

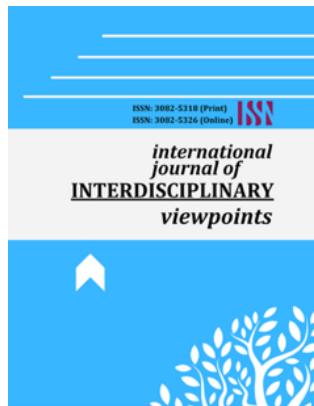
The Economic Issues and Coping Strategy of Vegetable Growers in Bukidnon During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global agricultural value chains. In developing countries, smallholder farmers were particularly affected by the impact on their incomes. In the Philippines, market instability, limited mobility, and a shortage of workers significantly affected vegetable farmers. A qualitative narrative study design was used to examine the economic problems and the ways vegetable growers in Barangay Kibenton, Impasug-ong, Bukidnon, dealt with them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data came from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six purposefully selected vegetable farmers. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that problems with production, distribution, and sales are linked to each other in the economy. A lack of workers and money, reliance on intermediaries, limited bargaining power, and reduced income slowed farm activities. Problems in marketing included unstable farm-gate prices, excess supply, transport delays, and post-harvest losses. Despite these problems, the growers showed resilience by using both problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies, such as prayer, optimism, and drive, as well as problem-focused strategies like borrowing money, continuing to plant, and changing the way they farm. The results show that vegetable growers can adapt to systemic problems and stress the importance of using localized qualitative data to help make policies that make smallholder farmers more resilient during public health crises.

Keywords

COVID-19, vegetable growers, economic challenges, coping strategies, qualitative research

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INTRODUCTION

In emerging countries like the Philippines, where many people depend on farming for food and income, agriculture remains an important part of supporting rural communities and ensuring the country's food security. Small-scale farmers, like veggie growers, are very important to keeping local food systems going because they bring fresh food to markets in both rural and urban areas. However, because they do not have much money, rely on manual labor, and do not have easy access to stable markets, these farmers are also among the most vulnerable to shocks outside their communities (Ellis, 2000; FAO, 2005). The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak highlighted structural weaknesses in global and local food and farming systems and exacerbated them. The COVID-19 pandemic, which was labeled a global health emergency in March 2020, caused problems in the world economy that had never been seen before. To stop the virus from spreading, governments implemented lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health protocols. This had a big impact on food production and supply lines (FAO, 2020). Farmers around the world had trouble finding workers, getting their goods to market, and keeping prices stable, especially for perishables like veggies (Béné, 2020; OECD, 2020). These problems reduced production efficiency, increased post-harvest losses, and made it harder for smallholder farmers to make ends meet (Weersink et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, agriculture was considered an important sector during the pandemic. However, vegetable growers were still struggling to run their businesses. Farmers, workers, input suppliers, and markets were harder to reach due to restrictions on movement. Prices at the farm gate were also unstable because of changes in demand and supply (Hossain, 2020; Labios et al., 2021). Studies have shown that peasant farmers were hit hardest because they relied on intermediaries for distribution and could not withstand sudden income declines (Pu & Zhong, 2020; Khan, 2022). Transport problems made the situation even worse by causing deliveries to be late and fresh food to spoil, greatly reducing family income (Béné, 2020).

As one of Northern Mindanao's most important agricultural areas, Bukidnon is a key player in growing vegetables that cities like Cagayan de Oro can use. Rural areas make up most of the province, and many families rely on farming to make a living (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). Even though Bukidnon is an important farming area, vegetable growers there were still hurt by the pandemic. Reports say farmers had a hard time keeping up with production, getting veggies to customers, and securing fair market prices during long lockdowns. However, there are still few empirical, localized studies that document these experiences.

