Economic Coping with Covid-19: A Conceptual Note

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Abstract

Literature on coping is expanse but that on economic coping strategies with disease outbreaks is still scarce. More attention seems to be towards coping with mental health issues. Therefore, this study brings to the fore, economic coping strategies that may be used when there is a disease outbreak with lessons learnt from Covi-19 where mobility is restricted. Thus, this study also explains potential coping mechanisms when mobility is restrained. Findings indicate that while well-known and common coping strategies may be applicable, their applications may change. Therefore, individuals are encouraged to embrace this change in use of usual coping strategies. Also, some coping strategies have the potential to lead to contact with persons with the epidemic, therefore, caution must be exercised when applying such strategies.

Key words

Coping; Coping strategies; Covid-19; emergencies; pandemic

Introduction

Most emergency situations require use of coping strategies. By way of definition coping has been defined as "... an attempt to adapt the resources at one's disposal to a particular situation" (Horn, 2009, p. 112). However, this definition is situation specific. For example, Horn used it in the specific case of the internally displaced persons. In its simplest sense, the definition may be taken as using what one has to counter the risks that the person is vulnerable to. When referring to resources, Horn may not have been referring to physical resources but even to social resources, for example use of social support. Additionally, Seguin (2016) noted that coping is highly contested and, therefore, has no unique definition. This was supported by a plethora of definitions for coping given by Ahmad, Ishtiaq and Mustafa (2017).

Another version of defining coping is by by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p.141) who said coping are "... constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". Again, Carpenter (1992, p.4) argued that coping is "... what one does ...". The two definitions alongside the ones given in the previous paragraph concur that coping involves the users' efforts to manage certain events which usually are detrimental to one's life.

When an emergency strikes, economic agents are left with no option except to resort to coping. Some of the coping strategies mostly used include migration, use of social capital, consumption smoothing and livelihoods diversification. While these strategies may be applicable in certain situations they may not be applicable in some cases. Thus, these coping strategies have been employed in various emergency situations such as forced resettlement, drought and conflict. However, their applications have been varied despite the coping strategies sometimes being the same.

The outbreak of corona virus (Covid-19) forced households and nations to institute coping strategies. One such coping strategy employed by almost all governments worldwide is lockdown. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines lockdown as confining of prisoners to their cells in a bid to regain control during a riot. In the context of Covid-19, individuals were confined to their homes to reduce spread of the virus. With movement restricted, livelihoods

were threatened or at worst affected. This again entailed loss of incomes from informal activities and, to some, loss of employment wages. Therefore, employment of coping strategies became imminent. The purpose of this perspective study is therefore to show theoretically, how households employed coping strategies when they were locked down by Corona virus (Covid-19).

In terms of impact, as of 16 June 2020, 7 941 791 Covid-19 cases were reported (WHO, 2020c). Again, WHO (2020c) stated that 434 796 deaths were reported. The virus seems to be spreading quickly with 118 502 reported globally on the same date. Therefore, with these current statistics, it was imperative that sates institute laws to at least minimise the spread of the virus. The main instrument, as already stated is the lockdown which meant that coping with movement restrictions was necessary.

A number of studies have so far been done on coping with corona virus (Covid-19) but the main focus has been on coping with the mental health issues for example Kar, Arafat, Kabir, Sharma and Saxena (2020) and Polizzi, Lynn and Perry (2020). Also information on coping with mental health issues related to Covid-19 has been communicated from several organisations for instance Mindspot (2020), WHO (2020a, b) and Morneau Shepell (2020). However, few if any, studies have been done specifically on economic coping with the pandemic especially given that mobility is restrained. This study, therefore, contributes to literature on economic coping strategies during Covid-19 and, by extension, to coping strategies applicable when movement is restricted. Thus, while coping strategies have been used to cope with certain diseases and other stressful life events, little is currently known about coping mechanisms when movement is restricted. For example, while most coping strategies, such as asset disposal, have been used to cope with certain stressful life events, coping with Covid-19 could not involve asset disposal because both the buyer and the seller may be locked down. Again, while migration has been used as a livelihood strategy (DFID, 1999), its application becomes impossible under lockdown because mobility is restrained to one's home, if not in the house. Therefore, only certain coping strategies become applicable under such circumstances. Thus, Mukarami (2017) argued that availability and accessibility are major determinants of coping strategies. Therefore, while coping strategies may be common, their applicability and usage may differ with prevailing

circumstances such as revealed by corona virus, thereby requiring behaviour change. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Salminen-Tuomaala, Astedt-Kurki, Rekiaro and Paavilainen (2012) also concur that different coping strategies are applied in different situations. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) further argued that a strategy that may be effective in one situation may become ineffective in another situation.

