



# AFRICAN CORONAVIRUS STORIES

Perspectives on COVID-19 Challenges to Livelihoods  
and Food Systems



ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA







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# Synthesis: African Perspectives On The COVID-19 Challenges To Livelihoods And Food Systems

Safeguarding food security — access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food sources — was one of the biggest challenges facing the global community this year. The matter is most pressing and most dire in Africa.

According to the 2019 regional overview of food security and nutrition in Africa, 256 million Africans are undernourished. Additionally, 399 million people were found moderately food insecure, i.e., they did not have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food, even if they were not necessarily suffering from hunger. Of these, 87 percent live in sub-Saharan Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted yet another new and disturbing setback to the continent's already ailing food security challenges.

The impact of COVID 19 on food security in Africa has been among the most widely discussed subjects since the first cases of COVID-19 in Africa broke in February 2020. Most of the narratives were alarming. The headlines put Africa at the brink of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis caused by the triple challenges of economic, health, and food security crises. The reports were focused primarily on policy analysis calling for top-down policy decisions. Real, human-centric, stories from the ground were rare to find. The result grossly hampered our understanding of the implications of the policy decisions on the day to day life of small food producers in Africa.

This compilation of stories offers broader contextual insight into how COVID-19 has devastated the lives of rural and urban small-scale food producers. It shows how various governmental responses to contain its spread impacted large sections of the population across the food chain.

To this end, AFSA collected grassroots stories from 18 African countries by collaborating with 21 journalists. Each journalist produced two feature stories focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale food producers, marginalized sections of the community, workers, and traders of the local food web.

This summary reviews the 40 stories gathered under the title African Coronavirus Stories: Perspectives on COVID-19 Challenges to Livelihoods and Food Systems. It intends to capture how the COVID-19 virus has changed life for African family farmers and small-scale food producers by highlighting its impacts on the overall food systems and key players in the food chain.



## **AFRICAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO COVID-19**

Governments across Africa took measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 and minimize its adverse and multifaceted impacts on its citizens and economy. Most of the decisions were introduced by proclamations, new legislative actions, and executive orders. Five countries from our list declared a state of emergency (Botswana, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Senegal, and Lesotho). Almost all the countries enforced national health and disaster emergency declarations that included many new laws to put proper social distancing in order.

The restriction of people's free movement was heavily enforced and was the containment measures with the most significant impact on food systems and livelihoods of small-scale producers. Measures included border closures, banning public gatherings, shutting down hotels, bars, and restaurants, prohibiting street markets, restricting domestic travel, curbing transportation services, limiting the number of passengers, suspending schools and universities, and imposing curfews.

Several governments introduced specific affirmative measures to support the community's most vulnerable people as part of an economic stimulus package. The most common were loans for various undertakings, including social protection support schemes for smallholder farmers, small-scale agribusiness companies, and those closest to the poverty line.

Reports revealed that governments in Africa struggled to strike a balance between the need to control the spread of the virus and the need to prevent the economic fallout exacerbating the current food security crisis. Although farming was considered an essential service and was not subject to governmental restrictions, agricultural products and local food markets faced enormous challenges. Lack of transportation, the closing of restaurants and marketplaces, and movement restrictions caused considerable disruptions across the sector.

Below is an analysis of the consequential impediments seen across the agricultural value chain and its effect on food producers, traders, and consumers.

### **IT IS NOT ACCESS TO FOOD BUT LACK OF INCOME THAT IS MAKING US HUNGRY**

For many small-scale family farmers and the urban poor, COVID-19 is more directly associated with hunger than a public health crisis. It is not sickness that many fear most, but the continuing loss of income.

"No market means no daily income, no daily income means no food," says a farmer from Zimbabwe who cannot work due to a nationwide lockdown.

Many African governments declared agricultural products as essential to ensure the free movement of food goods. Still, the stay-at-home advice and travel restrictions caused logistical hurdles for farmers and traders, leading to supply delays and post-harvest losses. Farmers were struggling to move their stock because of the soaring costs of transportation and a non-existent market. There were heavy losses from an inability to move fruit and vegetables, and fresh produce was rotting on the farms. With incomes drastically reduced, many families faced impending hunger.

The urban youth, whose lives depend on the daily sale of agricultural products, share the same story. Their market stalls are empty because of COVID-19. Hunger is no longer simply a fear to them; it is a reality they face every day. They plead for food assistance from the government, but most of all, they need money to start over again.



“I have finished my savings, I’m hungry, and I am worried about the future,” says a fish merchant from Senegal. No matter which sector of the food system, no matter the country, the story of hunger is the same.

## **BORDER CLOSURES: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE?**

COVID-19 triggered abrupt border closures in many African countries. The border lockdown decision adversely affected the cross-border trade between communities. However, the crisis gave rise to a new opportunity for some.

Lesotho and Botswana are the best examples. Small-scale farmers saw the lockdown and the subsequently closed borders as an opportunity to start new business ventures. The marked drop in South African meat and dairy products on the local supermarket shelves provided an opportunity for their business to boom.

Nevertheless, many border communities across Africa insist on agricultural input assistance - such as seedlings and fertilizers - to assist the communities in becoming self-sufficient. They say food sovereignty is the surest path to food security.

## **INCREASED APPETITE FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE AND GARDENING**

The youth in many cities in Africa have gravitated towards urban agriculture due to the food system disruptions caused by COVID-19. There is a growing passion for urban gardening of fresh vegetables for household and market consumption. Young people in Ethiopia and Nigeria are demanding their mayors provide them with seeds, agricultural inputs, and plots of land.

Ethiopia is allowing its low-income urban youth to farm spaces in public schools to feed their families and communities. In Nigeria, the substantial increase in the number of smallholder food producers on both rural and urban land since the beginning of the pandemic demonstrates the desperate need for an independent source of nutrition.

## **SCHOOL CLOSURES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY**

The school feeding program is among the most widely implemented safety net program in Africa. It is designed to provide and facilitate smooth learning opportunities for vulnerable and destitute children. The program systematically improves the holistic development of a child through education, nutrition, and social protection. The other great benefit is its positive impact on boosting local agriculture and family farming in each school’s vicinity.

The temporary closure of schools has halted school feeding programs. It has had a shocking impact on small-scale family farmers and low-income urban families who depended on the program to feed their children. About one million children in Ethiopia are not benefiting from school meals at present. In the nation’s capital, it is estimated to impact the food security of 300,000 children.

On another note, family farmers in rural Kenya have accepted the schools’ closure as a blessing in disguise. For close to four months now, children have been joining their parents on farmlands in western Kenya, learning new agricultural skills, and how to run the family farm.

“I am sad many children aren’t in school. But I also have some joy because with no schooling, the children are helping in the farm,” says Seredo Anyango, a mother of two from Kadero village in Kisumu County.



## **HOTEL, RESTAURANTS, AND BARS - THE LIFELINE TO FAMILY FARMERS**

The stay-at-home policies, coupled with the closures of hotels and restaurants, have severely impacted the lives of many small-scale food producers in Africa. The primary clientele for many family farmers in the urban and suburban population is the booming hospitality industry.

Hotels and restaurants sustain the lion's share of markets and are the largest buyers for fisherfolk, cattle and poultry farmers, and fresh fruits and vegetable growers. Many farmers produce to cater solely to restaurants. Consequently, these closures have been disastrous for small producers, and for some, it might even herald the end.

No other sector is so gravely affected by the closure of the hospitality industry as the fisherfolk and cattle and poultry farmers. Culturally, people in Africa eat meat during social gatherings and events, so there is little chance of an alternative market in this current climate. The lockdown measures have almost eradicated the meat market.

## **COVID-19 TRIGGERED LAND GRABBING AND LAND DISPUTES**

Since Uganda declared a temporary lockdown in March, the number of rural land disputes cases has soared. When cities were shut down, and economic activities slowed, landowners began returning to the villages to claim or sell their farming land.

Unfortunately, those who had been absent for a considerable amount of time found that other relatives or locals were occupying and farming their land. The clashes are particularly detrimental to those small-scale farmers whose entire livelihoods rely on the crops grown on the controversial land.

## **THE VIOLENT ENFORCEMENT OF RESTRICTIVE LAWS ON THE THRIVING BUSINESSES**

The legal enforcement of a state of emergency to curb the spread of COVID-19 has given rise to a profoundly concerning human rights violations. Many African countries are reporting the emergence of alarming police brutality. The number of abuse cases by uniformed forces such as arbitrary arrests and degrading treatment for failing to follow the lockdown procedures has increased. Fish, poultry, and vegetable stall market merchants are the primary victims. They are exposed to frequent clashes with law enforcement due to the nature of their jobs, which often conflict with the social distancing procedure and violations of imposed curfews.

## **CONCLUSION: HUNGER IS THE ONLY PERMANENT REALITY**

The COVID-19 pandemic is here to stay longer than our earlier expectations. The stories from the ground depict the grave effect of the pandemic on all pillars of food security in Africa. There is a shortage of adequate supply of food; there is an immense difficulty accessing available food; small-scale farmers and the urban poor have significantly reduced their diet, and hunger is the only urgent and permanent reality.

However, loss of income and access to food are probably the two most abundant manifestations of the severe impacts of COVID-19. Governments in Africa should overcome these challenging times by lending equal focus to food security while tackling the impending health crisis. Governments should listen to the small-scale food producers who are the backbone of the African food systems and the only hope of food security Africa beyond COVID-19.



# “We want our voices heard”: Poultry farmers in Benin lobby government to send pandemic aid

**Joel Tokponou**

In Benin, the coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating impact on several socio-economic sectors, among them, poultry farming. In this West African country, poultry farming is a common and family orientated practice. In the absence of large-scale or industrial operations, several families have henhouses that they manage and generate sufficient resources to meet their needs and occasionally create extra income.

Jean-Paul Ibikunlé, in his forties, has set up his family's farm in Glo-Aga, a town in the district of Glo-Djigbé, about 15 km from Cotonou, the Beninese metropolis. At the start of July, his flock consisted of 67 chicks — at an average age of two weeks old — 23 hens, and seven roosters. For three years, he has ensured their good health, helped by his wife and two boys. He specialises in breeding “goliaths”, a hybrid breed of imported chicken and local chicken. But he also produces and markets quail, turkeys, and rabbits.

“We have a good knowledge of poultry farming, especially chickens. Vaccination and good nutrition are very important, especially at the right time,” he says. But with the onset of COVID-19 and the government's virus prevention measures such as travel restrictions and the ban on gatherings of more than 50 people, farming activities are now slowing down.

“There is a serious problem in acquiring the raw materials to make the feed as we normally do,” Ibikunlé tells us. “At the veterinary store where we are going to source treatments for the chicks, there are several products that are out of stock due to the border closures and confinement of stock in European countries. As a result, we lost about twenty chicks during the month of May.”

And that's not all. “With the decline in trade, the women who usually buy the mature birds have become scarce to the point that we sometimes even go to the market to sell ourselves. Even then, we sell at a cost below normal,” he says.

To combat the drop in trade, Ibikunlé has attempted social media marketing. “We have created a group on WhatsApp in which we have integrated the majority of people from our telephone directory and regularly present our offers to them. So, sometimes we go to them no matter the distance. Otherwise, our henhouse would be overwhelmed with unsold chickens.”



Like Ibikunlé, many poultry farmers are experiencing similar repercussions of COVID-19 to their businesses. In Houègbo — about 54 km from Cotonou— Damien Houessou is also experiencing difficulties.

“There is a general slump,” says the breeder, a member of the National Association of Poultry Farmers of Benin. Then it becomes more explicit: “We have had a drop of more than 40% in our revenues. Customers no longer come. We have to travel to the markets to sell our eggs and due to the condition of the roads we are losing a lot. Then during deliveries, the sale prices are often dropping down because the economic crisis has also affected our customers too.”

However, poultry farmers refuse to grow discouraged. Whether they are broiler farmers or egg sellers, they hope the situation will improve, despite little signs of the crisis averting just yet.

Traders have been suffering too; this group is primarily made up of market women and cafeteria owners, mostly Guineans. They report drastic drops in their takings. A trader at the Fifadji market, in Cotonou, Hélène, explains her new sales method.