A lot of research has been done on the macroeconomic effects of COVID-19 and how it affected national and global food systems. However, there is a significant gap in community-level qualitative research on the real-life experiences of vegetable growers, especially in rural areas of the Philippines. Many studies use quantitative surveys or secondary data, which may not always capture farmers' personal experiences, feelings, or ways of coping during crises (Ullah et al., 2022). Also, not much thought has been given to how disruptions in the production, distribution, and sale parts of the agricultural value chain affect farmers' approaches to problem-solving. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the economic problems vegetable farmers in Kibenton, Impasug-ong, Bukidnon faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways they dealt with them to keep their businesses going. Based on value chain analysis and coping strategy theory, the study examines how problems with growing, distributing, and selling vegetables affected farmers' finances and how they responded using

problem- and emotion-focused strategies (McLeod, 202~). This study adds to the growing body of research on agricultural resilience by giving in-depth qualitative evidence. It also gives policymakers, development professionals, and agricultural support institutions useful information.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The economic problems and ways that vegetable farmers dealt with them during the COVID-19 pandemic were examined in this study using a qualitative narrative research design. Qualitative research focuses on understanding meanings, feelings, and social contexts rather than numbers. This makes it a good way to examine how people cope with job loss and adapt to crises (Hammersley, 2022). Narrative research, in particular, looks at people's stories and real-life experiences. This lets researchers really get to the bottom of how people understand and react to big life events like the pandemic (Josselson, 2010; Lumsden, 2018). With this design, the researchers were able to record the subjective experiences, feelings, and ways that vegetable farmers dealt with economic problems along the agricultural value chain.

Participants

Six veggie growers from Barangay Kibenton in Impasug-ong, Bukidnon, took part. There were three men and three women among them. One must have actively grown vegetables during the COVID-19 pandemic, two must have experience growing, distributing, and marketing vegetables, and three must be ready to take part in an in-depth interview. Many people think that narrative research is well-suited to small sample sizes because it focuses on depth rather than numbers (Josselson, 2010). To protect subjects' privacy, they were given fake names and referred to only by numbers during the study.

Locale

The study took place in Barangay Kibenton, Municipality of Impasug-ong, Philippines. The study site was chosen deliberately because it relies heavily on farming, especially vegetable production, as its main source of income. People know that Bukidnon is one of the most important agricultural areas in Northern Mindanao because it produces many vegetables that are sold in nearby cities. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2021), much of the municipality's land is used for farming. This makes it a good place to look at how the pandemic affected farming operations. The fact that the area is rural and relies on traditional farming methods made it even more useful for studying the economic vulnerability and resilience of peasant farmers.

Procedures

In-depth interviews were considered appropriate for this phenomenological study because they provide detailed, first-hand accounts of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This method is particularly suitable for exploring sensitive, emotionally charged experiences, such as those encountered by single mothers in academia, as it provides a safe, confidential environment for reflection and narration (Seidman, 2019; Liamputpong, 2007). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify participants who met the specific study criteria (Palys, 2008). According to Creswell (1998), a sample size ranging from five to twenty-five participants is sufficient for phenomenological research. The inclusion criteria required that participants be solo parents under legal or de facto separation as defined by Republic Act 11861 (Expanded Solo Parents Welfare Act); currently employed as instructors in higher education institutions in Makilala or Kidapawan City; carrying a teaching load of 18–24 units per semester; handling class sizes of 35–60 students per section; and willing to share their lived experiences, coping strategies, and insights. The exclusion criteria included public school teachers, individuals whose socio-economic status did not meet the study requirements, and those unwilling to provide informed consent.

Instrument

A researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide, which was approved by experts in the field before data collection. The interview guide included open-ended questions to learn what the participants knew about the economic problems that arose from growing, distributing, and selling vegetables, as well as how they dealt with the pandemic. The instrument was broken down into sections that asked about participants' backgrounds, the economic problems they were facing, and their problem- and emotion-focused ways of dealing with them. It was possible to get more in-depth answers with semi-structured interviews, and the study goals were still met (Canonizado, 2021).

Data Collection

Between December and January, data collection took place in two stages. Participants were informed about the study's aim and provided informed consent before the interviews. The local tongue was used during interviews to make it easier for people to communicate and ensure that answers were clear (Tan et al., 2021). Interviews were recorded with the subjects' permission to ensure accurate transcription of the data. Each conversation lasted about 15 minutes. Due to the current pandemic, strict health and safety rules were followed during data collection.