Also coping strategies come in various forms. For example Lazarus (1993) distinguished between style and process coping strategies. Lazarus (1993, p.234) states that style "... treats coping as a personality characteristic ..." and process emphasises "... efforts to manage stress that change over time and are shaped by the adaptational context out of which it is generated". With these two distinctions, economic coping seems inclined to the process approach.

The understanding of coping strategies is important for various reasons. One such reason is for future policy formation. For example, should similar emergencies emerge, how must government react to make sure livelihoods are less affected? Secondly, how must individuals survive under such circumstances? Thus, lessons for future resilience and livelihoods may be learnt from the current pandemic. This is because effective coping characterises resilience. Also coping strategies promote good quality of life despite the adverse conditions one finds him or herself in (Fave, 2013). Lastly, one very important reason for engaging in coping when movement is restricted is that capabilities will have been affected. According to Nussbaum (2003) and Sen (2008) capabilities refer to what people are able to do or be. Thus, movement restriction as required by lockdown affects people's capabilities. Therefore, capability as freedom of choice to do what one wants or capability viewed as certain liberties is affected. Again, with freedom having been affected, development viewed as freedom by Sen (1999) is affected.

This study is organised in the following order: Firstly an introduction and background has been given. Coming up next is the literature underpinning coping strategies. A conclusion is made as the last section.

Coping strategies

According to Rashid, Langworthy and Aradhyula (2006, p.5) "... coping strategies are fallback mechanisms ... when habitual means of meeting needs are disrupted". Heitzmann, Canagarjah and Siegel (2002) noted that coping is reactionary in nature. Therefore, Rashid, Langworthy and Aradhyula (2006) and Heitzmann, Canagarjah and Siegel (2002) seem to concur in that coping is employed when a stressful life event befalls someone. Also, Haour-Knipe (2001) view the definition given by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), as cited before, to mean coping strategies.

As already alluded to before, several coping strategies used to counter emergencies exist. The majority of which include use of social capital, consumption smoothing and livelihoods diversification. Thus, Polizzi, Lynn and Perry (2020) noted that as far as coping with covid-19 is concerned, one can learn a lot from the coping strategies used in previous periods such as strategies used to cope with the 9/11 attack. Thus, some strategies used to cope with disasters may be used to cope with stressful life events like covid-19. However, even though I concur with Polizzi, Lynn and Perry (2020), I also suggest that some of these strategies' usage changes with each emergency situation. Thus, while lessons can be learnt from the past experiences, new lessons may emerge from the pandemic. Therefore, this section reviews literature on coping strategies relevant to the case at hand. It also gives relevant examples where possible. Of particular importance is to note that the lockdown came in phases with more restrictions having been mostly imposed in the first phases and relaxed with each successive phase.

a. Social capital

Although the definition of social capital is still not yet agreed upon, there are significant strides made in defining it. For example, "[s]ocial capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group[11]—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248-249). Again, Coleman (1998, p.s98) states that "[s]ocial capital is defined by its function". Also social capital "... consists of those features of social organisation which act as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action" (Lochner, Kawachi and Kennedy, 1999,

p. 260). Again Mandishekwa and Mutenheri (2019, p. 302), building on the various social capital definitions, noted that "... social capital is comprised of networks, trust and reciprocity and these are built from the social organisation one belongs to". Therefore, from the above statements one can note that "... relationships matter" (Field, 2003, p.1) a lot in life especially under difficult circumstances such as Covid-19 lockdowns.

Social capital has become a very important capital in today's lives. Against this importance, it has extended its influence to emergency situations. For example it has been widely used among refugees (Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee, 2007; Northcote, 2015; Barbelet, 2017; Kiboro, 2017). While the use of social capital in such emergencies is clearly stated that the person in need of support travels to where the support is, with movement being restricted, use of social capital changes. For example, in the case of lockdown, movement was restricted and only a few people were allowed to move. Given that restriction, individuals in need were the ones restricted. Therefore, it was up to the social networks to provide the needed service at the recipient's home. For example, those with friends and relatives with permits to move were able to buy food items for the locked down friends. Such would mean again bringing the items to one's door step. Of importance is that the travel permits were normally given to the people considered to be working in critical sectors of the economy, such as health and security forces.

Because movement was restricted, the person providing the social network services had to sometimes go a bit way off their budget. For instance, they sometimes had to use own funds to purchase the goods trusting that their connections will reimburse the funds upon submission of items. In this sense then, social capital was used as a relationship-focused coping strategy. Marin, Holtzman, DeLongis and Robinson (2007, p.953) noted that relationship-focused coping involves protecting relationships "... during stressful events". Therefore, the person providing the service may have aimed at maintaining relationships.