“If we want to continue to stay in the market and wait for customers, we won’t sell anything,” she explains. “I already have an idea of who my customers are, so I go to their shops or homes to deliver my egg to them. This is the only way to solve it.” She still worries, though, as many of her eggs are sold on credit to these purchasers. “You have to make several round trips before getting paid,” she says.

The unpredictable and precarious nature of this new working world seems a long way from coming to an end. In Benin, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to increase.

According to the Ministry of Health, at the end of June, Benin had more than 1,200 active COVID-19 cases. The situation grows more worrying, says the Health Minister Benjamin Hounkpatin. But among the measures included in the response to strengthen the resilience against COVID-19, nothing is planned for alleviating the economic consequences.

“It’s a shame that the government doesn’t think of us. Yet the livestock sector is among the most affected by the pandemic. We are organising ourselves through the Association to make our voice heard among the governors,” poultry farmer, Houessou, tells us. In the meantime, they struggle on alone.

# “We are all in danger of giving up”: Small-scale producers in Benin face poverty and food insecurity in the wake of COVID-19

**Joel Tokponou**

On 16 March 2020, Benin was officially registered on the list of countries with coronavirus patients. As of 24 June, there were 902 confirmed cases, with 612 people undertaking treatment, 277 people cured, and 13 deaths.

With the virus' reputation for spreading quickly and easily, the Beninese authorities, like those in other countries, immediately undertook several strict measures of disease prevention. In particular, they introduced a nationwide lockdown from 30 March to 11 May 2020, limiting movement only to goods and people with special authorisation. On the subject of borders, no official decision was made, but they were effectively closed after all neighbouring countries shut theirs.

From the small-scale farmers in Houéyiho and Cotonou to the pineapple growers in Zè, all smallholder food producers felt the immediate effect.

## **SMALLHOLDER FARMERS IN DISTRESS**

Ganiou Bekotan, a small-scale farmer from Houéyiho, recounts with misery the misfortune he has experienced since the lockdown.

“My plants weren't quite mature but chasing customers forced my hand to sell them,” he tells us. “After that, it was hard to sell cucumbers and lettuce because of the mobility restrictions. The fear of becoming infected meant that no one came to the market.” Since the lifting of the lockdown, he has noticed a slight uptake in trade. “Customers have been coming slowly but I haven't started selling like before,” he adds.

Another farmer, Aristide Kpamègan, is beyond consolation. “I am worried about my lettuce sales. Before, I made at least 100 salad crates a month and I managed to sell everything without any difficulty. Now, I am selling on average just forty,” he tells us. “My wife and children depend on me.”

Their peer, Isaac Mèdéda, is also concerned about the drop in sales and hopes for a helping hand from the government and other goodwill organisations. “Before the onset of the disease, I produced at least 70 crates a month. Currently, I am doing 30. There is no point in investing and not being able to make a profit. We very much hope for the support of the government to revive the sector, otherwise shortly, we are all in danger of giving up.”





*Smallholder farmer Isaac Mèdédà waters his crops.*

At the Aïdjèdo market in Cotonou, Josephine, a lettuce trader for nearly 50 years and a loyal customer of other small-scale farmers, cannot stop the bitterness of entering her voice.

“Like me, the other vegetable traders have had to reduce their purchases dramatically since the sales have fallen. In the past, it was easy to sell two crates of lettuce in one day. But with this coronavirus disease, it’s hard for us to sell a single crate,” said the septuagenarian, sitting behind her stall full of goods.

The hotels, major clients of smallholder farmers, now rarely order supplies, and, when they do, it is in smaller quantities. And for a good reason; most of their rooms have been empty for several weeks. And even in their restaurants, attendance has dropped with many of their customers afraid of sitting in large crowds.

## **PINEAPPLE GROWERS SUFFER A SIMILAR FATE**

In the pineapple plantations in the commune of Zè, producers and sellers are not smiling either. During the rainy season, they are usually in the fields but not this year.

On the interstate road near the town, the number of pineapples on the street side stalls indicates a significant slump in trade.

“Since the onset of the pandemic, I have sometimes gone a whole day without selling anything. I come back the next day and it’s the same scenario,” explains one vendor. “My pineapples are rotting and I have to throw away a portion of my stock every weekend. It is an ordeal that I have endured since the beginning of the coronavirus.” She tells us how prospective customers know they can force her to sell well below the worth of her goods, and she is making very little money.





*An abundance of pineapples: piles grow as buyers are few and far between*

Her neighbour, Madeleine, is even more pessimistic. She confesses to having sold nothing this morning.



*Madeleine at her pineapple store in Zé.*

“When cars arrive alongside our stalls, some occupants raise their heads, look at us and continue on their way. They no longer even lower their windows — certainly for fear of contamination,” she says. “Even the few people who buy our products, take them at very low prices and give us the money carefully so as not to touch us.”

Those who form the sector of informal workers in Benin, are those who are feeling the harshest consequences of the health crisis. The questions that come up again and again without fail are simply, “how long will this last?” And, more poignantly, “how long can we last?”





# Botswana cattle farmers battle with COVID-19 and a state-owned monopoly

By Victor Baatweng

*“The arrival COVID-19 has helped us present a compelling case to the government to scrap the legislation that makes BMC the sole beef exporter. We now looking forward to selling directly to lucrative markets once the virus is out of the way”*

Having fought through other catastrophes such as Cattle Lung Disease and Foot and Mouth Disease, Botswana’s cattle farmers are now facing another battle against the human killer – COVID-19.

“Farmers — both commercial and communal — rely heavily on selling their cattle to the Botswana Meat Commission (BMC), a state-owned beef export agency.

As the flag-bearer of beef production in Botswana, the BMC represents the region in advanced markets such as Europe, the Middle East, North Asia, and Africa – trading with 52 countries over the years.

“The BMC Chief Executive, Dr Boitumelo Mogome-Maseko, says the emergency measures, declared in April 2020 to stem the spread of COVID-19, directly impacted the country’s beef cattle production industry, and by extension cattle producers”.

The declaration of a public emergency also marked the beginning of a decline in the demand for more expensive meat cuts such as fillet and steak.

Over the years, like its neighbours Namibia and South Africa, Botswana has established itself as a prominent beef exporter. Official figures shared by Statistics Botswana — a state-owned statistics agency — show that the tiny nation was the ninth-largest beef exporter to the European Union in 2019. Yet the country’s earnings from beef exports have dropped from \$130 million in 2010 to \$80 million in 2018.

During the pandemic, Dr Maseko says the BMC has purchased 8,319 cattle at the cost of \$3.8 million from farmers between April and May 2020.

The reality is that we are as challenged as everyone else—more so,” says Dr Maseko, “because above all, we are required to submit to our mandate of delivering on food security — even beyond the confines of our sovereign borders. However, we remain ever hopeful that just as the many calamities of life, this too shall pass — if we only heed the precautionary measures set in place.

BMC directly sources cattle from commercial and communal farmers across Botswana for slaughter and later export. Maseko says that production revenue realisation has been slow due to mobility restrictions, which have affected the agency’s payment turnaround.

We are hard at work to secure adequate funding to ensure that all our suppliers’ working-capital is not inconvenienced any further,” said Dr Maseko. “We can attest that our Business Continuity Plan has served the organisation satisfactorily, however there will be gaps which need attending to in order to ensure a thorough continuity plan,” says Dr Maseko.

A 33-year-old farmer in the Gantsi area, western Botswana, Ricardo Kalimukwa, agrees with Maseko and says that COVID-19 has notably harmed their profit.

The closing of the borders meant that we have partially lost access to some of the most important markets in the world. We sell our cattle to BMC, which in turn sell to the world, so if the international trade is slow — like it has been in the past several months — then it’s a big loss to us as cattle producers”, Kalimukwa said.

Another farmer in Ngamiland district – Patricia Manga (28) said that the government ban on social events because of COVID-19 has further lowered the demand for red meat in most countries.

This means we have been hit hard twice — both in the local market and in the more lucrative international market. In Ngamiland district we have not been able to sell to the EU over the years due to being classified as a red zone for Foot and Mouth Disease but we have been selling locally. Since the arrival of COVID-19, we have not been able to make any significant sales. We cannot even look after our cattle properly,” Manga explained.

In the past six years, cattle farming, practiced mainly in rural Botswana, has transformed into a billion Pula industry. During the national lockdown, which lasted for two months (April – May 2020), BMC scaled-down weekly production to just about a quarter (25%) of its main plant’s capacity to allow for production staggered.

While they have been hard hit by COVID 19, Botswana cattle producers are looking forward to new legislation that will allow them to sell beef directly to the export markets.

Hardly a few weeks before the arrival of the pandemic in Botswana, the Minister for Agriculture, Dr Edwin Dikoloti, made it known that the Botswana government was working around the clock to allow farmers to export their meat without the need for a middleman.

Dr Dikoloti told Botswana Parliament that a meat industry regulatory authority would be created to facilitate the liberalisation of exports.



All processes necessary for the regulatory establishment are earmarked for completion by July 2020," he said in March.

Currently, the BMC is the sole entity licensed to export beef from Botswana. Farmers have been contesting their monopoly for a long time and were looking forward to the new regulations that were initially due in July this year.

Grace Morolong, an enthusiastic young farmer, said he is longing for the days in which they will be allowed to sell beef directly instead of going through BMC.

They often buy our cattle at low prices and often pay us late," he said.



# “No-one will die of the virus, but they will of starvation”: Small businesses in Yaoundé face the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic

Léger Ntiga

*Usually, small eateries in Yaoundé toil to provide dinner for their regulars, who drop by on their way home, exhausted from their day at work. Due to lockdown restrictions put in place to combat the coronavirus, local authorities have taken drastic measures to ensure that these small business owners abide by the rules.*

It's 18 April 2020. The scene takes place as shops are closing one evening at the Borne Fontaine Emana crossroads, in a district of Yaoundé, the Cameroonian capital. Not unlike a war film, a military van races past at high speed and young soldiers launch themselves from it. Without saying a word, they rush towards the stalls run by local women along the roadside and start knocking produce to the floor, beating it with sticks.

Eugénie Nyame, a grilled fish seller, recalls being speechless. “We have been told to close the bars— not the markets that allow people to have a bite to eat at night. With this destruction, all my little capital is gone. They took away all my stock of fish,” she says.

*In much the same way, her neighbours have lost baskets of citrus fruits and tubers.*

“We're not even from town. We came from the village this afternoon to sell the products that they have just pounded with their feet,” Jacobette Mboussi tells us. She brings yams from Mbam and Inoubou, some 120 kilometres away, to sell in Yaounde.

The spectacle is a sad and strange one. A young soldier in his early twenties strikes Mrs. Nyame's fish stall with no show of emotion. The goods are shattered. While witnesses at the scene, turn and flee, the destruction continues.

Other soldiers tackle stalls further down the street. Marie Odette Etounga's oranges are stamped on and Jacobette Mboussi's yams are turned to paste. She later tells how she worries about finding another source of income.



*Jacobette Mboussi arranges her yams in Yaoundé*

"I have to feed children at home at a time while they are on forced vacation," says Mboussi, explaining her children would typically have benefited from school meals. "Three years ago, their father lost his job. He set up a poultry farm but the birds were completely destroyed due to an epizootic disease during November. While waiting to collect enough money to set up another small project, we were counting on money from the produce of the fields, including these destroyed yams," she continues, moved to tears.

Other sectors of the city experience the same tragedy around the same time — 6 pm, when the shops, bars, restaurants, and boutiques are scheduled for closure.

On 17 March, the Prime Minister, Joseph Dion Ngute, took a series of measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus in Cameroon. Among these measures included reducing the number of passengers in public transport and closing all businesses in the evening.

The violent means with which the rules were enforced have not been commented upon by the authorities.

However, the consequence is devastating on businesses that operate or offer services overnight, such as the small restaurants in the Melen district. They serve rotisserie meats, including beef, pork, and chicken, and their stalls are usually crowded, but today they are morbidly silent. The police and the military have even taken up residence there to dissuade traders and consumers from braving violating the nighttime curfew.

"We are dying. Due to transport difficulties, we can no longer get supplies," says Maurice Tamo, a grilled pork vendor. "Here in Yaoundé, all activities are at a standstill. I don't know how to feed my children. It is impossible to send them to the village because the policy is to stay home. In truth, at home, no-one will die of the virus, but they will of starvation."



