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## **FOCUS ON COVID-19 RESPONSES: LUMOS**

### **ABSTRACT**

In response to Covid-19, with the aim of reducing spread and transmission, the weekly lumos have been suspended since March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This focus note takes a closer look at the importance of lumos for the rural communities and hence the impact of the market restriction policies for these people. There are 22 major lumos in the country from which local councils collect revenue. With the lumos closed they are struggling to generate enough revenue to provide their essential services to the local populations. Furthermore, 87.5 percent of the rural population works in agriculture, wholesale and retail trade. These two sectors are dominated by women and are most dependent on market places to sell their products. Livestock owners, who commonly need to sell of their animals to earn quick cash during the lean season, are also highly dependent on the weekly markets as 24 out of 27 livestock markets are lumos. For consumers in the rural areas, lumos are essential to buy food and other vital goods, which usually comes at a lower price than the daily market prices. As such, the market restriction policy has disproportionate negative impacts on incomes and food security in the most poor and vulnerable communities in the country. With the risk of increasing the spread, and importing new cases from Senegal (considering the high presence of Senegalese traders at lumos), it is important that the lumos remain closed until it is safe for them to operate. Nonetheless, the Government in collaboration with development partners, must ensure that the severely affected households receive the help and support they need.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) continues to pose policy challenges for governments. With no treatment in sight, policymakers pursue a balancing act between saving lives and livelihoods. Based on the dynamics of the coronavirus, saving lives requires partial lockdowns and or other social/physical distancing measures, which in turn have negative ramifications on livelihoods. In the Gambia one such measure was the initial suspension of all public gatherings, including daily markets (restrictions) and weekly markets commonly referred to as lumos.

This was meant to combat the spread of Covid-19 within the country. The suspension was extended to 45 days under the proclamation of the state of emergency on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 with additional restrictions. Subsequently, a further clarification was issued on April 17<sup>th</sup>, allowing for restricted activities in the daily markets across the country to ensure the availability of essential commodities and income for the local population. To protect the consumers the Essential Commodities Emergency Powers Regulations 2020 was affirmed by the National Assembly in line with the Emergency Powers Act, 4, amongst others, to prevent price gouging. In the broader context, it was an effort to ease the socio-economic impact of the lockdown on the population. In contrast, lumos were not allowed to operate.

Lumos like daily regular markets are an important center for buying and selling food items, livestock and important commodities especially in rural areas with highest incidence of poverty and fewer daily regular markets. Studies have shown that lumos provide many important benefits to the Gambia. In his research, Patrick highlighted that lumos have a significant positive impact on food security in the Gambia by facilitating the distribution of agricultural products, improving access to cheaper food items and foreign goods<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, Lumos have become important sources of revenue for Area Councils who have become the main organizers that levy taxes on traders during lumos. Today, councils are collecting revenue from about 27 major lumos in the Gambia. There are 6 lumos in Kuntaur Local Government Area (LGA), 8 in Basse LGA, 6 in Kerewan LGA, 2 in Mansokonko LGA, and 5 in Janjanbureh. These weekly markets attract consumers, middlemen, petty traders from all over the country and Senegal. The Agricultural Census 2012 report revealed that in 4 of the 11 districts with lumos (Kantora, Upper Saloum, Jokadu and Fulladu West 2), 100 percent of surveyed individuals reported lumos as the only markets they depend on for economic exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> The considerations presented in this Focus Note belongs to the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Strategic Policy and Delivery or the Office of the President.

