

# Invisible impacts and lost opportunities: evidence of the global recession in developing countries

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The global economic recession hit developing country economies less hard than initially expected but, despite positive macroeconomic indicators, there are few reasons to feel optimistic about the impacts on poverty and wellbeing. Based on original research, this article outlines three reasons to believe that the impacts are likely to have been severe for those in poverty. First, the global recession was compounded by the protracted food and fuel price crisis; second, there are early indications of a trend towards increased labour flexibilisation in developing countries; and third, there has been a failure to turn the crisis into an opportunity by extending and improving social protection regimes.

## Introduction

By 2010, the global economy appeared to be recovering from its worst economic downturn since the 1930s. The recovery is uneven, however, with many developing countries' economies growing faster than those of countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – and after a less painful and protracted decline (IMF, 2010a). The full impacts of the downturn in developing countries have yet to be felt through public sector deficits – particularly in those countries that are dependent on official development assistance, or on export or commodity revenues that shrank at the peak of the crisis (UNESCO, 2010). But there is optimism that developing countries have so far weathered the storm better than had been anticipated (Green et al, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

A body of qualitative evidence is now emerging that challenges this moderate optimism about the impacts on developing countries, however.<sup>2</sup> It suggests that people living in poverty in developing countries have been hit hard, for several reasons. First, the global financial crisis may have had little impact in its own right; but it was preceded by a global food and fuel price spike in 2007–08. This eroded the real incomes of people living in poverty – and not only in developing countries. In some contexts, including much of sub-Saharan Africa, people have had to cope with (an admittedly slight) recession in a context in which food prices remain considerably higher than before the financial crisis. Second, there are signs of increased pressure for labour flexibility in export manufacturing. Some see labour flexibility as part of the reason why developing countries' export manufacturing sectors coped with, and recovered fast from, the downturn. Yet pressure for increased flexibility has come at

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considerable cost to workers' security and wellbeing in the recovery period. Third, social protection regimes in developing countries remain inadequate. Governments everywhere were under pressure to demonstrate that they were acting to help those affected, but evidence that vulnerable people were reached is weak. In some cases, there was more evidence that governments wanted to be seen to be acting than that they were in fact willing or able to do so. In contexts in which poverty and food insecurity have been chronic, and progress on poverty reduction was slow even during the boom years of high growth, the downturn represents lost opportunities for increased public provision of social protection more than direct negative impacts on poverty and wellbeing.

These invisible impacts and lost opportunities are not necessarily evident from the macroeconomic indicators by which recession and recovery are routinely tracked. This article draws on original community-level research in 2009 and 2010<sup>3</sup>, which aimed to bring the human experience of crisis to the forefront of crisis monitoring, as the ways in which people were being affected would otherwise risk being missed. The *Social Impacts of Crisis* research (Hossain et al, 2010) followed a study 12 months earlier with some of the same communities (published as *Accounts of crisis*, by Hossain et al, 2009). The approach was broadly participatory, focused on hearing people's own experiences, and involving a number of participatory research tools and approaches. The aim was to generate 'real-time' evidence about how the 'Triple F' – food, fuel and financial – crises were being experienced by people who are already living in conditions of poverty. Research was conducted in 2009 in 10 locations, an urban and a rural community in each of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya and Zambia. The 2010 research was conducted in eight of the same communities, in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya and Zambia, as well as in two new sites in Yemen. The present article focuses on evidence from the eight communities with which at least two rounds of research were conducted.<sup>4</sup> These were selected, among other reasons, to offer insights into how the shocks were playing out for groups engaged in the global economy, as well as for groups living with pre-existing poverty and vulnerability.

Rather than focusing on poverty as an exclusively material problem of income and asset deprivation, the research drew on conceptual and methodological advances within poverty and vulnerability analysis in development studies to focus on wellbeing (McGregor, 2007). This puts the material reproduction of everyday life at the heart of the analysis of globalisation and social change (Perrons, 2004). A focus on how wellbeing in everyday life has been affected draws attention to local economic impacts, domestic management, how well societies are able to live together (or social cohesion) and the personal and subjective experiences of these changes (McGregor, 2007).