Originally from Dschang in the West Cameroon region, Tamo owns a small farm. It is the main point of supply for his small food business that he has been running for twenty years. In fact, he admits, it has evolved into a family business. When he goes to the village to sell the pork, it is Hermione, his wife, who runs the farm.

“We are a team, my wife and I. We have introduced all of our children to this work. When they are not at school, they assist us. But now, for more than two months, nothing has been done. With the high cost of living, it’s difficult for us to have hope. A bag of rice has gone from 16,000 francs to 25,000 francs. In addition to not being able to serve food to those who need it, we are starving ourselves,” says Tamo, estimating his losses at nearly one million francs per month.

The United Nations has published a report on the number of people expected to face food insecurity in West Africa in the next six months due to coronavirus. 43 million people are threatened with hunger; many of them include Cameroon’s small-scale producers.

“COVID-19 threatens to become an additional ingredient in the toxic cocktail of armed conflict, population displacement and climate change which has already resulted in increasing rates of hunger and malnutrition in West Africa,” reports the World Food Program (WFP) during a virtual press conference.

The WFP estimates that, “without sustained aid,” millions in Cameroon will find it difficult to feed themselves during the next season. Many of them are not only hungry or malnourished but have also been uprooted from their homes due to conflict, violence, and food insecurity.

In Yaoundé, the small-scale producers’ unions have petitioned the government for intervention and hope to receive financial aid and the easing of social distancing measures so they can begin reviving their livelihoods.

The government has decided to lift the requirement for businesses to close in the evening, which has brought some relief. However, smallholder farmers and food producers are still left waiting for any sign of significant aid, financial or otherwise.

# “We are reduced to survival mode”: The forgotten sector of smallholder farmers struggle in the face of COVID-19

**Léger Ntiga**

*Following the drastic measures to reduce passengers on public transport and keep people at home, farmers are struggling to move their stock because of the soaring costs of transportation and a non-existent market.*

“We, the fruit growers and smallholder farmers, have lost everything,” declares Noelle Mengue, the owner of an orchard. Her land consists of two hectares of fruit trees, bearing mango and citrus. “The pandemic came just as we were starting to harvest. Due to the reduction of passengers [allowed on] transport buses, our crops rot in the village. When we manage to get them to Yaoundé, they arrive in terrible condition. We are the losers here, in everything.”

She says that she is not alone and that most women farmers in the area share her sentiments. Many are seeing a drastic decline in sales due to the national lockdown in Cameroon.

Since 17 March 2020, the Prime Minister, Joseph Dion Ngute, has taken several measures to curb the spread of coronavirus across the country. These decisions range from shutting down borders to closing schools and universities. Limiting the number of passengers on public transport has caused a soar in the price of goods transportation, directly impacting small-scale producers. Many of these, mostly women, are finding it impossible to take their harvests to local outlets and markets in Yaoundé or Douala.

Ernestine Enongue, a 42-year-old widow and mother of four, told us how she fears for her children. “We are exposed to hunger,” she says. “The [measures to restrict the] pandemic arrived without warning, while we were getting ready to go and sell the mangoes to make money to buy rice. I don’t have any supplies at home. My children cannot suck mangoes all day, they will get diarrhoea.” She attempted to prepare her baskets of mangoes for transportation, but the bus never came. Now the drivers are threatening to go on strike if the government does not intervene and lower the price of fuel or raise transportation tariffs.

The Minister of Transport, Jean Ernest Ngalle Bibehe, refused to rise to the threat. “If you want to go on strike, go on strike,” he said. “Besides, we don’t even want people moving from one part of the country to another. Travel promotes the spread of the virus. So there will be no drop in fuel prices. Nor will there be any increase in transport tariffs,” he added.

In response, the drivers illegally increased prices without delay. Some have doubled them. Others have backed down without a fight, parking their vehicles because they believe that there is little point running a 14-seater bus if you can only carry seven people.

Meanwhile, in households where the children are out of school, hunger is rife. "I don't do any planning anymore. I serve them what is available. At least we have vegetables. Except there is no oil or condiments, because I didn't have time to stock up," says Olive Mbia, a single mother of three.

At the Mfoundi market in the Cameroonian capital, unwanted food transported from the villages forms a giant pile in the middle of an abandoned space.



*Fresh produce rots on the streets of Yaoundé*

"We weren't able to sell them," says Mbia. She harvested 15 baskets of tomatoes, but they decomposed after she failed to find buyers. "You know a local farmer's produce cannot last more than three days. I lost two days at home but on the third day, I was able to find a transport bus for a distance of 50 kilometres. When I arrived, they weren't fresh anymore. I had to throw out eight of the 15 baskets," she explains, on the verge of tears.

Her daughter, home from university in Yaoundé, is to the point. "We are reduced to survival mode," says Nicaise Mbarga. "Suddenly, in addition to a pandemic, we have to face a famine."

When asked what their hopes are, the various producers mutually agreed that they expect public authorities to provide support for the agricultural sector as they have done with tax exemptions and financial aid for other industries.

"We are very fragile. But nobody pays attention to us," says Mbia. "The state must come to our aid."





# It's like the fish market never existed': The COVID-19 impact on Ethiopia's Small-Scale Fishermen in Hawassay

**By Abebe Haile**

In the last few months, life has taken an unexpected turn for Boche Gano, 39. Born and raised in the lakeside city, Hawassa, the capital of the Southern region of Ethiopia, he makes a living from fishing, a skill he inherited from his father.

Since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Ethiopia on March 13 2020, Gano has kept track of the global pandemic by listening to FM radio stations on his phone. It has been a vital source of information on preventative measures. By avoiding physical contact with other people and maintaining high levels of personal hygiene, he felt confident he could protect his family. The virus would not impact his life anytime soon — little did he know.

'It has been almost three months now since I stopped working because of Coronavirus,' he says.

Shortly after the first case in March, the Ethiopian government began extensive measures to control the spread of the virus. As part of a five-month-long state of emergency issued on April 11, social distancing became the norm. There was a ban on public meetings of more than four people, borders closed, and there was a 50% reduction in the number of passengers on every means of transport. A fourteen-day mandatory quarantine was introduced for those coming in from abroad.

Compared to the devastating impact of COVID-19 reported in Europe and America, Ethiopia has managed to avoid many of the severe repercussions of a public health crisis. In fact, it has imposed less stringent controls on movement and other activities than many neighbouring countries.

Instead, a proactive public messaging campaign has been the main focus, while conducting door-to-door temperature checks that have reached more than 40 million people. Simultaneously, it has strengthened the emergency response capacity of its public healthcare system by preparing isolated treatment centres for thousands.

Nevertheless, it did not take long to see the crippling effects of the pandemic on the country's economy as economic activity slowed to a halt. At once, there were job losses, adding to the country's already high unemployment rate.

The service sector, which contributes to 40% of Ethiopia's GDP, is the most affected. An assessment by the Hotel Owners Association reports that 56% of hotels are closed, 12% are working as makeshift isolation centres for visitors from abroad, and the remaining 32% are only partially operational, having laid off more than half of their workers.

Gano's hometown of Hawassa, situated 250 km south of the capital Addis Ababa, is a hub for hospitality in the region. Over the years, the city's high-end hotels and resorts have built a reputation as a popular destination for domestic and foreign tourists.



*Bird's eye view of Haile Resort, Hawassa. Credit: [www.hailehotelsandresorts.com](http://www.hailehotelsandresorts.com)*

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the beautiful, sprawling Lake Hawassa, was a firm favourite amongst tourists and locals alike. The famous fish market, known locally as 'Amora Gedel', was packed daily with visitors enjoying fresh fish and a view of the lake. In recent months, it has become desolate.

"More than 5,000 residents, tourists, and traders used to come to Amora Gedel every day", Gano recalls with pity. "For someone new, it now feels like the fish market never existed. The Coronavirus has deserted the place."

Since the beginning of the pandemic, hotels and resorts report a 90% decrease in footfall. Neither the beauty of the lake nor the glowing reputations of the local establishments are enough to entice potential clientele down to the harbour.

Life is difficult for Gano and his fellow fishermen. According to Dawit Abraham, Chief of Lake Hawassa's Fishermen Union, all 495 fishermen in the Union and more than 540 service sector labourers are out of work.



*Wooden Fishing Boats Docked on the Shore of Lake Hawassa. Credit: [www.hailehotelsandresorts.com](http://www.hailehotelsandresorts.com)*

A hundred boats used to be dispatched every day at noon, each manned by two crew members. They spent the night catching fish and brought their produce to the market in the morning. The Union would then sell the fish to local hotels, residents, and merchants supplying neighbouring cities.

On a good day, the fishermen caught more than 7,000 fish on the lake.

“Following restrictions on movement and public gatherings, residents are staying home, hotels are closed, and the Union has been out of work. The members are in trouble. Those who had the opportunity moved to the countryside to work on the farmland. But most of them are just staying at home hoping for better days to come”, the Union Chairman explained.

But, for lifetime fisher Boche Gano, staying at home is not an option.

“I have to provide for my family and my four children. What I used to earn was not enough to save for such bad times”, says Gano.

Established in 2008, the Union has limited capacity to alleviate its members’ financial troubles except letting those in extreme situations, like Gano, get back to fishing.

“We are now allowed to use 20 boats, and about 100 fishermen are back in business, but we struggle to find a market to stay alive during this critical time,” Gano said, adding that in the past, a fish was sold for 10 Birr(0.3 USD). “Now, we are selling two for 10 Birr if we are lucky enough to get buyers. I used to get 3,000 Birr (\$87) a week, but it has now dropped to 700 Birr(\$20).”

The low demand for fish caused by self-isolation and the restriction of mobility has affected the livelihoods and incomes of women engaged or connected to the fishing industry too.

Mekdes Degebasa, a widow in her mid-30’s, owns one of the small eateries in the fish market of Hawassa. Inside her small canteen, she serves a variety of fish dishes: fried fish, fish soup, and plates of raw fish, the locals’ favourite.



She said, “on a good day, especially during the fasting seasons and weekends, I serve more than 150 customers a day. But not anymore.”

Before COVID-19, she was able to provide for her four children. She was hoping the virus would be contained quickly, and the fish market would resume business. “What we hear from the media is that the disease is spreading. I don’t know how much longer the little money I have saved will support my family.”

Desperate in the face of such an economic challenge, Degebasa is planning a new venture. She is now exploring places in the city that are still active and have potential customers for her new business – selling tea and coffee. She knows that she risks exposing herself and her family to COVID -19, but, as she points out, “I have no choice.”

Confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Southern region, including Hawassa city, are rising and the virus is spreading fast. In the last two weeks of May, the number of positive cases had increased by 310% the figure reported for the entire first two months of the outbreak.

By June, the country had established more than 30 centres for diagnosis, which allows for a daily testing capacity of eight thousand patients. Yet, for a country of 110 million, that number is still very low, making it difficult to assess clear data of the rapidly spreading virus.

While the Ethiopian government has been praised for its initial response, health sector experts are still critical and now say the worst is yet to come. While Addis Ababa seems to have the spread of the disease under control, confirmed cases in other parts of the country are increasing by the day.

Sharing the same fears, economists are concerned that Ethiopia’s volatile economy could plunge into a recession if the effects of the global pandemic are not resolved quickly.

Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, disagrees and, in an extraordinary announcement on June 8 2020, told parliament that the country would register a six per cent economic growth while simultaneously fighting COVID-19.

In a televised interview, Eyob Tekalgn, State Minister of Finance, agreed, saying that Ethiopia has built up a capacity to withstand unexpected economic problems. “The government’s macro-economic reforms, especially that of reducing the fiscal deficit, has helped to take the necessary steps to address the current crisis”, he explained.

Indeed, the government has cancelled tax debt of over 80 billion Birr (\$2.3bln) for the business community. In addition to tax reliefs, loans with moderate interest rates have been given to the businesses most affected by the pandemic.

While admitting it is likely that the crisis will continue to impact the economy and international trade relations, Eyob claims the government is responding to the economic situation with an adaptive policy. “For example, export items are allowed to be sold locally. In particular, the textile and pharmaceutical industries have been tasked with producing products that are necessary to prevent the disease.”

According to the State Minister, the Development Bank of Ethiopia is currently giving financial support to enterprises like micro-finance institutions, farmers and co-operatives.