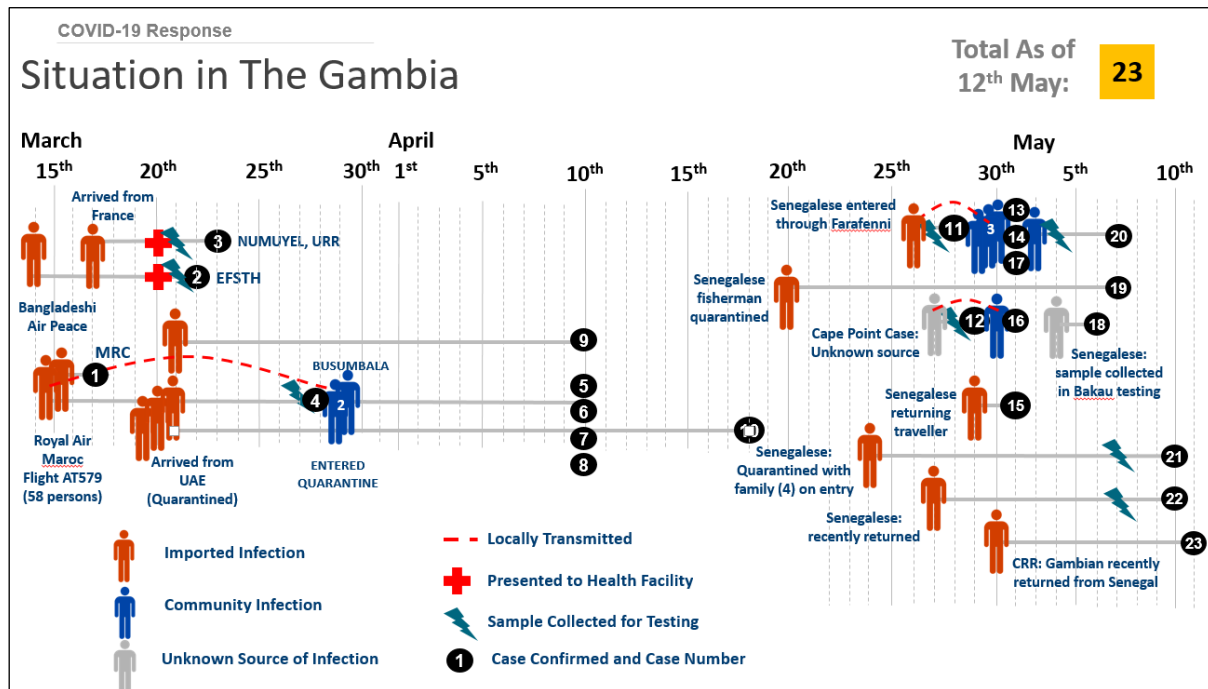
<sup>2</sup> Patrick (2009). A Study of Food Insecurity and Rural Development in The Gambia: The Impact of Rural Weekly Markets (Lumos)

have nowhere to sell their harvest. It was reported that about six metric tons of onions were on the verge to be perished due to non-availability of markets. Similarly, the Kuntuar Area Council recently reported to media that the Council is struggling to pay its staff as a result of revenue losses due to closure of lumos.

## THE COVID-19 SITUATION IN THE GAMBIA

As shown on Figure I below, the number of cases are steadily growing in the country, and stands at 23 as at May 12<sup>th</sup> 2020. More worryingly, most of the cases are either directly imported or epi-linked to imported cases from Senegal – despite official closures of borders.

Figure I. An Overview of the Cases of COVID-19 in The Gambia.



Source: Ministry of Health (Data), illustrations by James Hughes.

As at now the Gambia has registered 23 cases of the coronavirus, whilst Senegal have registered 2189 cases of the virus<sup>3</sup>. Given that most lumos are located at border settlements to attract Senegalese consumers and traders, lifting the suspension on lumos would likely attract cross-border movement to and from Senegal which could aggravate the already increasing number imported cases. This focus note therefore seeks to examine the impact of the continued suspension of lumos on the local population especially in the rural areas where daily regular markets are fewer and sometimes not existent.