From this core focus, the research took into account impacts on local economies, public services and social cohesion. The evidence on which it draws is illustrative rather than representative of the impacts of the global downturn. But where possible, additional supporting evidence is drawn on to develop arguments about the effects of the 'Triple F' crisis on poverty, wellbeing and social protection.

The body of the article develops each of the points listed above to demonstrate how the recession has played out in lives and local economies in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya and Zambia, focusing on communities for which at least two rounds of research were conducted, in 2009 and 2010.

## **Undermined resilience: the crisis before the crisis**

When our research teams started fieldwork in February 2009, macroeconomic analyses were already indicating channels through which the global financial crisis was being transmitted to local economies: through falling copper and rubber prices (Zambia and Indonesia), fewer tourists (Kenya) and changes in labour demand in export sectors (Bangladesh, Indonesia). Yet the far bigger and more immediate crisis was that of food and fuel prices, which had risen sharply across the world in 2007, peaking in 2008. While lower compared to their 2008 peak, domestic staple food prices remained above pre-2008 prices in early 2010, and the World Bank food benchmark index registered a 23% increase over 2009 (World Bank, 2010). Fuel prices have been volatile since the 2008 price rises.

In early 2009, people interviewed by our researchers reported a range of coping behaviours reflecting the severity of the impacts in the four countries, ranging from least severe (Indonesia) to most severe (Kenya), with Bangladesh and Zambia in between these two extremes. These coping behaviours illustrated the severity of the impacts: spending a larger share of income on food (in some cases as much as 80%); buying cheaper types of food; reducing quality and diversity of diets (likely to cause permanent damage for pregnant women and infants); gathering wild foods (including poaching wild animals); and eating less and, in the worst-affected cases, going hungry. In the second half of 2008, the food crisis peaked; the financial crisis was beginning to be felt in these developing countries a few months later. Research in early 2009 heard reports from that period of school dropouts and people being unable to afford medical care; working in multiple jobs; and getting involved with illegal or illicit activities to manage household costs. The strains on households from the dramatic food price inflation were extreme – and in Kenya and Zambia, they remained so into 2010. In the worst cases, households had fragmented, and there were reports of declining social cohesion and increasing crime and sex work (Hossain et al, 2009, 2010). The combined effects of the global food price spike of 2008 and the recession and declining growth rates in 2009 are estimated to have increased global undernourishment by 6.8%, or 63 million people (Tiwari and Zaman, 2010).

Therefore, by the time the impacts of the global financial crisis were being felt through declining global demand, those at the front line of the global economy – export sector workers facing shorter hours, job losses and factory closures – had already endured up to two years of declines in their real incomes. This put them in a far more fragile position in terms of coping with the downturn, and reinforced the knock-on effects for local economies. The compound nature of the shocks was illustrated by one garments industry worker in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who explained that, when food prices rose in 2008, he and his wife had been forced to send their

children to live with his parents in the village, where costs were lower. They sold assets and cut down on basic expenditures; but their overtime hours were cut and their jobs were looking increasingly precarious. Their joint income halved during the peak of the financial crisis, making it difficult to send remittances to feed their family back in the village, even while food prices remained higher than in 2007. In another example, from the rural Kenyan community near Malindi, artisan groups that had been set up to take advantage of the tourist trade had disbanded over the previous year, as members diversified their activities to try to manage the rising costs of basic foods. By the time the tourists began to return with the recovery in late 2009, the artisans were no longer organised to try to capture that trade.