He is optimistic that the pay-outs will enable businesses to continue to survive and citizens to keep their work and livelihood during this critical time.

Despite their claim, poorer communities - such as those who provide labour for the service industry - are still vulnerable. Fisherman Boche Gano and small-business owner Mekdes Degeba-sa are just two of 45,000 small-scale fishermen and a further 400,000 hospitality workers whose lives are inextricably linked to the fishing industry and, for now, there is no relief in sight.

# Food should be the last issue facing Ethiopia in a pandemic crisis: Urban farms flourishes but critics claim that the government has grown complacent over food security

**Abebe Haile**

Despite the number of cases of COVID-19 still rising in Ethiopia, life is continuing as the 'new normal' in the capital, Addis Ababa.

Of course, it was the poorer households in urban areas bearing the most significant economic hit during the lockdown. Staying at home was not a feasible solution for long. Despite the risks, going out to work has finally become unavoidable for many city dwellers who need to put food on their tables.



*Close interactions in public are again the norm in parts of Addis Ababa as many are forced to return to work to provide for their families.*



A survey conducted by IFPRI's Ethiopia Strategy Support Program questioned households in Addis Ababa. The results show that 37% stated that they have "much less income" and that another 21% reported "somehow less income" than last year.

Many families must use the little savings that they have while reducing food expenditure and changing diets. As their personal savings dwindle, many households come to focus on having enough to eat rather than on dietary diversity.

In its socio-economic impact of COVID-19 report, UNICEF Ethiopia points out that quarantine measures such as school closures and restrictions on movement disrupt children's routine and social support while placing new stressors on parents and caregivers.

About one million children in the country's seven regions are not benefiting from school meals at present. In Addis Ababa, it is thought to impact 300,000 children.

Though the country's food security status is yet to reach a critical stage, the decreased purchasing power of the poor and the vulnerable, coupled with rising food prices, makes the situation worrisome.

For months now, social justice groups and private and governmental aid organisations have extended extensive support to those profoundly impacted by the pandemic.

The Addis Ababa City Administration created a short-term social protection project with some 30,000 young volunteers. They identify and provide meals to the most disadvantaged, including the elderly, the ill, the poor, and children who usually benefit from school meals programs.

The administration has also established 1,200 food banks in its suburbs to provide essential food assistance.

According to Mitiku Kassa, Commissioner for the National Emergency Response Commission, 25 million live on Ethiopia's poverty line. Fifteen million are currently receiving food assistance through the program as a direct result of the economic fallout of COVID-19. Still, she anticipates that an additional 10 million will need food aid too.

Outside the city, there are concerns for the farming communities. Since the sixties, Ethiopia has relied on agricultural exports for income. With fears of a second wave of the pandemic imminent, there are concerns that many countries will keep their borders closed, halting trade indefinitely.

Worse still, the country's harvest this year is predicted to decline by 8% compared to production in 2019/2020.

Nevertheless, the State Minister for Agriculture is optimistic about the resources the country has to curb food security, saying, "the government is very much aware of what is at stake."

He stated that the government is upgrading existing and new digital ways to raise awareness of COVID-19 related health issues to farmers and agriculture development workers to encourage them to continue working and increase productivity.

Toll-free call centres are being introduced to help farmers reach out for current information and expertise. Additionally, virtual platforms and media outlets will provide training and knowledge.

Inputs have been dispatched to different parts of the country. There is no shortage of fertiliser. Apart from that, we are using resources at our disposal to support the ongoing farming activities," says the State Minister.



*State-provided fertiliser waits to be collected by local farmers*

Back in the city, with disrupted food supply chains - creating scarcity and causing food prices to increase - urban farming has grabbed wider Ethiopia's attention. Addis Ababa has established the Farmers and Urban Agriculture Commission to facilitate enough food production to feed the city during the global pandemic and in its aftermath.

Takele Uma, Addis Ababa City Deputy Mayor, recently called for those who have the passion and any formal education in agriculture to help achieve his dream of feeding the city of more than five million through urban farming.

He also handed over 200 water pumps and five tractors to farmers in and around the city in May. Other sub-city administrators took the initiative to support farmers in their vicinity with the provision of seeds and fertilisers.

Several pilot farming projects have been implemented in public spaces, such as schools and recreation facilities. Farming systems and technologies are designed to encourage and equip city dwellers to produce food in small urban spaces.

The Commission, who plans to create 50,000 urban farmers, has launched a digital platform for interested applicants to register, and announced that more than a hundred farming plots have been readied.

Demis Chanyalew, an agro-economist, said that more than 100,000 people in the city have, for many years, been producing horticulture food items both for personal consumption and market. The attention given to urban farming now is timely and “obviously has great importance stabilising the food market.” But, he is very critical of the government’s commitment to the development of the sector.

“It is not a new phenomenon in Addis Ababa. A lot has been said about urban and peri-urban crops and horticulture farming, dairy and poultry activities. But no one gave the attention it deserved.”

He is concerned that the hype and the attention will take away from the underlying issues. He is critical of the government’s lack of urgency towards food security, which has put many vulnerable Ethiopians at risk in the face of an unprecedented pandemic.

“If not for lack of commitment [by the government],” he says, “food would be the last issue for the city to worry about during a pandemic crisis.”

Nevertheless, Chanyalew appreciates the current development initiative taken by the Addis Ababa City Administration. He advises every effort to be led by agricultural professionals to increase financial resources and access to seeds.

The city has enormous potential for urban farming. With the availability of cultivable land, water resources, and the necessary manpower, it could be the source of food security for hundreds of thousands and a leading example to many more.





# Left stranded: Smallholder farmers in Ghana find themselves ineligible for the government's small business bailout

**By Fred Dzakpata**

In April this year, the Ghanaian government announced a 1 billion dollar bailout to help cushion businesses reeling from the impact of COVID-19.

The package forms part of the various interventions being rolled out by the government to mitigate the adverse effect of the viral disease on businesses, individuals workers, and low-income households.

The initial \$600 million soft loan scheme is subject to a one-year moratorium and a two-year repayment plan. But it appears the requirements for accessing the funds will not favour the many informal workers such as smallholder farmers in Ghana.

Owners of such farms are unable to meet the requirements such as belonging or associating with a trade group, possession of a tax identification number, or ownership of a bank or a mobile money account.

As a result, many are helpless in accessing the funds to sustain their businesses, their livelihoods and their families.

Charles Nyaaba is a farmer and works as the Programme Officer for the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana. Currently, he cultivates sorghum, maize, and rice in the northern region of Ghana, which is the major farming hub of the West African country.

Nyaaba is among a myriad of smallholder farmers who were severely hit following the outbreak of the viral disease. He despairs over the adverse effect of the recent lockdown on his sorghum farm, the produce of which is usually purchased by breweries.

The trickle-down effect of a slump in beer sales in hotels and other players in the hospitality industry means low demand for sorghum and soya by breweries.

“Most breweries halted purchasing our produce,” says Nyaaba. “Even though hotels have opened, patronage is still very low because people are no longer organising conferences with visitors from abroad,” he explains.

According to Nyaaba, the biggest disappointment is that the local government and agricultural officials have failed to extend support. He discovered that his business is not eligible for the stimulus package because he does not have a personal identification number for his farm.

“The government should identify farmer groups [as beneficiaries] and relax the requirements to enable us to benefit,” he says.

It has been a tough few months for Nyaaba as, like many farmers, he is stranded with fresh produce that’s he’s struggling to move.

“I lost about fifty per cent of my eggplants. Some of my colleagues who plant tomatoes could not do anything but leave them to rot away.”

Wepia Addo Awal Adugwala, another farmer in the region, grows vegetables — mainly okra and pepper — and employs two workers on his farm.

He has noticed that demand for his vegetables is not like it used to be despite the lifting of the restrictions on movement.

Adugwala says that most people are not buying from the markets regularly because they still worry about visiting places that might attract crowds. The decline in the vegetable market for businesses in the hospitality industry has also impacted his income.

He, too, is frustrated by the legislative subsidiary package since he is not yet entitled to financial assistance. Nevertheless, he has started the arduous process of registering his small-scale farm, but he does not know how long it will take.

“They should come out with a separate package for small scale farmers,” he says and then points out another more obvious solution.

“The government should also direct all the food contractors for the school meals programs to buy vegetables from small-scale farmers to prevent our produce from going to waste,” he says.

He appeals to the Agricultural Ministry to supply them with free inputs, especially seeds, citing the critical role that small scale farming could play in Ghana.

“Peasant farms are really those who should feed the local population.”

Johnson Yeboah is the owner and operator of Jamboree, a medium-sized poultry farm in the Bono Region. He tells us that his troubles started with school closures, which happened before the nation-wide lockdown.

The farm currently employs fifteen workers and has a 12,000 bird capacity, which produces about 300 hundred crates of eggs a day.

Unusually Jamboree has about twenty women retailers and schools in the region who buy from them. However, with the Stay Home campaign in full force, the market is very slow.

Thankfully, the company's network means they have had some avenues to sell. He won the lucrative contract with the government to supply eggs to one of their aid initiatives, which provide food supplies for those in need.

"The government initiative to feed the underprivileged during the lockdown meant our eggs did not go waste," he explains.

However, that does not mean the lockdown passed without issue. Jamboree's input suppliers were suffering from shortages, which meant a depleted supply, causing a rise in prices. A lot of feed, such as maize and soya, are imported from abroad despite the country generating its own. The shortage has highlighted the absurdity of relying on and paying for outside sources for crops that could be grown, managed, and supplied on home soil.

Now, Yeboah is doing his best to access the financial aid promised by the government's stimulus package. He said that the farm had applied— however, despite having the paperwork, he is not confident that he will secure the funds, citing the cumbersome nature of the process.

According to the International Labour Organisation, 60% of the global workforce is classed as an informal worker — in Ghana, that number is 80%. Devastating numbers of farmers, like those from the Peasant Farmers Association, find themselves disqualified from governmental aid programmes in the face of pandemic related job losses and depleted incomes.

Some changes need to be made to support the vulnerable and lowest paid in Ghana. It is clear that if the country does not improve its economic strategy for these times, they will be facing even more significant problems of increased poverty, gender inequality, and food insecurity in times to come.



# “My business has collapsed”: COVID-19 restrictions cause confusion and fears for the future of farming in Ghana

**By Fred Dzakpata**

On March 12 2020, Ghana recorded its first two cases of COVID-19 — the first a foreigner and the second a Ghanaian returning from abroad. The response from the government was swift, and a series of aggressive contact tracing began.

As the number of cases continued to rise, President Akufo-Addo announced a two-week partial lockdown in five major areas - the capital Accra, Kumasi, Tema, Kasoa, and Obuasi - on March 26.

Elsewhere, public and social gatherings were banned, and schools were shut down. Travelling was only permitted where necessary, and borders were closed to enforce international movement.

Worldwide, there were concerns about the financial impact and instability that would rock the global economies. In Ghana, agricultural experts feared for their industry and warned that the ramifications would be severest on small agribusinesses and smallholder farmers.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Chamber of Agribusiness conducted a nationwide survey of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, recording a 61.2% revenue shortfall in medium-sized Ghanaian agricultural firms and a staggering 77.4% for smallholder farmers.

Felix Kamassah is the CEO of Maphlix Trust Ghana Ltd, a company located in the Volta region that grows and sells chilli pepper, okra, and other exotic plants for local consumption and export in the European market. His business has struggled in the face of closed borders.

On about ten occasions, I have carried goods to the airport without getting a cargo plane for export,” he says, “and even the hotels are not taking supplies now because they are not functioning properly.”

With the nationwide closure of the hospitality industry and no news of reopening of the borders, he worries for the future of his business and the people he employs.

The government has recently introduced stimulus packages to support small and medium businesses, but Kamassah fears his annual turnover is too high, and he won't be eligible.

“I have had to lay off 43 casual workers already,” he explains, concerned that such cuts are in reality, only the beginning.

While the impact of COVID-19 is placing pressure on business owners like Kamassah, it is devastating the livelihoods of those further down the economic ladder.

A collective of female farmers in Damongo, Northern Ghana, are no strangers to a challenge. Many of these women are single mothers, relying on farming to provide a small but sufficient income for their households.