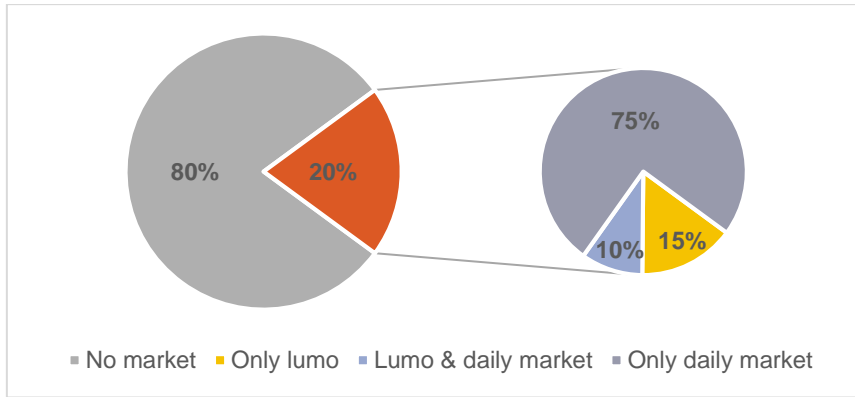
## DATA & STATISTICS

To understand the importance of lumos we must first understand some of the most relevant urban-rural differences in relation to markets, agriculture and socio-demographic factors. Below we present data from the Gambia Bureau

<sup>3</sup> John Hopkins Covid-19 Dashboard, 14 May 2020.

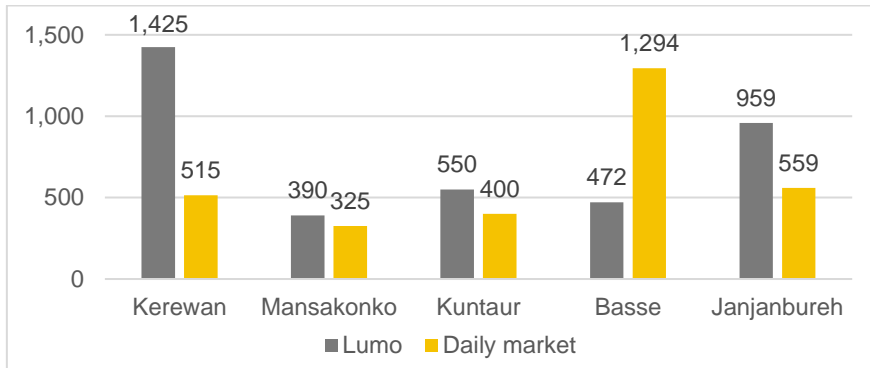
of Statistics (GBOS) Integrated Household Survey (2015/16), the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) Agricultural census (2011/12) and from MOA monthly market information system (2019).

Figure II. Division of Villages by Access to Markets



Already before the closure of lumos, 80 percent of villages in The Gambia did not host any market. Out of the few that did, 15 percent only had a weekly lumo and no daily market.

Figure III. Council 2019 Annual Revenue from Markets (‘000 GMD)

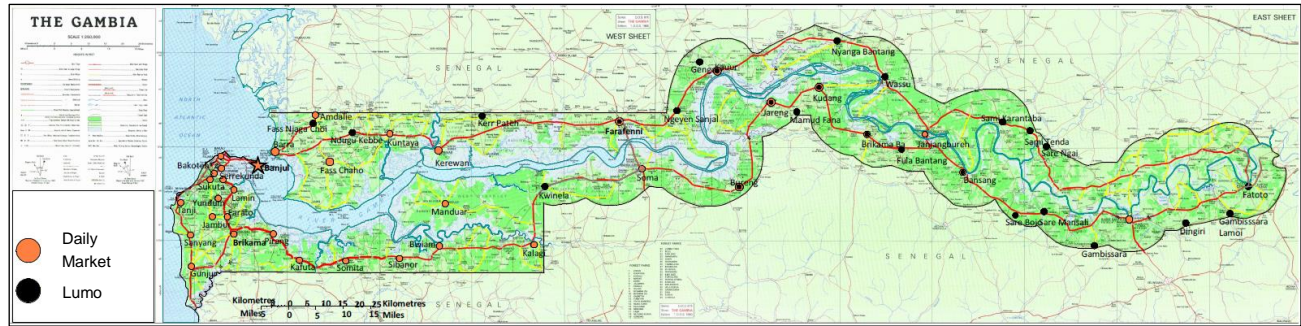


Note. These figures are self-reported from the councils.