The growing body of evidence from around the world provides support for the view that the food price shocks are likely to have undermined resilience to future shocks, in a number of respects:

- reducing the scope for people to adjust household spending to cope with the downturn (Horn, 2009; Turk, 2009);
- permanent damage from malnutrition of infants aged under two, school dropouts and nutritional impacts on cognitive and learning capacities (Raihan, 2009; Sulaiman et al, 2009; UNESCO, 2010);
- the adoption of coping strategies with enduring negative consequences, such as sex work (particularly in conditions of high HIV/AIDS rates, such as in Kenya and Zambia) and criminal activity (Hossain et al, 2009; Turk, 2009);
- erosion of real incomes, leading to increased competition in the informal sector, which typically acts as the employment 'cushion' during recessions in developing countries (Horn, 2009).

### **The threat of increased labour flexibilisation in the recovery**

The resilience shown by globally integrated developing country economies in the face of the recession seems to have owed something to the flexibility with which export manufacturers were able to adjust production to respond to fluctuating demand. Labour markets in South and Southeast Asia proved to be highly flexible in response to the recent shocks (McCulloch and Grover, 2010; Turk, 2009; Green et al, 2010; IMF, 2010b). Across Asia there were reports of workers accepting pay cuts, shorter hours and unpaid 'holidays'; these responses seem likely to have helped avoid many more lay-offs and factory closures.

As global demand for exports recovers, a worrying trend has been identified in the form of increased pressure for labour flexibilisation in globally integrated emerging economies. While downward pressure on wages on a global scale pre-dates the crisis (ILO, 2009), evidence suggests that the global economic downturn has presented an opportunity for employers to secure more flexible labour arrangements. This trend emerged clearly for export production in the Indonesian industrial area in our research in mid-2009. Significant increases in the range of more flexible contracts and generally worsening conditions for workers began to emerge at that time; and in

our research in early 2010, these conditions were found to have persisted. New and tougher conditions include:

- (unlawful) discrimination on the criteria of age, sex and physical condition in recruitment, resulting in ratios of women to men in new factories as high as 7:1. Employers prefer women, in the view of one labour coordinator interviewed for the research, because they are more 'obedient, less troublesome, more diligent'. While these views pre-date the crisis, in this industrial area, the extreme preference for women workers was noted as a shift;
- the use of more flexible and short-term contractual arrangements. This included a sharp rise in jobs based on piece-work and 'putting out', or output and performance-based arrangements; daily wage labour (known as 'peon' contracts), 'intern' or short contracts (typically of one month's duration), and other short contracts, typically of three months;
- more difficult recruitment conditions: workers noted that, compared to before the crisis, they were more likely to have to rely on labour supply companies in order to access jobs, and also to have to make 'under the table' payments to receive work; or to have to rely on networks for access, rather than more open recruitment processes;
- worse working conditions: this included reports of increased pressure to achieve outputs and shift work;
- lower real wages: basic wages had increased by 10% in 2009, in line with the regional minimum wage, and apparently with some union pressure to do so (Miller-Dawkins et al, 2010). But workers in both the *Social Impacts of Crisis* research on which this article reports and the Oxfam study (Miller-Dawkins et al, 2010) complained that in real terms they were worse off. There were complaints of compulsory overtime, and of getting no additional benefits such as meal or transport allowances, which had previously been provided. Other research on workers' conditions during the crisis in Asia supports the evidence from Indonesia of lower real wages in a context of inflation, and/or harsher working conditions in Southeast Asia (Turk, 2009; Oxfam GB, 2009; Hurst et al, 2010).

Workers with whom we spoke in the export area outside Jakarta were clearly dissatisfied with their new working conditions. One woman employed as a contract worker working night shifts – a job she took after a six-month period of unemployment at the height of the crisis – explained that her health was suffering and she was unable to sleep. Another migrant worker who had experienced several episodes of unemployment during 2009 had left his job because he was so dissatisfied with the piece-work system, an arrangement between the labour outsourcing company and the factory, which in his experience meant lower wages as well as additional pressure on worker productivity. Miller-Dawkins et al (2010: 15) suggest that the global financial crisis has reinforced a trend towards labour flexibilisation that has been under way since labour law reform in Indonesia in 2003, citing research that claims that:

companies used the pretext of the global economic crisis as a way to pressure the bargaining position of their employees for any negotiations on welfare adjustment. It has become a popular trend to spread rumours about the company necessity to take efficiency measures, and to apply a system of increased outsourcing in their production.