Data Analysis

Following the steps laid out by Alhojailan (2012) and Caulfield (2019), the collected data were examined using thematic analysis. Interviews that were taped were transcribed word-for-word and played back repeatedly to get used to the data. Meaningful words were used to make the first codes. These codes were then grouped and turned into themes. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they made sense and were related to the study questions. Thematic analysis helped identify recurring patterns in economic problems and coping strategies, while remaining true to the participants' stories and the real-life situations they faced.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. The researchers made sure that everyone who took part did so voluntarily, gave full consent, kept their information private, and remained anonymous. Participants in the study were told they could quit at any time without being punished. To protect individuals' privacy, personal information was omitted from transcripts and reports. The study also followed data accuracy and responsible reporting guidelines, ensuring that the results were presented accurately and not in a misleading way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's results are presented and discussed in this section. The results come from thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with vegetable growers in Kibenton, Impasug-ong, Bukidnon. The study's goals guided how the talk was set up: (1) The economic problems vegetable farmers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically with production, distribution, and marketing; and (2) The ways they dealt with their stress, which can be broken down into two groups: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. The results are analyzed by comparing them with other research to place the subjects' experiences in the broader context of theory and practice.

Vegetable growers had economic problems during the pandemic. These problems had to do with production.

The shortage of workers during the pandemic was one of the main themes that emerged from the data. Participants said that health rules and limits on movement made it hard to find hired farm workers, so farmers had to rely mostly on family labor. This situation reduced production efficiency and placed greater physical strain on family members. Participants also said they had trouble hiring workers and buying enough farm inputs because they lacked sufficient funds.

These results are in line with studies showing a shortage of agricultural workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among smallholder farmers who depend heavily on physical labor (Pu & Zhong, 2020; Zhi-Xiong, 2020). Planting and harvesting schedules, which are highly time-sensitive in vegetable farms, were thrown off by the shortage of workers. Also, farmers could not address these problems because they did not have enough money, which made them more likely to lose money (Khan, 2022).

Economic Problems Related to Distribution

Another important theme that came up was the need for third-party intermediaries to help get veggies to people. Participants were unable to move around, so they could not personally carry and sell their goods in urban markets. Instead, they relied on traders or buyers to bring the goods and sell them. They would often wait to find out about costs and income after the goods had already been sold.

Farmers had less power in negotiations and less confidence in their earnings because they could not reach markets directly. During the pandemic, there were similar problems with agricultural logistics and market integration. This was especially true in rural areas where strict transportation limits were in place (Béné, 2020; OECD, 2020). The results back up what other research has found: when transportation and distribution systems break down, they hurt small-scale farms the most because they lose control of the value chain (Labios et al., 2021).

Economic Problems Related to Marketing

When it came to selling, participants consistently said prices were unstable and farm-gate prices were discounted. Even though it cost a lot to grow veggies, they were often sold for cheap because there were too many, not enough people wanted them, and transport was slow. Several people also said they lost money after the harvest because veggies went bad while they were waiting for buyers or transportation plans to be made. These results are in line with data showing that agricultural products that spoil quickly were among the worst hit by the pandemic due to supply chain disruptions and fewer opportunities to sell them (Weersink et al., 2020). Price changes and more food going bad reduced farm income, and in some cases, farmers could not even cover their production costs. Labios et al. (2021) made similar points, noting that peasant farmers in the Philippines wasted fresh food and lost money because they could not move around as easily.

Ways that vegetable growers deal with stress

Using emotion-focused coping became an important way for farmers to deal with the mental and emotional stress that the pandemic caused. One of the main ideas in this group was that God could be reached through prayer. Participants said prayer gave them strength, hope, and mental comfort during times of uncertainty and financial trouble. Along with prayer, determination, and hope, these attitudes were seen as important, keeping farmers planting even though they kept losing.