The lumos are important sources of income, not only to the traders, but also for the councils that host them. Figure III shows the annual revenue collected from markets in a few councils around the country. In Kerewan, Mansakonko, Kuntaur and Janjanbureh the weekly lumos generate more revenue than their daily markets. At the time of writing the lumos have been closed for 8 weeks, the lost revenue over this period approximately amounts to GMD219 200 in Kerewan, GMD60 000 in Mansakonko, GMD84 600 in Kuntaur, GMD72 600 in Basse, and GMD147 600 in Janjanbureh.

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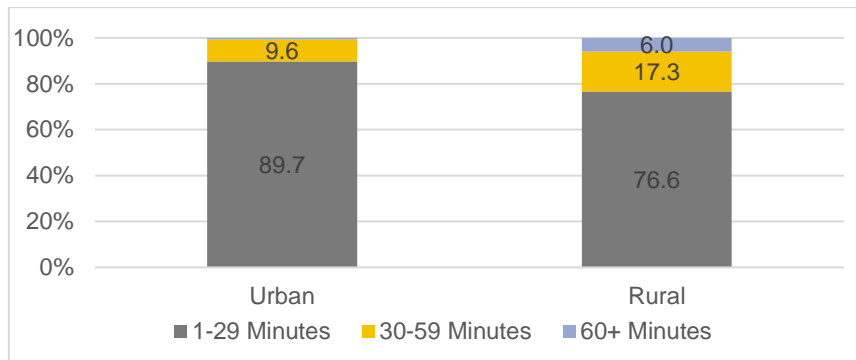
Figure IV. Major market locations in The Gambia



Source: UK Government, Directorate of Overseas Survey (Base map); Lumo locations self-reported from Councils.

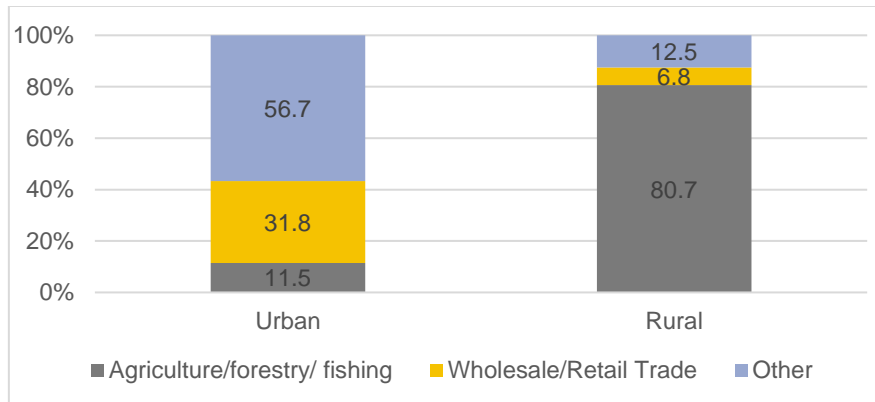
Figure IV illustrates another example of the limited access to markets that arise with the closure of lumos, especially in the rural areas. While these are just the major ones it is clear from the map that the rural population is much more dependent on lumos with essentially no daily markets nearby.

Figure V. Division of Households' Time Taken to Nearest Food Market



Before the closure of the lumos, 23.3 percent of rural households had to travel 30 minutes or more to access their nearest food market. With the closure of lumos, the proportion is likely much higher with some not being able to access any markets at all when the distances become too far, leading to partial or complete income losses for producers and traders, as well as increased vulnerability to food security and malnutrition concerns for consumers.