Grace Sobey, who grows and sells cereals, is the primary breadwinner of her family.

"I sell my produce to the schools," she says, "the closure of schools means that my business has collapsed.



*Sobey outside her home in Damongo in the Northern Region of Ghana.*

As cases of COVID-19 continued to rise, the Ghanaian government continued to enforce a strict ban on gatherings. However, it now faces criticism for its failure to provide information on the virus to the population.

We know the disease is around," continues Sobey, "but we do not know when it will go. We have not had any interaction from the authorities, and we do not know how it transmitted and other effective ways of preventing it."

Lerigzaya Bang, another farmer in the collective, sells produce directly from her farm. She is concerned about the lack of education on coronavirus and the impact it has had on her business. "People are now scared of the food I sell," she explains, "and they are scared of even going to the market to sell or buy food."

The government's promise to provide stimulus packages to vulnerable groups, agribusinesses and adjoining industries is hotly anticipated —however, a road map to implement these policies and programs is still yet to be fully outlined.

Angela Dannson, from the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, says the government is planning to support 1.5 million farmers but, she admits, many farmers will find themselves unable to meet requirements for the provisions.

It has brought the topic of formalisation to the forefront of the conversation. Many farms still do not have a culture of proper bookkeeping or business registration. The majority do not even have a tax identification number, a mandatory requirement to engage in most transactions with commercial banks and government agencies. Before such measures were believed excessive for subsistence farmers but in times like these, when it's the difference between receiving vital financial aid or facing life-threatening hunger, it is clear something needs to change.

In the meantime, farmers in Northern Ghana continue to struggle to support their families — and it has fallen to civil society groups and donor agencies to provide food and aid to this vulnerable group.

We have not received any support from the authorities," says farmer Elizabeth Yedeni, "the only thing we have is what benevolent organisations such as Action Aid have given us."



*Elizabeth Yemeni, from the collective of women farmers in Damongo, on her farm.*



While food packages provide temporary relief for these women and their dependents, the survival of their farms and futures are the centre of their concerns. Restrictions on movement and gathering have impacted the natural cycle of farming life.

“Since the beginning of the pandemic, the collective has not had any meetings, and currently, we are supposed to be farming, but the [fertilisers and seeds] we usually receive have also stopped,” Sobey explains.

Lerigzaya Bang, agrees, “because of the restrictions, we were not sure what to do,” she says. “We have now started farming, but we are late to start and, as it stands now, we do not know what will happen to our crops.”

It remains to be seen how the late harvests will affect the farmers in Damongo, but there are fears it will lead to food shortages, not just in Northern Ghana but nationwide. Reports of food hoarding, in the wake of excessive demand and rises in prices, are already surfacing.

The Ministry of Agricultural affairs is optimistic, claiming that it is “too early” to determine how much the sector has been affected by COVID-19 and that it would be wise to wait for later reports to see how much the virus has impeded production.

Miss Dannson shares their confidence, admitting that there was a rise in the cost of foodstuffs in earlier weeks but that her department had seen a gradual reduction once the restrictions loosen.

Nevertheless, the outbreak of coronavirus has exposed the grave vulnerability of farmers as well as the critical level of food insecurity in Ghana. For many, there are plenty of lessons gleaned, even amid a pandemic, which will inform and influence new approaches to farming, but for now, the focus is on protecting livelihoods and striving to keep hunger and disease at bay.

“Even though there is a lockdown, people still need to eat,” points out Felix Kamassah, resigning himself to limited exports for the foreseeable future and turning instead to the more pressing matter. “We need to grow for consumption to live. We need people to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, to boost immune systems, to fight COVID-19, to survive.”



# Smallholder farmers in Kenya remain stranded with rotting produce amid widespread travel restrictions

**By Allan Odhiambo Akombo**

NAIROBI, KENYA - It is mid-morning on a Saturday in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, and five trucks are lined up in a muddy back alley outside the city's most important fresh produce market, waiting to offload their cargo.

Only a few months ago, a visitor to the city's famous Marikiti market would have been greeted by an overwhelming rush of traders and buyers. Usually, where the five trucks stand, tens of vehicles would have crammed in, jostling for space to pick up or unload produce.



*Vibrant, bustling Marikiti market in the pre-pandemic days.*



Today things are dissonantly tranquil. Only metres away, a group of porters rest idly on parked handcarts while a handful of traders desperately shout prices to attract the few customers to their respective stalls.

“Everything has been horrible here since the government banned the free movement in and out of Nairobi. My business has been suffering because products do not arrive as smoothly, regularly, and affordably as they did before the outbreak of the disease,” says Martha Wangeci, a fresh producer trader at Marikiti market.

On April 6 2020, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta ordered a cessation on movement in and out of Nairobi as part of the efforts to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. However, moving cargo and agricultural produce was excluded from the ban if transporters could obtain a special permit from the security and health agencies.

A measure easily implemented by larger businesses but trickier and expensive for individuals and small-scale farmers. Just weeks into the travel restrictions, concerns began to emerge in Kenya’s smallholder agricultural system. A lack of storage facilities and reliable market links with buyers was causing a steep rise in post-harvest losses.

“Only a few farmers are successfully delivering fresh produce to the market because of the travel restrictions. The small number of trucks making deliveries to Marikiti is a testament to the impact of the measures put in place to control the spread of the coronavirus,” Wangeci added.

It only takes a quick review of the leading agricultural areas in Kenya to show the level at which farmers and produce dealers have been affected by the travel restrictions. Some are finding inventive ways to cut down on losses, opting for roadside car boot sales or farm-gate sales to help clear stocks quickly and sustain their businesses and their families.



*Locals in Githunguri resort to car boot sales to move their fresh produce.*



"I have no choice but to follow customers wherever they are. I grow spinach and tomatoes for sale which have a low shelf life," says Salome Murage, who now sells her produce in makeshift roadside markets in Githunguri, an agricultural town some 36 kilometres outside Nairobi. "Most small-scale farmers like me don't have cold storage facilities for fresh produce, and we are forced to drive around looking for car boot sales or face the consequences of throwing it all away" she adds.

Before the outbreak, Murage, and many other smallholder farmers around Githunguri, supplied fresh produce to markets in Nairobi through dealers who bought stocks from their farms. The agreement stopped in line with the travel bans. Other farmers would hire a small truck to ferry produce to Nairobi for Sh5000 (\$50), but the cost has since doubled due to the complexity of travel restrictions.

"Right now the transporters charge a fortune to ferry our produce to Nairobi which makes little sense to us because it wipes out our small profit margin, yet we have a financial obligation to continue selling somehow. So we either sell our produce at the farm gate or move around flogging it cheap to avoid throwing it away as waste" Murage adds.

Those with a more entrepreneurial spirit have been reaching out to potential buyers through social media platforms to boost sales as many customers stay away from the markets in line with social distancing regulations.

"With proper storage facilities we would not have anything to worry about, but here we have to push as much volume as possible as fast as possible before it goes bad," Murage laments.

These supply challenges have come with knock-on effects. The increase in the cost of fresh produce to farmers and dealers has passed onto buyers.

"Despite the favourable weather conditions the prices of some food items remained elevated because of the supply disruptions arising from the COVID-19 containment measures," the Central Bank of Kenya said in an update.

Traders and farmers say the policies implemented, while understandable, have caused a rise in prices pushing many businesses into financial hardship, resulting in widespread job losses.

"No one wants to burn their fingers by stocking up on costly produce at a time when the purchasing power of buyers has been badly hit. The markets will remain in a poor state until the restrictions are lifted, and the cost of supply is stabilised," says Wangeci.

An industry lobby, the Fresh Produce Consortium of Kenya (FPC Kenya) acknowledges the challenges caused by the travel restrictions and urges farmers to join a government-backed scheme which guarantees easier transportation of fresh produce.

Trucks that have stickers for their vehicles – a Fresh Produce Vehicle Pass with the government coat of arms – are allowed to travel at night. Even then, the driver and details of the vehicle must be logged with the security services to gain clearance.

"Vehicles are now available to move fresh produce at night both for export and for local needs. Indeed, we vow that no Kenyan farmer shall be left with rotting fruit or vegetables because they can no longer get transport or get their food to markets. We have set up a helpline to guarantee food collections and sales" says Okisegere Ojepat, CEO of FPC Kenya.

“We have also launched a scheme whereby any one of these trucks can go directly to any estate who has requested fresh produce and sell the produce on the spot, so residents in city estates can get their fresh food without leaving for the markets.”

To acquire this permit, a farmer must first register for a license as a fresh produce distributor with the Horticulture Crop Directorate (HCD) at the cost of SH5,000 (\$50) annually.

Despite the improvement of transport links, smallholder farmers are now facing another challenge. As Western Kenya entered the planting season of April to May, which coincided with the long rains, there was trouble accessing certified seeds or fertilisers.

Most smallholder farmers in Kenya are not wholly self-sufficient and often purchase their farming inputs from commercial stockists who operate in urban centres. Without a reliable and affordable source, accessing these suppliers and transporting the goods has been laborious and costly, if possible at all.

“The economic turmoil caused by Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the many financial challenges that face the small farmers in this country,” says agronomist, Jerome Okoth. It has also highlighted the vulnerability of those to which food insecurity is a very real problem. As the repercussions of the pandemic continue to unfold, smallholder farmers are left wondering, what next?

# School disruptions: A blessing or curse for smallholder farmers in Western Kenya?

**By Allan Odhiambo Akombo**

KISUMU, KENYA - For close to four months now, farmlands in western Kenya have increasingly been tended to by children. Such has been the norm since March 15 when the government abruptly closed schools and colleges countrywide as part of measures to control the spread of the coronavirus.

With agriculture as the economic mainstay in the region, most families spend much of their time on the farms.

I am sad many children aren't in school but it is neither our fault as parents nor theirs. But I also have some joy because with no schooling going on the children are helping out in the farm," says Seredo Anyango, a mother of two from Kadero village in Kisumu County.

Like thousands of other smallholder farmers in the region, Anyango's farming experience has been challenging due to expensive labour.



*School's out: two schoolboys help their parents work their family farm.*



Manual labour is no longer readily available. Many young people have taken up the 'boda-boda' (motorcycle taxis) business, which they perceive to be more prestigious and better paying.

"Many of the youth have stopped taking jobs in farms because they claim it is low paying and strenuous. They prefer the motorcycle taxi business which is not energy sapping and fetches them better earnings," Anyango adds.

Enquiries show that motorcycle taxi riders earn KSh900-Sh1,000(\$9-\$10) a day. Farm work fetches only KSh200(\$2). It seems reasonable, therefore, that the allure of the former draws in many young people.

"Clearly boda-boda wins — nobody wants farm jobs anymore. The few you find willing to do the job demand higher pay," says Geoffrey Otieno, a bicycle taxi operator.

With the schools remaining shut indefinitely, many farmers in western Kenya are turning to their children to help with farm chores and save money.

On a half-acre size of land such as Anyango's, it would typically take five labourers some three days to have it ready for planting. A considerable cost of labour.

"With the help of my children I can avoid this kind of expenditure and redirect it to buy food and other items needed for upkeep," Anyango says.

And as farmers begin preparations for the second planting season in October, more children are expected to stay on the farms amid further extensions to school and college closures.

According to Kenya's 2019 population census report, which was released in December, more than 10 million Kenyans were at primary school age at the time of the survey. This number represents 21 per cent of the country's total population, indicating the potential labour force that some parents may exploit as schools remain closed.

Further, the census report shows that 3.4 million were attending secondary school, while about 500,000 were enrolled in middle-level colleges and another 471,000 attending university.

On July 7 2020, Kenya's Education Secretary George Magoha announced that this year's national examinations had been cancelled and that the schools would remain closed for the rest of the year.

"Stakeholders have shelved the initial proposal to reopen schools in September for Standard Eight and Form Four candidates," he said, from the Kenyan capital Nairobi. He added that all primary learning institutions would likely reopen in January 2021 when experts expect the virus curve to have flattened.

Although many farmers benefit from the school closure, some critics have cautioned that while children lending a hand on the farms can be helpful, shouldering the long hours of an adult labourer could amount to abuse.

It would be a disappointing turnaround from the official data that shows that the child employment rate in Kenya has shrunk in the last ten years, signalling a positive rise in the protection of children's rights.