These results support the idea that resilience is the ability to bounce back from problems and adapt to new situations (Kuntz, 2021). According to Coulombe et al. (2020), studies have shown that spiritual practices and a positive attitude can help protect people from the negative psychological effects of crises. In the Philippines, farmers who face many economic and environmental shocks tend to be resilient, grounded in faith and hope (Palo et al., 2020; Soriano et al., 2022).

Problem-focused ways to deal with stress

Along with emotional coping, participants used problem-focused coping strategies to address the practical problems the pandemic caused. One common method was to borrow money from suppliers, unions, or microfinance institutions to keep planting and meet the family's needs. Farmers were able to maintain production with this strategy, but it also made them more financially responsible and more vulnerable in the long run.

This result aligns with other research: microcredit is a lifeline for small-scale farmers during times of trouble, even though taking on more debt carries risks (Iderawumi et al., 2015; Soriano et al., 2022). Another interesting strategy was farmers' view that continuous production was the only way to make a living, as shown by their continued planting even when conditions were uncertain. Hossain (2020) found that farmers continued working in agriculture during the pandemic, though they had to make significant changes. This persistence fits with what they found.

The fact that vegetable growers were able to adapt to systemic problems through both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies demonstrates their flexibility. While emotional coping helped farmers maintain their mental health, problem-focused strategies addressed their pressing need to make a living. Newell & Davis (2021) and McLeod (2023) argue that coping is dynamic and that people use different strategies depending on the severity of the stressors and the degree of control they have over them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study, using a qualitative narrative method, examined how vegetable growers in Kibenton, Impasug-ong, Bukidnon, dealt with economic problems and the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that economic problems faced by vegetable farmers were linked to various parts of the agricultural value chain, particularly production, distribution, and marketing. A lack of workers and money hampered vegetable production, and farmers had to rely on third-party intermediaries for delivery, which delayed their income and made it harder for them to get what they wanted. In marketing, uncertain prices, oversupply, and post-harvest losses all cut into farm income and made it harder to make a living. These problems reflect broader issues in agri-food systems that emerged during the pandemic, especially for small farmers who lack resources or the ability to adapt. Even though the economy was bad, vegetable growers demonstrated their strength by using both problem- and emotion-focused strategies to manage stress. Emotion-focused coping, especially prayer, optimism, and resolve, was very important for farmers' mental health as they faced uncertainty and repeated losses. Farmers were able to keep making a living even as risks increased by using problem-focused coping strategies such as borrowing money, continuing to plant crops, and changing how they did things on the farm. Putting these coping techniques together shows how flexible vegetable growers are when faced with problems. Overall, the study adds localized qualitative evidence to the growing body of research on agricultural resilience. It also shows how important it is to understand farmers' real-life experiences to develop agricultural policies that are responsive and include everyone during public health crises.

Based on the study's findings, several suggestions are offered to help vegetable farmers be more resilient and keep their businesses stable during economic downturns. To begin, local governments and agricultural agencies should improve farm management and financial literacy training programs. These programs should focus on budgeting, savings, and risk management to help farmers better manage sudden income drops. Second, building and strengthening farmer unions and associations should be a top priority to give farmers more power in negotiations, make it easier for them to reach markets, and reduce their reliance on intermediaries. In times of emergency, cooperative organizations can also serve as places to obtain cheap loans and share resources. Third, officials should make it easier for goods to reach markets and ensure they reach the right places by setting up localized trading centers and ensuring that transportation systems work together in ways that follow health rules during emergencies. This can keep farm-gate prices stable and reduce post-harvest costs. Fourth, farmers should have easier access to low-interest loans and flexible financing options so they do not have to rely on risky loans from strangers. Finally, more research should examine how people cope with stress across different types of agriculture and regions, using a variety of methods, to understand

better how to help smallholder farmers recover and become more resilient over the long term. The goal of these suggestions is to help farmers make a living in the long term and make it easier for veggie growers to handle future economic downturns.

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Conflicting Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest in the preparation and publication of this research.

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Contribution

The author contributed to the overall conduct and writing of the study.

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