

# Pack 115, Item

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**Impact of COVID-19 on availability of fresh vegetables and how farmers and others are coping**

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Notes to broadcaster

COVID-19 is one of the most frightening scourges of the century, on the same level as the Spanish flu of 1918. But with no cure in sight, many governments worldwide have resorted to restricting people to their homes for a period of time in order to control the spread of this pandemic. This has generally been referred to as a lockdown. This strategy is expected to halt the development and spread of the virus. However, for a farming society like that in eastern Zambia, the lockdown has negatively impacted farmers, who depend on the urban community to buy their crops. It has also impacted the urban populace who mostly depend on outlying farming communities for fresh vegetables.

This script explores some of the ways farmers are coping with the situation. It also explores coping measures taken by urban dwellers to get fresh vegetables in the absence of their usual sources.

You might choose to present this script as part of your regular farmer program, using voice actors to represent the speakers. If so, please make sure to tell your audience at the beginning of the program that the voices are those of actors, not the original people involved in the interviews.

You could also use this script as a model for creating your own program on how farmers and other stakeholders are faring in your country in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. You could interview small-scale farmers, nutritionists, agricultural economists, various agro-market players, as well as representatives of health agencies and traditional healers to tell your story. You could ask them:

* The level of infection in your country and what measures the Ministry of Health and other players have put in place to control and contain the pandemic.
* How small-scale farmers are coping with these control measures.
* Actions taken by communities to comply with these measures (include the importance of trusted community health workers in compliance with interventions).

**SFX:** PHONE RINGING

\* Please note that this script describes the situation in eastern Zambia in April and May 2020, and the situation has changed since that time.

Duration of the script, with intro and outro: 20-25 minutes

**Kambole:** Hello, this is Kambole Kanyanta at the District Agriculture Office. May I know who is calling?

**Filius:** My name is Filius Chalo Jere, the producer of the *Farming is a Business* radio program at Breeze FM. May I have an interview with you by phone?

**Kambole:** What about?

**Filius:** About the impact of the coronavirus on the farming community and their marketing partners.

**Kambole:** Do you mean the coronavirus pandemic, what is generally referred to as COVID-19?

**Filius:** Yes. With the recent restrictions of people’s movement, we already see a decrease in farmers coming into town to sell their vegetables. This also prevents dealers from the green market from going out to buy vegetables from the farmers. Please give a brief outline of the fresh food supply chain from farmers through middlemen and middlewomen to consumers.

**Kambole:** The economy of Chipata is based on agriculture and almost everyone in the district has a role in the value chain. A break at any point of this chain will affect the rest negatively.

**Filius:** Kindly explain exactly how this is so.

**Kambole:** It’s simple. Farmers in the villages produce food but do not have basic necessities like salt, sugar, and soap. Town dwellers have easy access to the basic necessities but lack fresh food from the farm. As a result, there must always be an exchange of commodities between the two. Yet for the farmer to produce any food at all, he or she must first get inputs like seed, fertilizer, and farm chemicals from town.

At the end, the farmer must go to town to sell the produce. In this way, the farmer earns money and can get the basic necessities needed at home, including inputs to produce more vegetables. This value chain has worked very well for everyone until the appearance of the coronavirus.

**Filius:** How did this affect the value chain? Is it because people started to get sick and die?

**Kambole:** Not really. The problem is the lockdown that was suddenly ordered countrywide.

**Filius:** Please kindly explain the meaning of lockdown in simple terms.

**Kambole:** In relation to the current situation, lockdown means the restrictions that the government has put in place to check the spread of the virus. The police and other law enforcement agencies are all over in town and the compounds patrolling to ensure that only essential people are out and about.

**Filius:** Who are considered essential people? I thought all people were important.

**Kambole:** Yes, everyone is important. However, under the prevailing circumstances, if everyone was allowed to roam about and mingle freely, the virus would have a heyday and jump from one person to another and many people would get sick and die. Consequently, the government will not allow just anyone to roam about—just medical staff at the hospital and a few other people whose work is indispensable. This includes the police and other law enforcement officers. The rest are expected to stay within the confines of their homesteads until the lockdown is lifted.