The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) shows that the number of children — aged between five and 17 years — working in 2019 was 1.349 million, 26%. The statistic indicates that the child employment rate is 8.5 per cent down from 34.49 per cent reported a decade ago in the country's 2009 population census.

But despite the concerns about child labour, those like Anyango hope having children out of school will help improve the families' fortunes.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), smallholder farmers in Kenya depend predominantly on family labour. On average, the smallholder family provides twenty times more work than hired workers, the UN agency says.

"Our dataset shows that in Kenya, two family members work in one hectare of their farm every day and another family member joins them for half the time," says the report.

However, the challenge of the availability of reliable and regular labour for agriculture is a long-term problem.

Lack of well-paid opportunities in the rural areas — which can also be associated with low education levels — results in agricultural households generating meager incomes. Faced with such low rural incomes, small family farm households tend to exploit their labour force out of necessity— the smaller the farm, the higher the labour intensity.

"Our research suggests that in Kenya, if all smallholder family members of working age had more opportunities and were paid the national average wage, rural income would double," FAO added.

Agriculture nonetheless remains a crucial driver of Kenya's economy, accounting for about a quarter of the country's GDP. In the first quarter of this year, agriculture helped bolster the country's GDP despite an overall drop to 4.9 per cent from 5.5 per cent last year.

The KNBS shows Kenya's agricultural activities expanded by 4.9 per cent compared with 4.7 per cent in the previous year.



# We have relied on South Africa for too long: Closed borders reveal a gap in the market for Lesotho's poultry farmers

**By Francis Mukuzunga**

Lesotho's poultry farmers are now grappling with supplying the local market after South Africa, their primary food supplier, cut imports as a result of the restrictions brought about by the global pandemic.

The South African government announced a national lockdown in response to the pandemic on 26 March 2020. Lesotho followed suit a week later, resulting in the closure of the border between the two countries.

Lesotho, a tiny kingdom of 2.1 million people, is enclosed by South Africa, which supplies \$30.52 million of meat, poultry, and edible offal to the country every year. According to available data from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Lesotho imports 85 percent of its food requirements from South Africa.

The poultry farmers, who previously claimed injustice over South Africa's dominion over the local industry, are now having to work harder than ever to provide eggs and chicken meat in large quantities for the people of Lesotho.

Lineo Mokotjo is a small-scale farmer from Maseru. She is in her early thirties and ventured into poultry farming after struggling to find other employment. She is not alone; in 2018, Lesotho's unemployment rate stood at around 28 percent for young people.

"I have had a passion for farming from a young age," she explained. "I grew up on a family farm where my parents used to grow crops and rear chicken and livestock. After completing school and working as an accountant for a while, I realised that farming was the only business I could venture into with a passion," she said.



With the support of her parents and the savings from her previous job, Mokotjo has managed to set up a poultry farm that rears 200 birds. Her customers are mainly individual households within Maseru town.

However, the COVID-19 outbreak forced her to scale down her operations when she lost customers and no longer had access to chicken feed and medicine that she usually imported from South Africa.

“Most of my customers’ jobs were on the line because of the COVID-19 lockdown. Although I gave the food to some on credit, I soon realised that they too, could not pay for the goods,” she said.



*Small scale poultry farmer, Thabiso Matsoele, with his ducks*

Mokotjo belongs to the Lesotho Progressive Farmers Market (LPFM), an organisation seeking to empower and find markets for the country’s indigenous farmers. She said that many of her colleagues at LPFM faced the same predicament during the lockdown.

Some farmers decided to form consortiums or groups where they would rear the chickens and eggs concurrently to supply the big supermarket chains, a gap left by South African food import giants.

“This is just one of the many stop-gap measures that members of the LPFM are trying to do. We have also approached the government to assist us so that we could remain afloat and capable of creating more jobs,” said Mokotjo.

Another member of the LPFM, Thabiso Matsoele, said that while the situation remains gloomy for the farming community, the chicken and egg producers should reflect on the positive consequences of closed borders. COVID-19 has left both Lesotho and South Africa’s large scale commercial exporters exposed and powerless. In turn, the outbreak has opened a window of opportunity for the local poultry producers to supply the market.

“COVID-19 has made us realise that we are not producing enough to feed ourselves and the country. The consumer market in Lesotho has, for the longest time, relied on South Africa for the supply of goods and services, some of which we can produce locally,” he said.

Matsoele urges the whole industry to revamp its approach to business to create an unbreakable supply chain for all inputs and implements needed. He proposes that the relevant farmers’ organisations and the poultry farmers’ associations unite to see the industry utilise locally produced farming inputs instead of importing them from South Africa.

Mr Matsoele, an Agriculture graduate from the National University of Lesotho (NUL), says he ventured into farming soon after college over a decade ago and has never looked back. He believes agriculture is the only option for thousands of Lesotho youth to take control of their own economic prosperity.

“One can only hope that the whole agricultural sector will bounce back post-COVID-19 and by then the South African producers exporting to Lesotho will see how the local Lesotho producers are now doing it for themselves,” he said.

The poultry farmers have requested governmental assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security and Lesotho National Farmers’ Association (LENAFU), who have outlined plans to help those who have been affected by COVID-19.

LENAFU has a registered database of over 80 000 farmers comprising of 17 affiliated national farmers’ associations and one apex body from each of Lesotho’s ten districts and five industry-related associations such as the Basotho Poultry Farmers’ Association.

LENAFU programme manager Khotso Lepheana said the poultry farmers were an integral part of food security and the economy in Lesotho.



“COVID-19 has brought changes to what is known as normal agricultural protocols in Lesotho. Farmers are now experiencing poor extension support services from the institutions such as government departments, development partners and NGOs,” he said.

### ***Khotso Lepheana of LENAFU addresses communal poultry farmers***

Mr Lepheana explains that safety fears about COVID-19 is causing workers to panic and underperform. There have been reports of agricultural officers, entrusted to support farmers with various services, not working at their optimal capacity.

He said some of the efforts being made by LENAFU to help the poultry producers during lockdown have been vital. LENAFU helped acquire travel permits, find new markets, take care of the farmers’ health and wellbeing, and lobby for support from the government.

“LENAFU has played a vital role to disseminate information to the farmers on how to acquire the travel permits at those times of restricted movements. After the issuance of the permits was aborted in the authorised institutions, we consulted the relevant institutions and farmers were eventually permitted to do their farming practices without hard restrictions,” Mr Lepheana said.

Importantly, LENAFU has been integral in linking farmers to buyers of agricultural commodities. Since they are the most respected body of farmers in Lesotho, many potential buyers even sought them to share contacts.

The mental wellbeing of farmers has also been at the forefront of the conversation. Lepheana explains how the organisation has released videos and pamphlets explicitly designed for smallholder farmers. The material was developed after it became clear that a lot of the official information about COVID-19 did not reach farming and rural communities who are often marginalised in times of trouble.

It is clear that such unprecedented times could be the opportunity Lesotho has been waiting for. While many are still struggling, policy-makers and agricultural leaders are waking up to the idea that food sovereignty is not only possible in Lesotho, but integral to its future as an independent nation.



# 'It's a blessing in disguise': Closed borders with South Africa creates new opportunities for farmers in Lesotho

**By Francis Mukuzunga**

*While smallholder farmers call for farming inputs and not food parcels, other agribusinesses are exploiting a gap in the market and advocating for a self-sufficient future for food production in Lesotho.*

THE LERIBE DISTRICT IN THE KINGDOM OF LESOTHO forms the hub of the country's total agricultural output. It not only produces maize, wheat and fresh fruit and vegetables for local consumption, but it also offers employment opportunities for most of the adult working population. Animal rearing for beef, pork and poultry are also essential farming activities in the region. Despite this, Lesotho imports at least 85 per cent of basic food necessities from South Africa.

Typically, farmers rely heavily on the annual cropping and rain season that takes place from mid-November to the end of March, and the harvest undertaken thereafter. Fortunately, Lesotho, which has experienced bouts of drought since 2012, had a good rain season last year and the farmers were looking forward to a good yield.

However, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 triggered a total economic lockdown on 29 March 2020. It had a crushing effect on the district's food output and its contribution to Lesotho's economy. Although agriculture was identified as an essential service and farmers were allowed to work, activities were hindered as farmers could not travel to acquire necessities. South Africa had also closed its borders to them.

Since her husband died in 2012, smallholder farmer, Neo Maile, has been supporting her family of 16. During the first few weeks of the outbreak, she and other villagers did not know what was happening. She said that little was coming through on the radio, which is the typical source of news. As a result, people began stockpiling and panic buying food in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown. However, there was not enough to sustain local families long term.

In response, the Ministry of Social Development, together with businesses and the donor community, rolled out a programme to hand out food parcels to vulnerable families to cushion them from the effects of COVID-19.

Jiyani Mfolisi, another local farmer, said that he appreciated the efforts made by the government and other well-wishers. However, while giving food parcels to the struggling communities was well-meaning, he believed it would have been wiser for them to donate farming implements.

“The donations are not sustainable as the food parcels cannot last for a month. They should also consider donating seedlings, fertilisers, broiler chicks, point-of-lay birds and piglets so as to assist the communities to produce their own food for the future,” Mfolisi said.



*A communal farmer receives COVID-19 food donation in Leribe*

IN ANOTHER PART OF LERIBE, one small-scale farmer saw the lockdown and subsequently closed borders as an opportunity to start a new business venture. In the immediate wake of lockdown, Molapo Shakhane joined forces with other farmers to establish a consortium. He told us how they struggled at the beginning of the pandemic.

“Much of our meat and poultry products are supplied to markets in Maseru as well as surrounding boarding schools, teachers’ colleges and other institutions,” he explains, “so there was a marked dip in deliveries during the lockdown period.”

However, despite everything Shakhane, who is a graduate of the Agricultural College of Lesotho, said the marked drop in South African products on the local supermarket shelves is a “blessing in disguise” for smaller producers like him.

With colleagues who have farms in Leribe, Beria and Maseru, he founded Lecholi Meats. Driven by the slogan: “Deliciously at your doorstep,” Lecholi Meats came to life when Shakhane noticed a gap in the market caused by closed borders with South Africa amid the COVID-19 lockdown.

Using only Basotho meat supplied by local farmers from all across the region, the company has taken control of the entire production chain from collecting, packaging and distributing to customers.

“Lecholi is unapologetically building sustainable practices in Lesotho’s economy. It aims for business collaboration and partnership rather than business competition. The value chain is wide,” says Lejone Mpotjoane, one of the partners in the business.

The Lecholi partners are keen to recruit more farmers into the scheme. Since July, they have begun travelling to different agricultural areas to lead workshops. They explain clearly how they are going to work with farmers and how Lecholi will transparently pay for their produce.

The company comprises of agricultural graduates who want to share their expertise with communal farmers. They all see Lecholi as an opportunity to invest in the future of sustainable agriculture in Lesotho. Mpotjoane explains that ensuring meat quality is high and in line with the standards of the market expectations is a vital part of that.

“Lecholi has established an education department which trains farmers on proper production methods,” he says. “Our farmers learn about pricing their products, about how there is a price for producers and retailers,” he said.

The government of Lesotho has praised and encouraged Lecholi Meats for taking the initiative to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on local farmers.

On 15 June 2020, the Lesotho parliament approved a US\$1,4 billion budget for the year 2020/2021. It shows a marked increase from the one announced in February 2020, as the government promises to put its full weight behind agriculture during the crisis and place food security at the forefront.

TO PROVE HIS SINCERITY, President Dr Moeketsi Majoro met with the local farmers’ associations in Maseru on 6 July 2020 to discuss how the government would assist them during the COVID-19 period.

He warned farmers that South Africa might completely ban exporting food to Lesotho as the neighbouring country is also reeling from the effects of COVID-19. Therefore, he called upon farmers to increase local production to tackle hunger and poverty as they face an invincible onslaught of food insecurity in the coming months.

He said that the government would do all they can to assist and has established a cabinet sub-committee with a mandate to ensure they achieve the goal of increasing local production.

Deputy Prime Minister Mathibeli Mokhothu, who was also at the meeting, highlighted the country’s capacity to locally produce meat, poultry, vegetables and even grains that had been imported from South Africa previously. He urged farmers to assist the government in its endeavour for self-sustenance.