Figure VI. Percent Population (7 years and above) working in Industry by Area

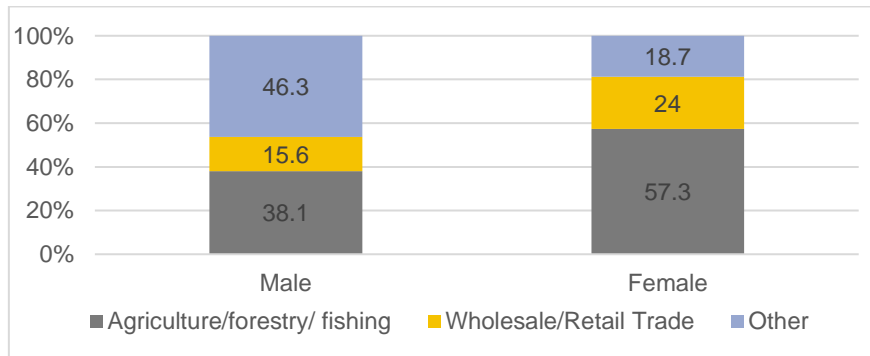


The two sectors that rely most heavily on markets are agriculture and retail/wholesale trade. These sectors together occupy 87.5 percent of the rural population and thus constitute their main sources of income. The rural population, which is already vulnerable with 55 percent living in extreme poverty, is much more dependent on lumos for their income given their limited access to daily markets. Besides the supply and income aspect, the lumos are also vital for consumers to exchange goods and foods. While the exchange of foods and crops is essential for health and food

security reasons, the exchange of other goods ensures access to other necessities such as soap, detergents, electronics, clothes, tools, etc.

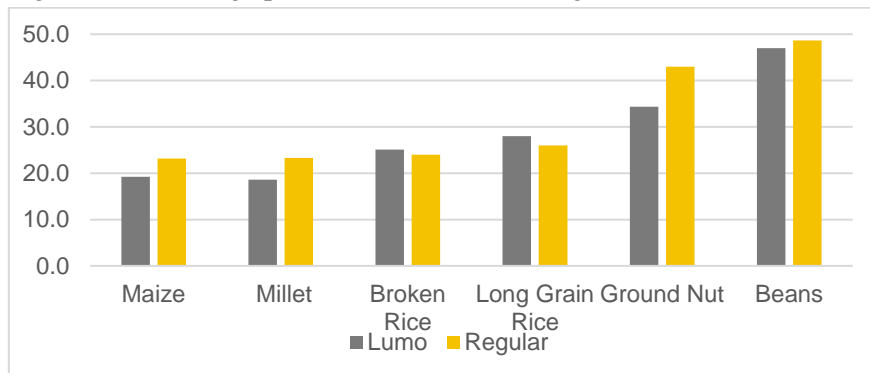
In addition, lumos play a vital role for people who own livestock. It is common for farmers to keep livestock as security to sell off when in need of cash. This need usually arises in the period between planting and harvesting, which in The Gambia is known as the lean season, when cash from livestock is urgently needed for farmers to feed their families.<sup>4</sup> Figures from FAO show that there are 27 livestock markets in The Gambia, out of which 24 are lumos, with the highest proportion located in the Central River Region with the highest poverty incidence.<sup>5</sup> As such, essentially all rural livestock markets are currently closed, which will aggravate poverty and food security concerns in the most vulnerable regions of the country, especially as we are entering the lean season.

Figure VII. Percent of Population (7 years and above) working in Industry by Gender



Going back to agriculture and retail/wholesale trade, these two sectors are dominated by females. At a national level, 81.3 percent of all women work in agriculture and retail or wholesale trade. Therefore, with the closure of lumos and hence loss of sales, women are unproportionally suffering from income losses.