**Filius:** Are farmers not essential? We can’t eat without the food they grow.

**Kambole:** Indeed, farmers are essential. But in a life-and-death situation like this one they, too, have to be restricted. Otherwise, this thing can grow like the Spanish influenza of 1918 that killed over 50 million people worldwide.

**Filius:** If farmers can no longer come to town to sell their produce, it means that, for the time being, there will be no outlet for their crops and they will just go to waste, leaving them with no income.

**Kambole:** Exactly! There will be no income for farmers and no fresh vegetables for you and me here in town. Of course, imported vegetables are available in the supermarkets, but they are very expensive and not really fresh. In addition, they are stigmatized as GMOs, which many people consider to be bad for health. That is the reason why many people prefer to get fresh vegetables from farmers. Supermarkets are now open, but to a limited degree and relatively few customers are using them.

**Filius:** I would like to know how farmers and their town-based customers cope during this lockdown. Please kindly link me to some people I can talk to.

**Kambole:** Alright, there is Mr. Grevazio Banda, who has been doing very well in his garden. He usually plants a lot of vegetables, tomatoes, and other crops, which he supplies to the main market. I wonder how he is faring under this situation because I no longer see him coming to town to sell his crops.

**Filius:** Indeed, it would be interesting to find out how this lockdown is affecting Grevazio’s farming business. What about a vegetable customer or two staying in town? Do you have anyone in mind I can talk to?

**Kambole:** (LAUGHING) Yes, I can link you to yourself. You are a town dweller who also depends on farmers for fresh vegetables. You can interview yourself.

**Filius:** (ALSO LAUGHING) Maybe you are right. However, you are also a town dweller who has been buying fresh vegetables from farmers. So, I will interview you instead.

**Kambole:** I stand disqualified because of my profession as an agricultural economist. Yet on second thought, maybe this is an opportunity to show people the importance of backyard vegetable gardens that we have been recommending over the years. Many people have ignored our advice for fear of incurring huge water bills. That is a poor excuse.

**Filius:** How so?

**Kambole:** Backyard gardens do not really lead to wasting water because they do not have to be all that big. For instance, I just have one bed of tomato, another for onion, and two for vegetables. I use wastewater to water them. This is okay as long as it does not have soap or oil residues. That is recycling, which is highly recommended. Everyone should do it!

**Filius:** But do they?

**Kambole:** They simply have to do so now because there is no alternative. Already, a few people have come to me to learn how to make vegetable beds and compost manure. I also teach people who stay in high-rise flats how to grow vegetables in buckets on their balconies.

**Filius:** That’s very interesting. Now, please give me some phone numbers. I need to talk to Mr. Grevazio Banda the gardener, and maybe one or two other people in the fresh vegetables value chain.

**Kambole:** Alright, Grevazio’s number is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Filius:** Got it. Thank you, my friend. I shall give credit to you in my program for making it possible.

**SFX:** MUSICAL INTERLUDE FADING TO PHONE RINGING

**Grevazio:** Hello, who is calling?

**Filius:** Filius Chalo Jere from Breeze FM. Do you have a moment to talk with me about your farming under the current situation of COVID-19?

**Grevazio:** Yes, we can talk. I listen to your program. You always say that *Farming is a Business* is the space where we farmers can express ourselves and be heard. The business of farming has become challenging with this lockdown. How does the government expect us to survive?

**Filius:** Before we go into that, please tell me how things were before.

**Grevazio:** Things were pretty good. You know, my garden is on the banks of the perennial Lutembwe River, and I have a treadle pump. As a result, I have plenty of water all year round, unlike some of my friends whose water sources dry up later in the year. Consequently, I have a very big garden and plenty of vegetables.

**Filius:** How do you normally sell your vegetables?

**Grevazio:** Usually, I take my vegetables to the green market in town where the middlemen and middlewomen buy in bulk. But this isn’t good because the women haggle until they negotiate the price down to a level where a farmer is on the brink of merely giving away his produce. So I sometimes lobby for contracts to supply vegetables to the hospital and boarding schools. At times, I go around on my bicycle and sell directly to consumers.