It is also possible that some individuals developed social connections during lockdown. Probably because one would come to know that someone has access to certain commodities that became scarcer during lockdown, the person may approach the one with that access. By so doing social capital develops. Thus, while social capital has been widely acknowledged to be used only when

need arises, it also can be created by that need. Therefore, one can conclude that collaboration, which is a sign of social capital, might be a result of needs fulfilment.

Even though social capital in this study was considered an economic strategy, it has ramifications that are psychological. For example, while being quarantined either in homes or quarantine centres, people were subject to stress and therefore reliance on social support enhanced psychological well-being.

While social capital enhanced livelihoods under mobility restrictions, it can also be a source of transmission. For example, social distancing is one of the recommended ways of reducing spread of the virus, therefore where accommodating connections was possibly used, it could be the source of inviting the 'devil' in the home. However, possibly those who may have used social capital may have been relying on other means such as hand-washing, sanitizing and use of face masks.

b. Efficiency and priority planning

The use of efficiency planning and priority planning also emerges when mobility is constrained. In short, the priority setting or planning concept refers to "... a process of deciding what type of activities, enforcement actions, advocacy initiatives, ... might pursue in a given period of time" (UNCTAD, 2013, p.4). Therefore, when in a lockdown, it is important for economic agents to employ these panning strategies to cope with the situation. Fernbach, Kan and Lynch (2014) focussed attention on how consumers use efficiency and priority planning to cope with resource constraints. They acknowledge that each and everyone has a shortage of something and that all resources are limited in supply. With these constrains, individual economic agents have to plan. The three considered two main types of planning used as coping strategies which are efficiency and priority planning. On one hand, Fernbach, Kan and Lynch (2014, p.1205) argue that "[e]fficiency planning aims to avoid opportunity costs, achieve savings by stretching the resource to avoid waste". In the context of this, then, a consumer may be considered an efficient planner if they can make use of one trip to buy a number of items at once to reduce number of trips to the shopping area. On the other hand, Fernbach, Kan and Lynch (2014) noted that "... priority planning achieves savings by making trade-offs between one's goals given resource

constraints and opportunity costs". In short, priority planning is based on prioritising what has to be done urgently. In lockdown situations, for example, the illustration given by Fernbach, Kan and Lynch (2014) may be valid where one may postpone, car repairs and instead focus funds and trips to food purchases. Because efficiency and priority planning are used to directly act on the stressful life event, they may collectively be viewed as problem-focused coping in line with the explanations given by Marin, Holtzman, DeLongis and Robinson (2007) and Ahmad, Ishtiaq and Mustafa (2017). In short, in problem-focused coping strategies, efforts are "... often directed at defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, weighting the alternatives in terms of their costs and benefits, choosing among them, and acting" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p.152).

In the context of Covid-19 lockdown, the consumer may then be expected to combine both efficiency and priority planning. By planning household expenses ahead and defer some of the expenses and at the same time minimising trips, savings on the already constrained budget may be beneficial. This helps to attain time and financial savings. Thus, while Fernbach, Kan and Lynch (2014) noted these planning approaches as distinct approaches to back-to-school shopping and found them to be used differently, I argue that under lockdown, they can be used concurrently. This is evidenced by the fact that by planning expenditure one minimises trips and attains efficient use of the already constrained resource. Again, this minimises exposure to Covd-19.

c. Consumption smoothing

In single shocks, consumption smoothing tends to be a good coping strategy. Lekprichakul (2009) defines consumption smoothing as a strategy in which households try to defend the current consumption levels. Given, that consumption smoothing is used to defend a certain position, it can also be considered as efficiency planning in that, at times, consumption smoothing involves stretching the available food to last longer. Therefore, consumption smoothing is an ex-post risk management strategy. In Tajikistan, Mukarami (2017) found that most households reduced or changed consumption as a coping strategy against shocks and risks. A related strategy to consumption smoothing is asset smoothing where households try to defend current asset holding thresholds and is usually attained by cutting down on consumption

(Lekprichakul, 2009). Lekprichakul (2009) noted that poor households use both consumption smoothing and asset smoothing strategies to cope with shocks. While consumption smoothing is used by both the poor and well-off, the poor can go further by using asset smoothing.