In the export manufacturing readymade garments industry in Bangladesh, workers noted that conditions had actually improved since the crisis. As one result of the downturn, for example, smaller units that had been notorious for not paying, or delaying payment of, wages and for maltreatment of workers had closed and been bought up by larger, better factories. But these gains came after a protracted period of labour unrest, which at its peak in mid-2009 in the midst of the recession resulted in six factories being burned down and tens of others vandalised in protests involving as many as 20,000 people. Export sector worker militancy dates back to 2006, the start of the food price rises in Bangladesh, and union leaders have stressed that the unrest was a response to wages paid at below poverty line levels at a time of rapid export sector growth. Workers in Dhaka export factories in 2010 noted that employers had in the past few months become more responsive to their rights, but that the recovery had meant not only increased demand but also greatly increased pressure for worker productivity. Wages had increased slightly, but remained well below half the level that labour leaders were arguing for as the basic minimum wage. Workers felt that improved conditions were partly seasonal, reflecting the annually high demand for labour between October and March. The labour market for readymade garments in Bangladesh remains highly flexible, which is one reason why Bangladesh experienced a 'Walmart effect' in the early part of the recession, when demand for cheap goods actually increased sales of exports from Bangladesh for a time. It remains to be seen whether improved working conditions are indeed a significant change, or merely reflect a recovery of export demand.

### **Social protection: limited coverage and lost opportunities**

Social protection coverage in developing countries was typically inadequate before the crisis, despite growing interest among national governments in extending programmes and interventions. A recent review of 10 developing countries found that few were able (or willing) to expand coverage in response to the financial crisis, although several had already made efforts to increase support in the wake of the food and fuel crises (McCord, 2010). Countries with existing safety-net provision that had the fiscal space and political will to enable expansion of coverage generally responded more effectively, with corresponding reductions in vulnerability.

Indonesia is one such example. There, the social protection regime developed in the wake of the 1998–99 Asian financial crisis was in place and could be expanded rapidly as the global financial crisis of 2008–09 struck, greatly reducing the degree of vulnerability and the overall poverty impact for its population. However, even in Indonesia, some of those most directly affected by the crisis, such as migrant

export sector workers in Jakarta, are generally excluded from official programmes such as ‘rice for the poor’ or cash transfer schemes, which go to permanent local residents. The impacts of exclusion from official safety nets on these groups may not show up in official statistics, either, as many migrant workers living in dormitory accommodation are not sampled by national household-based surveys.

In the Kenyan communities involved in the study, there were notable and welcome increases in food security programme coverage in 2010 compared to 2009. School feeding programmes were particularly popular, as they combined encouragement for parents to keep children in school with nutritional support. But infants below school age are of course excluded; in many cases, it was reported that parents would bring babies and infants along to school at meal times, so that the food provided ended up having to stretch further. Also in Kenya, young unmarried people complained of their exclusion from food programmes, which are typically targeted at families with children.

The design of social protection programmes often meant that they provided far less help than they might have done. In the rural Kenyan community, people criticised a food-for-work programme on the grounds that:

- beneficiary selection criteria were so narrow that many of those in the greatest need were excluded;
- the work was excessive: participants had to do manual labour for 12 days per month (in a context of chronic under-nutrition), and were therefore unable to seek additional work;
- food rations were inadequate, and not adjusted to household size.

Sales of subsidised rice in Bangladesh, intended to offset food price inflation in 2010, were also criticised, particularly by women. They argued that the cheap rice:

- was being sold in such small quantities that a lot of their time was spent queuing for their ration;
- was of such low quality that it smelled bad not long after being cooked;
- because of the low quality had to be cooked fresh for each meal, rather than once a day, as was usual, which meant additional cooking and additional time spent on gathering firewood or more money on buying cooking fuel, which had increased sharply in price with the fuel price rises.