**Filius:** What challenges do you face now that there are restrictions on movement?

**Grevazio:** First, this lockdown came too abruptly, and I had plenty of vegetables ready to be harvested. At first, I didn’t know how to dispose of them. I tried to sneak into town a few times because we needed money for salt and soap and the vegetables might go to waste if not harvested.

**Filius:** Wasn’t going into town reckless?

**Grevazio:** Indeed, it was reckless. The police are all over to ensure that everyone on the road is an essential worker and has a face mask. In addition, you have to keep at least a one-metre distance from the next person, which is rather difficult when selling vegetables. You must also wash your hands with some sanitizer chemical before entering any shop to buy soap or sugar and other essentials.

**Filius:** That must have been too much trouble for you.

**Grevazio:** Yes, it was. I also realized that what I was doing was dangerous because if I got infected I would take the virus back to the village and many people could die because of me.

**Filius:** That would be very sad, indeed. But then, your vegetables are in danger of going to waste. What will you do?

**Grevazio:** I have contacted the hospital and they will use their own transport to come and pick the vegetables. Hospital staff are deemed essential workers, so they can move freely. The only problem in doing business with them is that they do not pay cash right away, and we seriously need money.

**Filius:** So what are you going to do?

**Grevazio:** I am lucky because people from the surrounding villages come to buy my vegetables.

**Filius:** Meaning that the lockdown has no effect in the villages?

**Grevazio:** Not exactly. But it is not all that strict here. We can move around as long as we have face masks and do not congregate in groups of more than fifty.

**Filius:** But you said you have plenty of vegetables. I am sure the one-off sale to the hospital and trickle-selling to your fellow villagers is not enough to avoid wastage. How do you plan to avoid losing your crops?

**Grevazio:** My wife is very innovative. She has started to harvest the vegetables and cooks them slightly before drying them on a rack in the shade. We call that *mufutsa* and she plans to sell the *mufutsa* to the townsfolk as soon as this thing is over. The dry vegetables fetch a very high price in the city, and don’t go bad like the fresh ones. As a matter of fact, the longer they stay, the tastier they become.

**Filius:** Indeed, that’s very innovative of her.

**Grevazio:** My wife has even considered making jam because we have a lot of tomatoes. However, the most important ingredient is sugar, which we can’t get easily because of the lockdown. It’s also not easy to get jars for that. Nevertheless, this lockdown is somewhat good because it has got us thinking about adding value to our crops.

**Filius:** Thank you for talking to me, Mr. Banda. You said at the beginning that you sometimes sold your vegetables directly to people in compounds. Could you kindly give me the phone number of one or two of your customers so that I can phone them?

**Grevazio:** Maybe you can talk to Mrs. Miriam Mwale. She was my regular customer and I am sure getting fresh vegetables has become a big challenge for her now. Her number is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Filius:** Thank you for your cooperation. After this lockdown, I surely will become one of your regular vegetable customers.

**SFX:** MUSICAL INTERLUDE FADING TO PHONE RINGING

**Miriam:** Hello. Who is calling?

**Filius:** My name is Filius Chalo Jere. I ...

**Miriam:** (INTERRUPTING) Oh, you are the farmers’ friend on Breeze FM. How wonderful! But . . . I am not a farmer. My only relationship with farmers and farming is that I buy their vegetables. So, I can’t be a useful candidate for *Farming is a Business*, can I?

**Filius:** Actually, you are. I want to talk with you as someone who buys vegetables from farmers. I am sure you have challenges during this period of lockdown.

**Miriam:** Of course I have. The lockdown may be good as a safeguard against COVID-19. But it’s like prison because we can’t go to the market or to the shop. We can’t go even to church and schools are closed. So, everyone is at home like goats in a pen.

**Filius:** It must be good for you, having everybody around for once.

**Miriam:** Yes, it is good because we get to closer as a family and know each other better. My husband also can’t go out for his beer to come back shouting like a banshee and smelling like something from the rubbish dump.

The children also read more, write more, and watch TV and play more. But when they get fed up, they start fighting and I have to umpire one fight after another!

**Filius:** (LAUGHING SOFTLY) It’s so ironic that there’s always something unpalatable in everything, no matter how good.