In the current analysis, it cannot be ruled out that households smoothed consumption or assets, as the case may be. Because of the time frames given for lockdown, individual households have been possibly using intertemporal consumption smoothing strategies. This enabled households' food budget to take them longer. However, given adjustments done, households were then forced to revise their approach. While it may sound unrealistic to assume that some countries made announcements with indefinite dates of ending the lockdown, this possibility may have forced households to adjust their intertemporal consumption periods to an indefinite period. Thus, while the simple two-time periods intertemporal consumption is well articulated, the indefinite consumption with time (t) being of an uncertain duration may also be applicable here. Therefore, the fear of running out of food before lockdown ends leads households to encompass food rationing as a way to smooth consumption.

Again, some households resorted to what they previously considered inferior food items. While it is well accepted that there are various types of consumption goods ranging from normal, luxury, inferior and basic goods, there is also a possibility that what one may consider a normal good will be an inferior good to someone. Therefore based on preference ordering, it is plausible to argue that some households reverted to consumer what they previously would not have consumed. Accepting this reality is also a good psychological coping strategy.

d. Food handouts

At national or community level food handouts have been employed as coping strategies. For example, Barbelet (2017) noted that refugees in Cameroon were assisted with food by World Food Programmes. Also, Deressa, Ringler and Hassan (2010) noted that government–driven strategies on food aid include free food handouts and food for work programmes. These strategies have been widely used in Ethiopia (Deressa, Ringler and Hassa, 2010). However, despite its widespread use, food for work programmes cannot be used under certain circumstances. For example, where mobility and association is restricted, people could not

employ such a strategy. Such cases include lockdown where one is supposed to remain in their homes and in worst cases in their houses.

Cases in point where food handouts have been given to households during Covi-19 include the Republic of South Africa where households were given food assistance in their homes. In Zimbabwe, churches have also been involved in this distribution. A good example is the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, Chikanga Church, which has been involved in distribution of food to households in Mutare. Churches have been instrumental even in spreading the word on Covid-19 for example Roman Catholic's Caritas was involved in spreading the word on Covid-19 to Mbare residents in Zimbabwe. Again, in this quest for assisting people, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were not spared. Some members of these NGOs were actually spared from the lockdown and as such were treated as critical sector staff. Such organisations intending to provide social services would however need permission from the authorities. Again, it was imperative that the food distributors must be Covid-19 free. This implies that they must have been tested and results found negative.

SEWA Federation of Co-operatives (2020) also stated that as of the 1st of April 2020, the Gujarat had indicated it will distributed food items. These food items included 3.5kg rice and 1.5 kg rice per person, among other items. With such food assistance, households would be better off than those without the assistance. This would be both emotionally and physically. For example, knowing that one would definitely get the necessary food items helped to possibly reduce the emotional stress.

Of note is that food handouts can be used concurrently with consumption smoothing. For example, given the uncertainties underlined by food handouts, households may engage in consumption smoothing so that the food lasts longer.

e. Informal market activities

Adam (2008) and Justino (2012) agree that informal market activities have become a common coping strategy. For example, Justino (2012) noted that informal market activities, such as petty-trading, are mostly used in complex emergencies. Also these activities may also include illegal

activities. In Gaza, women refugees also engaged in informal market activities such as petty-trading (Reidy, 2019). Also, among journalist who lost their jobs in Finland, Raito and Lahelma (2015) found that they ended-up being freelancers. Thus, instead of working for a certain news company, journalists went onto be somewhat self-employed in that same sector.

Informal market activities also developed during the lockdown. For example, some people developed their own food stalls in-house. Neighbours would come to buy items such as tomatoes and even some grocery items. Those with access to commodities may be able to buy items for resale. However, some items were even brought by the suppliers to people's doorsteps. However, this strategy will defeat the purpose of the lockdown. People will have violated the lockdown rules by moving within their vicinities. While it is an economic coping strategy, it also could facilitate the transmission of the virus because the buyer or the seller may have contracted the virus.

In the case of some countries, it may be argued that it was just a matter of moving the informal activity from one place to another. For example, vendors who used to vend around town would then do it in their homes supplying the commodities such as tomatoes. These informal activities, in some countries even ended up as selling of face masks even in streets. Consistent with the argument of becoming more informal is the findings by Raito and Lahelma (2015) among journalists in Finland who became informal players.

To make matters worse, some municipalities, such as those in Zimbabwe, destroyed people's vending areas under the auspices of cleaning the cities. This is in a similar manner to what happened in Zimbabwe in 2005 under the name of *Operation Murambatsvina* (meaning cleaning the filth). This means that even after Covid-19, households' economic activities have been disturbed. Their rehabilitation will take longer, if ever it will.

f. Hoarding commodities

Commodity hoarding can simply be defined as amassing commodities during a disaster or supply bottleneck either for personal use or resale. Hong, de Paula and Singh (2015) noted that hoarding leads to panics and can affect even households without resale intentions. Sharfman (2006) noted

that many governments have condemned hoarding of basic commodities and therefore placed anti-hoarding laws. In the current discussion hoarding is viewed as the position limit perspective of Sharfman (2006). In this view, consumers are barred by anti-hoarding laws to purchase too much of a good, especially an essential good.