Figure VIII. Average per kilo Cereal Prices (August 2019, GMD)



Note. Markets included to calculate average prices include: (i) Lumos: Brikamaba, Ndungu Kebe Fass Njagachoi, Kwinella, Jareng; and (ii) Regular: Basse, Farafenni, Serre-kunda, Tipper Garrage, Brikama.

<sup>4</sup> Nwafor (2004). Small ruminant livestock marketing in The Gambia: a socio-economic perspective.

<sup>5</sup> FAO (2016). Review of the Livestock/Meat and Milk Value Chains and Policy influencing them in The Gambia.

“the market restriction policy in response to Covid-19 have unequal effects on income and food security, disadvantaging the already vulnerable and poor rural communities. In addition, these policies exacerbate gender disparities”



In August 2019, the average lumo cereal prices were cheaper than the average regular (daily) market prices, except for some rice products. On average for all cereal, the lumo prices were 8 percent lower than the regular market prices. As such, besides the income generating role of lumos, they also serve a purpose in food security and providing affordable food to the poorer rural communities. In the rural areas 21 percent of children under five years of age and 20 percent of adult women are underweight, compared to 11 percent and 14 percent respectively in urban areas (DHS, 2013).

## DISCUSSION

While the daily markets are allowed to operate under certain opening hours, the weekly lumos have been closed since March 17<sup>th</sup>. Daily markets are found in cities, towns and larger villages in all regions of the country, but for many rural and more secluded villages the only markets that can be accessed are the weekly lumos, especially for those seeking to sell off livestock. As such, the market restriction policy in response to Covid-19 have unequal effects on income and food security, disadvantaging the already vulnerable and poor rural communities. In addition, these policies exacerbate gender disparities since there are more women than men working in agriculture and retail or wholesale trade which are the sectors most dependent on market places to sell their products and earn an income. Furthermore, with councils not being able to host the weekly lumos, these vulnerable communities are experiencing shortages of funds for their councils to operate and provide essential services, facilities and infrastructure. Hence, the lost revenue will by extension also affect the populations of the councils.

Even for the rural communities that have the option of turning to daily markets while the lumos are closed will potentially be affected. The lumo prices are usually lower than the average daily market prices. As such, these higher prices could aggravate food security concerns in rural areas which already suffer from higher levels of malnourishment compared to urban areas. This is especially concerning for women and children who are already vulnerable groups in society.

While lumos certainly constitute an activity of high contagion risk of the coronavirus (and transmission of other diseases), the suspension may cause people to travel to larger cities and even the Greater Banjul Area where the most cases have been found. Nonetheless, given the strong presence of Senegalese traders often found at lumos, opening the lumos may give incentive to Senegalese nationals to illegally cross the border in order to sell their products, or for Gambian nationals to approach the border in order to import goods from Senegal to then sell at the lumos. Both these scenarios increase the risk of transmission, especially in the light of that at least seven confirmed cases have been directly imported from Senegal where they have had 2189 confirmed cases as of May 14<sup>th</sup>. Senegal is currently easing their restrictions and are among other things considering reopening lumos. Before the lumos can be allowed to operate in The Gambia we need to observe the success of easing restrictions in Senegal and/or wait until the number of daily new cases in Senegal has been significantly reduced (the country reported 177 new cases on May 12<sup>th</sup>, their highest number in a single day).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the risks of transmission and importing new cases that arise by reopening the lumos, we recognize the importance of keeping them closed until the situation has improved and they can operate safely. However, the suspension of lumos can potentially have severe consequences in terms of income losses, poverty and food security concerns in poor rural communities, especially affecting vulnerable women and children. Therefore, we recommend that the relevant actors (GBOS, UNDP, FAO, etc.) collaborate to identify the affected households and assess the required provisions needed from the Government or development partners to help. This may be cash transfers, food parcels, buying excess crops, etc. In the fight against Covid-19, everybody is affected by either the virus itself or by the policy responses imposed to restrict the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, we must ensure that the most severely affected and vulnerable groups are receiving the help they need, such that no one is left behind.