**Miriam:** Yes, it’s unfortunate. But you haven’t heard it all. This lockdown has reduced our access to food. Yet it has increased food consumption in the home. How will I cater for all these hungry mouths when I can’t go to the green market and the farmers can’t come to town with their vegetables? Trust me, a lot of people will be mere bones by the time the lockdown gets lifted!

**Filius:** So how do you cater for the daily needs of your family?

**Miriam:** It’s an uphill battle. Luckily, I have a bit of flour in the house and I make fritters for our breakfast. I also have some dry foodstuff like beans and *mufutsa* that I bought in bulk before lockdown enforcement.

**FILIUS:** It’s interesting that you talk about *mufutsa* because I was talking to one farmer named Grevazio Banda. He said his wife is busy processing her vegetables into *mufutsa* for sale. Does *mufutsa* have any advantages over ordinary fresh vegetables?

**MIRIAM:** Personally, I would say *mufutsa* has a lot of advantages. First and foremost, it is a form of preserving vegetables for use during the leaner months. It has a great taste because it is usually dried in the shade.

As a result, it is like a concentrate because most of the nutrients in the fresh vegetables are preserved for a very long time. Unlike fresh vegetables whose quantity shrinks upon cooking, *mufutsa* increases in volume as the dry leaves absorb water and fill up.

**FILIUS:** Do you mean *mufutsa* can replace fresh vegetables?

**MIRIAM:** Not really. We still need fresh vegetables, otherwise we shall suffer from scurvy and other diseases like those poor sailors of olden days.

**Filius:** So how can you ensure you have fresh vegetables when the farmers can no longer bring them to town due to the pandemic?

**MIRIAM:** Actually, it’s possible because Mr. Kambole the agricultural officer has been encouraging us to start backyard gardens.

**FILIUS:** I was talking to him recently and he has agreed to talk on my program about backyard gardening.

**MIRIAM:** That will be wonderful. I used to think a backyard garden would result in wastage of water for the crops. But now I realize that it can actually result in useful usage of wastewater because we would use it on the vegetables instead of just throwing it away.

**Filius:** So?

**Miriam:** I will definitely look out for what he will say on the program. I am sure I can start my own backyard garden soon after listening to him. This COVID-19 thing and the lockdown have taught us important lessons on how to cope.

**Filius:** Indeed, it has, Mrs. Mwale. I have also learnt a lot from this situation. For one, I must expand my program because I now realize that the business of farming does not just mean farmers but also the middlemen and women who buy from the farmers to sell to consumers like you.

It also means engaging people like you in small ways of producing vegetables in your own backyard gardens. So, look out for my next episode of *Farming is a Business* on Breeze FM, Mrs. Mwale, because very soon you will be one of my stars!

**SFX:** MUSICAL INTERLUDE

**FILIUS:** Listener, the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed brought in a lot of suffering, and we have come to the end of this program with no answers in sight. Of course, we have had a few insights into how farmers, agricultural dealers, and consumers are coping. But more is the distress.

To address some of the issues raised in this program, maybefarmers and town dwellers should meet in a decontaminated buffer zone controlled by Ministry of Health and other stakeholders. The health authorities would have thermometers for testing and contact tracing.

Another important concern is water. Many farmers in rural areas do not have ready access to water for handwashing to avoid catching the virus. As a matter of fact, they do not even know the importance of regular handwashing and social distancing.

Yet farmers are very important. They are key to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals about ending poverty and hunger and achieving food security. So we must all support farmers’ contribution to improving nutrition and making agriculture more sustainable.

Remember that COVID-19 is real. For this reason, please comply with all control measures to be safe. In addition, please do everything possible to cope with the situation. As I mentioned, farmers can be the keys to ending poverty and hunger and achieving food security.

**Acknowledgements:**

Contributed by: Filius Chalo Jere, Producer of *Farming is a Business*, Breeze FM, Chipata, Zambia

Reviewed by: Elisabeth Wilson, journalist and communication specialist

**Sources of information**

Interviews:

Kambole Kanyanta, agricultural economist, Ministry of Agriculture Chipata, Zambia, April 2020.

Grevazio Banda, vegetable farmer, Kauzu Settlement Area, Chipata, Zambia, April 2020.

Mrs. Miriam Mwale, housewife, CS 19, Old Jim Compound, Chipata, Zambia, May 2020

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