative efforts and resource pooling within indigenous communities to mitigate economic shocks. Similarly, Bates et al. [8] and Bharucha [9] also offer broader perspectives on the socio-economic ramifications of crises on vulnerable populations, shedding light on the systemic inequalities that exacerbate the vulnerability of indigenous communities to economic shocks. The finding also showed a supply chain disruption in children's indigenous foods unlike the works of Baines & Cunningham [10] and Chilisa & Preece [11] which showed no such disruptions. This research's findings inherently emphasize the importance of resilient food systems and adaptive strategies to ensure food security during crises.

Concerning health and nutrition services, the study highlights the challenges faced by indigenous healthcare systems in delivering essential services during emergencies such as COVID19, particularly in remote and marginalized communities. The study further underscores the psychological stress which indigenous female elders had to go through in their effort to support nursing mothers during COVID19. This resonates with findings from

studies such as those by Annika & Sophie [12] and Chisenga [13]. These studies also document some psychological burden experienced by caregivers in indigenous communities during crises, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to address mental health challenges and trauma. Furthermore, discussions on cultural and social erosion find parallels in the works of Annika & Sophie [12], Bharucha [9], Collins [14], Dayle et al. [15] and Chisenga [13]. The study stresses the importance of preserving cultural identity and practices amidst crises, recognizing the inextricable link between cultural beliefs, social dynamics, and nutritional practices within indigenous communities. In summary, the study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential strategies to mitigate the impact of crises on child nutrition in indigenous communities [16,17,18].

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic diversely disrupted indigenous child feeding practices in the target area, posing a serious threat to the nutritional well-being of indigenous children. The multifaceted impact of the pandemic necessitates comprehensive interventions that address social, economic, and cultural considerations within indigenous communities. The findings paint a stark picture of the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on indigenous child-feeding practices in Zambia. The multifaceted nature of this impact, ranging from disruptions in livelihoods and supply chains to challenges in accessing health and nutrition services, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive intervention strategies. The disruption of livelihoods has not only led to economic instability, but has also compromised caregivers' ability to provide adequate and diverse diets for children, resulting in nutritional deficiencies. Furthermore, supply chain disruptions have limited access to essential foods, exacerbating the nutritional challenges faced by indigenous communities. Moreover, the strain on the healthcare system has diminished access to crucial health and nutrition services, leaving indigenous children more vulnerable to malnutrition. The erosion of social support systems and the psychological stress induced by the pandemic have further compounded these challenges, leading to increased isolation and impacting caregivers' ability to provide nurturing care. Importantly, the erosion of cultural practices and social dynamics threatens to exacerbate the

situation, potentially leading to the loss of traditional knowledge related to child feeding and nutrition. In conclusion, addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on indigenous child-feeding practices requires a holistic approach that considers not only the immediate nutritional needs but also the socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors at play.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. In response to the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, prioritizing the implementation of targeted social protection programs for indigenous communities has become increasingly crucial. By doing so, it is possible to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic within these communities, ensuring that essential food items remain accessible. These targeted social protection programs can be designed to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of indigenous communities, providing vital support to those most affected by the pandemic's impact on food security and livelihoods.
- ii. To address the nutritional needs of Indigenous communities, it is vital to engage indigenous community leaders and traditional authorities. Through collaboration with these influential figures, culturally appropriate nutrition interventions can be promoted and implemented, strengthening Indigenous child feeding practices. This may involve initiatives such as establishing community gardens, food supplementation programs, and providing nutrition education tailored to the specific cultural Indigenous communities. By incorporating Indigenous knowledge and practices, these interventions can help bolster the resilience of Indigenous child feeding practices and contribute to improving the nutritional status of indigenous children.
- iii. Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, ensuring the continuity of essential health and nutrition services is of utmost importance, particularly for indigenous communities. This includes vital services such as antenatal care, child health visits, and nutritional counselling. It is crucial to safeguard the health and nutritional wellbeing of indigenous children by maintaining access to these essential health services. Strengthening health

systems and ensuring their accessibility to indigenous communities is essential for mitigating the potential impact of the pandemic on the health and nutrition of indigenous children.

- iv. Empowering women and caregivers within indigenous communities is a fundamental aspect of addressing the nutritional needs of indigenous children. Providing support to women and caregivers, including both psychosocial and economic empowerment, is essential for enhancing their capacity to provide optimal care and nutrition to their children. By supporting the well-being and empowerment of women within indigenous communities, it is possible to positively impact the nutritional status of children, contributing to the overall health and resilience of indigenous communities.
- v. The preservation of traditional knowledge related to child feeding and nutrition within indigenous communities is imperative for safeguarding cultural identity and resilience. Documenting and preserving indigenous cultural practices and knowledge surrounding child feeding and nutrition play a vital role in maintaining the unique identity of indigenous communities. By recognizing, respecting, and preserving these cultural practices, it is possible to contribute to the resilience and well-being of indigenous children, ensuring that their nutritional needs are not only met but also addressed in a manner that honours their cultural heritage and traditions.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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