While hoarding is generally considered illegal (Sharfma, 2006; Hong, de Paula and Singh, 2015); it cannot be ruled out as a coping strategy where those who had perceived the lockdown coming might have bought commodities in large quantities. When the lockdown was proclaimed, people would resort to running down on those items. However, depending on the size of the stockpile, this was a very short-term approach. Because the lockdown was extended to unprecedented periods, the stock pile would get depleted thereby forcing individuals to employ other coping strategies. Like food handouts, this strategy could have been used in conjunction with consumption smoothing. In some countries, however, laws to inhibit hoarding of commodities were instituted. However, the probability of being caught versus expected benefits counted more for households.

g. Transport substitution

This coping strategy may be taken as a variant of efficiency and priority planning. When restrictions were loosened, people were somehow allowed to move. Therefore, like substituting with inferior foods, some individuals also resorted to substitute transport by walking to town or by avoiding use of own transport. Because the transport system was also affected, some individuals had to walk to town or use public transport that was authorised to travel. However, cases like that of Zimbabwe, where law enforcement agents enforced the lockdown, one would assess the probability of an encounter with the agents versus the benefits. Therefore, in these cases information played a significant role. Again, social capital would enhance use of this strategy as it enabled assessment of perceived risk of encountering law enforcement agents. For example, it will be pointless to walk into town only to be turned out without anything bought. So people would likely rely on their social connections to assess the environment in town so as to be able to walk or else stay put. Therefore, this strategy was applied as in the theoretic game approach where the person to travel will assess the probability of encounter versus the items to

be accessed. Thus, assessment of the probability of being caught and paying a fine versus the associated benefits if not caught played a significant role in decision-making. Therefore, considering this view, transport substitution may be considered a form of priority planning.

Conclusions

In emergencies such as Covid-19 where mobility and association can be sources of the spread, use of coping strategies may change. For example, while in other emergencies like disasters, affected people may gather to put their heads together and pave the way forward (Polizzi, Lynn and Perry, 2020), with Covid-19, social distance is the norm. Therefore, some well known coping strategies may become useless. However, some existing strategies may be used in reverse order. For instance, while in most cases the one needing assistance may have to travel, the Covid-19 epidemic meant that the person who needs to assist, as indicated in this study, must be the traveller. Thus, while some lessons have been learnt from previous coping mechanisms, the current pandemic has led to emergence of new ways of using known strategies.

Well-known coping strategies such as social capital and informal market activities have been encompassed in coping with Covid-19. However, although these strategies have the potential to improve livelihoods under lockdown, they may be potential transmission mechanisms for the same pandemic. Their use, therefore, needs caution. For example, social connectedness may only be used minimally to reduce the spread of the pandemic but is one way that people may access required basic needs.

Instituting efficiency and priority planning in decision-making became paramount under lockdown. Under Covid-19 lockdown, households would plan their expenses, trips and modes of transport well in advance. Thus, while people may have different trips to different shops, under lockdown, combining trips and purchases became a very important decision to minimise both exposure and movement restrictions thereby adhering to efficiency planning. Again, some expenses would be deferred to later stages so that some immediate needs may be met. This would, therefore, be a form of complying with priority planning.

Substitution is also important as a strategy. People could substitute their mode of transport and food items. Thus, instead of using own transport, public transport was somehow encouraged but with potential for increased spread. Where public transport was used, restrictions were in place in terms of numbers and also requirements to meet requirements like sanitization and wearing of face masks to minimise spread of the pandemic. In terms of food, households resorted to food items that they could access and afford given the incomes that were also affected. Also inferior food items could also be used instead of the usual food items consumed. This could help reduce food budgets.

It can be noted that some coping strategies cannot be used in cases where association is restricted. Such strategies include, among others, turning to religion cannot be employed. Because religion implies community, it means that when a problem befalls one member of the community, community members come together to help the affected member. While turning to religion can be considered to be part of social capital, it can also be viewed as a stand-alone strategy. Because religious gatherings were banned, this strategy could not be used as a source of information on coping with the pandemic.

Conclusively, while Lazarus (1993) differentiates between style coping and process coping approaches, this study concludes that under lock down, it seems that personality coping is more appropriate. Thus, coping changes over time depending on the situation at hand.

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