So, while the cheap rice was welcome as a significant subsidy to household budgets, it meant considerable extra work for women.

In a number of instances, it seemed clear that governments’ responses to the crises were intended to show that they were taking action, rather than focused on strengthening people’s capacities to cope. In Zambia, the government announced in 2009 that it was doubling the number of farmers who would receive subsidised fertilizer. However, this was to be achieved by halving the amounts going to each (FAO, 2010). Farmers in the Northern Province, where the research was conducted,

complained that the amounts were inadequate to farm enough maize to make a profit, and that they were therefore having to turn to other crops to sustain themselves. In Bangladesh, the new government announced large increases in safety net and food aid coverage in its 2009–10 budget. But evidence indicated that these large commitments were not necessarily being translated into action on the ground, as actual disbursement levels were extremely low – whether because the resources were not available or because state capacities to deliver these resources were inadequate was not yet known (CPD, 2010).

The full impact of the recession has yet to be felt in developing countries, as OECD countries' aid budgets are still showing signs of being squeezed, and anecdotal evidence supports the expectation that non-governmental organisation programmes will continue to shrink.<sup>5</sup> Yet there are already signs that the impacts of the recession on poverty and wellbeing in developing countries need to be measured in terms of the opportunities lost for poverty reduction and expanded social protection coverage (McCord, 2010). A telling example is Zambia, which had experienced a period of rapid economic growth until 2008 and faster poverty reduction after decades of stagnation and impoverishment. A windfall tax on copper production was abandoned in 2009, only nine months after it had been introduced. This tax could have contributed to much-needed social and health expenditures, but was dropped in response to pressures from the powerful copper industry, and looks unlikely to be reinstated, despite the resurgence of copper prices in 2009 (Green, 2009). The recovery in Zambia has been strong, but the effects of the global recession are thus likely to endure.

## Conclusions

The global economic recession may have hit developed countries' economies far harder than those of developing countries, but there are fewer reasons to be optimistic about the longer-term impacts on poverty and wellbeing than macroeconomic indicators suggest. Drawing on ground-level participatory research with low-income communities in developing countries, this article has highlighted three reasons to believe that the impacts of the global recession are likely to have been severe for those living in poverty. These include, first, the fact that the global financial crisis was compounded and complicated by the protracted food and fuel price shocks of 2007–08 (which continue in some countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa); there are good reasons to believe that such global commodity price volatility will feature more regularly in future (Evans et al, 2010). From the perspectives of the people involved in this research, it made little sense to disentangle the effects of the global recession from the food price inflation that preceded – and overlapped with – it. Second, there are early indications of a trend towards increased labour flexibilisation, pre-dating the global crisis, but reinforced by it. Developing country governments are likely to be reluctant to strengthen labour regulation at a time when their export markets are undergoing a still-fragile recovery; and without stronger protection of labour rights, the effects of the crisis look set to endure well into the recovery period. And

finally, social protection regimes in developing countries remain limited in coverage, and typically unresponsive to shocks. While some observers were initially optimistic that the crisis might turn into an opportunity to extend social protection coverage in developing countries, there seems little evidence that this has in fact taken place.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most notably in an article in *The Economist*, 'Emerging markets and recession', 30 December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This research has been undertaken rapidly in order to help monitor the effects by a number of organisations, recognising that much survey and other forms of quantitative data take months or even years to emerge. This has included research by Oxfam (Green, 2009; Green et al, 2009; Miller-Dawkins et al, 2010), the World Bank (Turk, 2009) and the network Women in the Informal Economy: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) (Horn, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> More detailed accounts of the research on which this article draws are available in Hossain et al (2009) and Hossain et al (2010). The authors are grateful to the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for funding both rounds of the research, although all views in this article are those of the authors, and should not be attributed to DFID.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers made interim visits in 2009 to the Dhaka, Bangladesh and Jakarta, Indonesia communities.

<sup>5</sup> 'Wealthy countries fail to hit aid target', *Financial Times*, 16 February 2010.

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