Several schemes have been introduced as a consequence. The government had decided to increase its agricultural inputs subsidy from 50% to 60% to alleviate farmers from the effects of COVID-19.

Further, in partnership with the Lesotho Post Bank, a financial scheme has been implemented to prepare farmers for the next farming season later this year.



Most banks in Lesotho do not already have a financial model for agriculture in place, so historically, farmers have struggled to acquire loan advances. "Therefore, the partnership between the government and Lesotho Post Bank may lead to solving challenges of access to financial support services to the farmers," explains Agriculture and Food Security Minister, Tefo Mapesela.

The farmers in Leribe who were present in large numbers, said they appreciate the government's efforts to alleviate them from further effects of COVID-19. They expressed hope that the assurances would come to fruition to enable them to participate fully in Lesotho's food security needs as well as to participate in the growth of the country's economy in years to come.



# Small-business owners in Malawi: COVID-19 is an economic crisis, not a health one

By Paida Mpaso

*As small, female-led businesses struggle to survive amid lockdown restrictions, the president of the National Association of Business Women's CEO calls for urgent financial aid from the government.*

Unlike its neighbours, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, Malawi did not implement a complete national lockdown but instead issued several strict mobility restrictions. Despite the looser regulations, many industrial sectors and communities were — and still are — deeply affected by business activities coming to a halt.

Chief Executive Officer for Nthathwe Farms, Ngabaghila Chitata, who is also President of the Lilongwe Horticulture Farmers Cooperative, says the most vulnerable victims of COVID-19 are women farmers who are already on the poverty line.

A farmer herself, Ngabaghila has seen first-hand how difficult things can be. Her regular orders of vegetables to Sunbird Lilongwe, one of Malawi's major hotels, has dropped drastically, affecting over 80 per cent of her income. It has forced her to reduce the number of casual labourers on Nthathwe Farm.

"I have been supplying high quality vegetables and fruits to hotels over the years but since COVID-19 restrictions were enforced, hotels have been demanding less and less of our produce. Meanwhile the farm has continued producing but since products are perishable, there are losses," she says.

The hospitality industry was severely impacted by the restrictions to curb the virus. Most hotels were forced to operate at minimal levels, with many restaurants having to shut down completely. The restrictions on travel mean fewer guests and certainly no events.

"For those eateries that have not shut down, permanent staff have become casual labourers, with almost half of them getting laid off completely," Chitata explained, knowing that as a business owner, she too will soon face the same dilemma.

“As an entrepreneur I have to strategise, do I need the 15 permanent workers that I have at the moment or do I let them go?” It is a moral conundrum that flies in the spirit of the farmers cooperative, which relies on solidarity. Despite knowing that she must put her business first, Chitata is determined to fight for as long as possible. “We are trying hard to think of other means of surviving,” she continues, explaining that they have begun approaching individual customers as a means of moving stock.

Women in cross-border trading have also suffered as a result of the pandemic. Even though Malawi did not impose a lockdown, its neighbouring countries did, and that automatically brought cross border trading to a standstill.

Rhoda Kawaza has been a cross-border trader for the past four years, selling all kinds of wares from clothes to shoes and consumables. She rents two shops in one of the busiest places in the capital of Lilongwe.

Now that she is no longer crossing the border to trade, her revenue has fallen substantially. Before she would make USD 600 per month, now she only makes USD100 every two weeks. The nature of her business has also drastically changed. She is now selling second-hand clothes.

While not wholly subsidising her income, it has proved successful. However, Kapaza must move from the main markets to other locations, seeking a greater variety of customers. City by-laws do not permit roaming vendors, but it is hard to abide by the law under these conditions and in these trying times.

Due to such a drastic drop in income, Kawaza was eventually forced to close one of her shops to remain afloat, and she continues to worry about the future.

“At the moment, we are trying to survive but we are aware that sooner or later we might have to shut down completely,” she says.

Meanwhile, in the agricultural sector, women producers and sellers are already feeling the full effect of COVID-19, with the price of commodities falling to record lows.

This time last year, the average price for a 50Kg bag of maize was USD12, now the same bag is selling for USD7.

As a means of sustaining themselves, women farmers have started to organise themselves into small groups where they can lend each other money, referring to them as ‘village banks.’ Government projects have welcomed the move and are encouraging women to join such lending facilities to access financial aid.

However, COVID-19 has fettered such initiatives. If the farmers can’t sell their produce at the necessary price, they cannot earn enough to feed their households and also bring capital into the collective.

“I am indebted to two village banks but I have no money to contribute, because what I make when I can sell is what I feed my family with,” says Dalitso Mlekezi, a farmer in the cooperative. “As the sole provider, that’s the only option I am left with at the moment.”



THE CEO OF THE National Association of Business Women (NABW), Barbra Banda, says that 70 per cent of their members are failing to cope with the effects of COVID-19. The Association, established in the 1990s, has a network of over 4000 members across the country who thrive under its support. However, in the face of recent events, they are at a loss and are yet to find a tangible solution for the struggling women.

“Cross border traders cannot travel and that automatically means the business is depleted. Social distancing has also compromised many which also has a negative effect,” she said. They are not the only ones to struggle, she continues, adding that street food vendors and small businesses who supply schools are all suffering too.

“Another challenge is that the response [to COVID-19] is geared towards protecting health because the crisis is described as a health issue forgetting that so many sectors have been affected - women are struggling,” she said.

Since the recent election of a new President a week ago, the government plans to introduce a new budget for economic support. They promise to look into women’s access to finance and have increased the loan amount to USD 30,000,000. Nonetheless, Banda worries it will take a long time for the funds to be accessible to vulnerable communities.

“Women are suffering now, and action needs to be taken now if we are to revive these businesses. Otherwise, we are looking at almost another year before things return to normal,” she adds.



# COVID-19 cases are low, but food insecurity soars as Mozambique struggles with disrupted supply chains

By Charles Mangwiro

*"I have been in this business for the last 20 years. Before COVID-19, my business was very good. Not now. Things have worsened because people have no money."*

Antonia Americo is a vegetable vendor and single mother of six from Maputo. Daily, she waits for deliveries of fresh produce into the city, which she will go on to sell to feed her children.

According to Americo, the last delivery arrived a week ago, when three tomato, four potato and two cabbage consignments arrived from South Africa after three days of waiting for clearance at the border.

Since the border between South Africa and Mozambique has closed to contain the spreading coronavirus, Zimpeto wholesale market is nearly empty of food supplies. What is available has been sourced from depleted reserves from Maputo's "green zone", a hub of urban farming.



Masked vendors in Zimpeto market

It is not the first time that vegetable vendors have faced a crisis like this, but this is the worst Americo has seen. Some days she does not sell to a single customer.

She wraps her baby close to her as she prepares to load her lettuces onto a waiting truck, ready to make the trip to Zimpeto to see what she can sell.

While Mozambique is reporting an exceptionally low death toll from Coronavirus — 13 at the time of writing — the impact on livelihoods is a far greater threat.

While some companies have decided to recreate the way they carry out their business by making home deliveries and getting paid through mobile payments to stay afloat, this is not possible for many independent traders like Americo.

“I had never seen or heard of [a lockdown] before. Most of my clients were working-class people who used to buy my vegetables on their way home from work. But now they are all at home for the third consecutive month,” she says.

The recent growth of the informal sector of workers, who have little job and social security, has been spurred on by increased rural-to-urban migration. Street commerce is among the most volatile but, at the same time, most rapidly expanding sub-sector of the city’s informal economy. Since the introduction of restrictive measures to curb the virus, there have been renewed attempts to eradicate informal street selling activity. The Municipal Council of Maputo wants all produce sold exclusively from Zimpeto Market as part of its efforts to keep the city clean.

In reality, the marketplace, built in the colonial days before independence in 1975, does not have enough space to accommodate all potential vendors, says Monica Wuamusse, the chairperson of the Association of Informal Traders at Zimpeto Market.

She acknowledges that the strict regulations will be detrimental to many low-income food vendors, however preventing the spread of coronavirus must take precedence.

“We cannot accommodate everyone here because we also want to have control of this place and protect [vendors] against a possible disease outbreak,” Wuamusse said.

She added: “Can you imagine one person contracting coronavirus in this market? It would be a complete disaster.”

Urban food security is mounting for these vulnerable individuals as opportunities to generate income dwindle and the retail maize prices continue to rise. Experts do not expect to see any relief until the harvests of 2021.

Roughly one-third of the population who live in urban areas, mostly in Maputo and Matola, will be particularly hard-hit by subsequent increased food prices.

Due to population pressure, only a small portion of the urban poor in Maputo have access to land to grow their own food. Those who can, make up a number of urban agriculturalists such as Abnério Matusse, 26 who lives in Infulene valley outside of Maputo with his wife and two children. He sells his vegetables in bulk to buyers like Americo who, in turn, re-sell the produce at Zimpeto or on the roadside stalls in the heart of Maputo.



However, rising transport costs have limited the travel links between towns and marketplaces. Additionally, food production was hit by weather-related crop failures early this year.

Orlando Jalane, a vegetable vendor, is concerned about relying on home grown Mozambican crops at this time. The country does not have the infrastructure or the farming systems in place to feed its population.

“We have always survived on urban agriculture. Local production is very poor due to climatic conditions, and we import all our [seeds and fertilisers] from South Africa. But now the border is closed,” she told us.

Despite the food shortages across the city, she is struggling to sell her wares.

“It’s either we sell our stuff cheaply to recover our investments, or things will just rot while we wait for clients, thereby losing everything in the end.”

In spite of strong recent economic growth and extensive natural resources, Mozambique remains one of the world’s poorest countries. Over 500,000 people in 43 districts are straining to cope and require food aid.

Still recovering from two cyclones which hit the country last year, Mozambique is struggling to keep its most vulnerable out of poverty. Limited imports from South Africa and trade between the cities and countryside are further compounding the threat of food insecurity to millions.

Local authorities must act soon to mitigate disruptions to supply chains or face losing more livelihoods and more lives.

# We are struggling alone: Coronavirus threatens to worsen Mozambique's hunger and unemployment crisis

**By Charles Mangwiro**

*The end of a post-independence civil war in Mozambique brought a lot of optimism to its citizens. Still, nearly three decades later, real progress continues to elude the vast resource-rich southern African country, which keeps lurching from one crisis to another.*

MAPUTO (Mozambique): FOR MANY MOZAMBICANS in the agricultural sector, like 37-year-old Carlos Sigauque, a commercial farmer in the district of Moamba, the last few years have been tough, but this year has been the toughest of them all.

In ordinary times, it takes Sigauque less than two hours to ferry his produce to Zimpeto vegetable market, the country's fresh produce bazaar on the outskirts of Maputo. Since restrictions to prevent Coronavirus began, some shipments are now taking much longer to reach the market, that is if they are lucky enough to reach it at all. On bad days, Sigauque and his workers end up dumping sacks and boxes of produce on the roadside.

Trading within Mozambique, with its rutted roads and bribe-hungry police, has never been easy. Still, the measures imposed by President Filipe Nyusi's governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened an already stressful situation.

"I employ a total of 40 people at my farm, and if the trucks are delayed or turned away altogether, the produce spoils," says Sigauque. His trader collective has slashed the number of trucks it runs to Maputo from upwards of eight a day to only one or two. "This is an outright loss, and I must still pay my workers at the end of the month," adds the farmer of 15 years with dismay.

The breakdowns in trade are contributing to fears of a spiralling food crisis. The four-month Coronavirus induced lockdown, which began on March 30, is pushing food prices and commodities up in Mozambique while people are racing to stock up on food. The United Nations says the pandemic could cause the number of Africans living in food insecurity to double to 43 million in the next six months.

"We [the farmers] are the solution to this, but we are struggling alone without any assistance. We are forced to spend our own money on keeping the farming sector afloat," says Sigauque as he watches his tractor tilling the land in preparation for the next season. "With support from an agricultural bank, we could feed the whole nation and cut all food imports into Mozambique."



*Workers on Carlos Sigauque's farm in Moamba.*

According to Sigauque, high fuel prices and transportation costs are isolating farmers from one of their biggest markets, while the country's growing debt and economic crisis strain the budgets nationwide. Further, extreme weather, which often alternates between flooding and drought, has dashed hopes of a decent harvest.

The subsistence farmers of Moamba, which lies in the Maputo Province of southern Mozambique, are hardened by years of poverty. In the wake of recent flooding, they are already replanting what they can, using cuttings from the uprooted cassava plants that now litter the village. But the land has its own rhythm and will not be rushed, however great the need. It will be eight months before the cassava is ready to eat. Until then, hunger remains a real threat.

MOZAMBIQUE IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S POOREST countries – ranking 178 out of 187 nations on the UN's Human Development Index — which means it struggles to afford the luxury of importing food for its population.

To increase food production, analysts argue that the government needs to invest in local farmers, many of whom still use the most basic machinery and lack access to the best seeds. Carlos Sigauque agrees, he believes making agriculture a national priority will help reduce youth unemployment and poverty in Mozambique.

"We need government help to secure loans from commercial banks because they are reluctant to offer loans because our sector is regarded as very risky. All we want is agricultural inputs and subsidies for basic utilities such as fuel and electricity," he explains.



At the beginning of the financial year, the government did allocate ten per cent of the country's total budget of US\$5.1 billion to help purchase and improve the quality of seeds, as well as to introduce irrigated and mechanised farming. However, such a contribution is only brushing the surface of a much more deep-rooted issue.

Small-scale farmers are regularly losing productive land to sizeable foreign investment companies that are scrambling into Mozambique to explore the country's untapped natural resources. Expansive areas of land are sold to outside investors who grow cash crops for export.

It is the cause of the displacement of thousands of indigenous farmers. Land rights remain a contentious issue since many farming families do not own the title or cannot prove ownership of the land that they farm. Worrying reports show large numbers of Mozambican farmers evicted from agricultural land, without hope of compensation, to make way for corporate plantations.

THE RELATIVE PEACE AND STABILITY Mozambique has enjoyed since the civil war ended in 1992, continues to make the country attractive to investors. The economy has grown by more than seven per cent each year over the last decade, with crop plantations, mining projects, and recent discoveries of natural gas continuing to spur national economic growth.

However, the number of legitimate jobs for Mozambicans remains at an all-time low. The Open Society Foundation estimates that 70 per cent of people under 35 years of age, who form the majority of Mozambique's population of 30 million, cannot find stable employment.

"We call these jobless activities," says Felice "in the sense that the investments have no direct impact on job creation especially for the youth because they are capital and technology-intensive and not labour intensive."

The impact of COVID-19 threatens to escalate a situation, already precarious, to new levels of critical. The livelihoods of smallholder farmers across Mozambique are in peril while food insecurity remains rife. Investment in agriculture is crucial, but it will take time, and for now, the focus appears to be on exports to the foreign market rather than feeding the hungry at home.

# There is no assistance from anybody”: Farmers in Nigeria rebuke government claims of financial support

**By Jimoh Babatunde**

Before COVID -19, a drive down the Lasu-Iba road in Nigeria would reveal many young men tilling the soil, cultivating vegetables and a mirage of traders who patronise their farms for fresh produce. Since the global pandemic, the scene has changed.

For 23-year-old Idris Muhammed, a farmer in the area, life is complicated. He is one of 5,000 smallholder farmers in Alimosho, Lagos, which supplies fresh vegetables to different local markets. During the nationwide lockdown in March, he lost about 60 per cent of his produce because he could not get transportation to the farm to tend to them.

“It was a traumatic time for me and others here,” he says, “we could not feed ourselves as we rely on what we get from the farm to feed our families.”

Even once the restrictions had been relaxed, getting back on track was hard as weeds overtook the fields, and they had to start over. Like many farmers in the region, Muhammed relies heavily on imported farming inputs. The restrictions of movement and issues with security on the road meant that they substantially increased in cost.

Muhammed’s frustration was shared by 30-year-old Abdullahi Musa, who has been growing vegetables on his father’s farm since he was 15 years old.

“If you had come here on a weekend like this,” he said, “the entire stretch of the road would have been filled up with traders moving their vegetable out of the farm to their various markets, but how many can you see today?” The place is desolate.



*Produce waits to be bought by the side of the Lasu-Iba road.*

Musa, who is married with two wives and six children, revealed that he has had to borrow money to feed his family as the little savings he had were not sufficient to care for his large family during the lockdown.

"I cultivate several vegetables here. There is no assistance from anybody, we save money from our sales to buy fertilisers, seedlings and manure as well as herbicides," he says. "Whatever is left we use to take care of our families."

Nigeria has struggled with the onset of coronavirus. This weekend, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) announced that Nigeria had crossed the 20,000 mark for cases. The state worst-hit by far is Lagos, so extreme measures have been put in place to do everything they can to avoid it spreading.

The local government was forced to ease the lockdown on 4th May to revive economic activity, but social distancing is still strongly advised, and where possible, enforced.





*A vegetable vendor stands with her wares and negotiates with a driver for return passage*

The issue of travel arises again and again as more street and market vendors tell stories of extortionately high transportation costs, both for them to reach the farm and then bring their wares back to the city.

"We used to pay about N250 to get it to the market," says Balikis Oyelaja, a vegetable vendor at Ikotun market. "But now we pay between NGN500 and NN600."

Iyabode Bello, another trader, agrees. The cost of travel has increased the price at which she sells her vegetables so she can cover overheads. "Our customers now tell us our vegetables are too expensive," she tells us.

Yet the truck drivers we spoke to explain that they too are only charging what it costs them to work. Deliveries have to be made at night when the lockdown curfew is lifted between 8 pm and 6 am, and fewer people are allowed to travel together, so trucks are often left half empty.

"Before coronavirus we used to have smooth ride bringing manure from various parts of the country, but since the advent of the pandemic, we have a problem coming into Lagos," he says. He tells us that there are ten roadblocks between here and Lagos, and the police collect money at each one, a price he is forced to pass onto the vendors and farmers.

Financial struggles mean fewer trips to the farm for vegetable traders. Akinremi Bose explains how she used to visit every day before heading to the market. Since the lockdown, she visits every three days and struggles with the restrictions of people entering the market to avoid overcrowding.

"All the guidelines set out by the government are taking their toll on us," she says. "We now have a small number of people coming to the markets, which invariably affects our sales and take home. But we just have to comply as we have to take care of our children."

When the farmers' complaints were raised with the Ministry of Agriculture officials in Lagos, an official said the government at both the state and federal levels is doing a lot for smallholder farmers.

They have introduced an NGN 50 billion stimulus package, which includes intervention funds with lower interest rates, aimed to support micro, small and medium enterprises.

The farmers in Lagos say they had heard talk of subsidies from the government to cushion the effects of the lockdown on vulnerable agricultural workers. However, Abdullahi Musa says that neither he nor other local farmers have received any financial aid.

Prof Veronica Obatolu, the Executive Director of the Institute of Agricultural Research and Training in Ibadan, says the institute plans to donate one tonne of maize seed to six different areas across the country.

While a short term solution for seed shortages, Agroecology experts are concerned about the Institution's promotion of maize — a crop most susceptible to pests and drought — during this time.

Such recovery attempts are well-meaning, but this crisis should be an opportunity for agricultural ministries to start anew. The crisis has shown that Nigeria is vulnerable and its agricultural sector incapable of surviving in a period of difficulty.

Now is the time for scientists to invest in a more resilient, sustainable, and food secure future for their farmers and the people of Nigeria.

# 'Nothing is coming': Promises of government aid fail to reach small-scale farmers in Lagos.

**By Jimoh Babatunde**

AS NIGERIA RECORDS 30,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 684 subsequent deaths in 36 states, the government is planning another lockdown of major cities to arrest the trend.

Today, three months after the first lockdown, Lagos State has the highest number of confirmed cases (11,670) and deaths (133) in the entire country. A mood of panic is already growing as citizens, who struggled through the first lockdown in March to May, face a second wave of restrictions.

Among the worst-hit were smallholder farmers who had to contend with a lockdown that made it impossible to reach their farms due to the high cost of transportation. Those who could access their land had problems selling their produce as customers themselves were in lockdown.

President Buhari announced a few exemptions to movement restrictions for agricultural produce. However, there were stories of third party security operatives using the lockdown as an opportunity to extort money from travellers.

Many smallholder farmers said the reinstatement of lockdown in Lagos state would further add to the post-harvest losses they had experienced earlier this year.

Obey Azeez, a poultry farmer from Odogunyan farm settlement in the suburb of Lagos, looks back on that time with dismay. "The restriction that came with the COVID-19 in March was traumatic for us," he says, "customers could not come down to buy but our birds were still laying eggs on a daily basis."

Emmanuel Olakunle, another poultry farmer, struggled to get to his farm during the lockdown, finding the commute almost impossible. "It was a challenge," he says, but he agrees with Azeez, this was not the worst of it. "During that period, we were not able to sell our products and most of us threw produce away or gave it away. We had to keep buying food for our families but we were not selling."

Oluwakemi Ayonnuga, a woman farmer from the same region, shared Olakunle's frustration. "During March, people could not come down to the farm to buy eggs and those who came would tell you what they would pay for the eggs. A box used to sell for NGN800 but now they will tell you they will pay only NGN500," she explains. "You can't keep eggs for long so instead of incurring a total loss, we have to sell to them."



TROUBLE SELLING in a buyer's market was not limited to the poultry farmers-fish farmers experienced a similar dilemma.

Afolabi Oluwaseyi, a young fish farmer at Odogunyan Fish estate, told us how he used to have a wide variety of customers before COVID-19. Now with an abundance of fish to sell, he too finds himself struggling in the face of haggling clients. That is if there are any at all.

"Our customers had issues as they found it difficult moving around as security operatives were harassing them," he says, an issue shared by his peers in the poultry sector.

Both sets of farmers face a bleak future and worry whether their businesses will survive the pandemic. Many don't only sell to individuals but rely on the custom of commercial clients such as hotels, restaurants and even the local schools. Long terms closures of these industries are having a terrible trickle-down effect on those in small-scale farming and fishing.



*Emmanuel Olakunle, a small-scale poultry farmer in Odogunyan, a rural district of Lagos*

Olakunle has found himself in debt to his friends and family who have been helping him survive. "I have lost money and birds as many of them have died due to lack of proper feeding, and also most of the eggs are lost," he says. "At the last count, I have debts of NGN250,000 but I still need to buy feed and my production has drastically reduced, affecting my profit margin and my ability to repay my loans."

PRESIDENT BUHARI HAS ANNOUNCED palliative measures such as food distribution, cash transfers and loans repayment waivers to ease the pain of the restrictive policies during such a difficult time. Still, many of the farmers we spoke to say that they have seen no aid.

"Nothing is coming," says fish farmer, Olateru Oluwatosin, "we have heard of three different proposals and they came here in May asking for our bank details, but nothing was sent to us."

The reports of others farmers in the region repeat the same story of neglect. "There was no support from the government or its agencies during the lockdown," says Oluwakemi Ayonnuga, "even after a serious storm and we lost many birds."

"Someone came from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture," Esarume admits, "they took our data and asked us about our challenges but that was all."

IT IS NO SURPRISE then that the farmers are unanimous in rejecting the idea of a second total lockdown. They fear the repercussions will be even severer this time around. In the meantime, they continue to call for government assistance to get their businesses back to being fully operational.

As the economy gradually start to pick up, they are hoping to slowly rebuild their lives and create a semblance of normality again. However, with many who have incurred debts during earlier months and the cost of farming inputs on the rise due to low supplies, it is clear that things will not be easy.

“Demand for eggs is high,” says Olakunle, with visible relief, “but the challenge now is that the cost of bird feed has gone up sharply.”

“We need grants, not a loan,” Daniel Esarume points out, pleased that the demand for eggs has returned but concerned that he does not have the funds to increase his production. He worries too that he will not be able to pay back the loans he took out during the height of the first lockdown.

The mood is one of frustration and anger in Lagos as farmers return to work. If there must be another lockdown, they say, we demand that the Nigerian government intervenes and honours its pledge to offer relief to the most vulnerable of the agricultural sector.

# There was no money to feed my children: Insufficient government support leads Nigeria's small-scale farmers to turn to aid organisations to support them through COVID-19

**By Ruth Tene**

*As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the globe, with little or no assurance of its cure, the measures to tackle it continues to put Nigeria's economy on hold, with no exception to rural communities and smallholder farmers.*

Rural communities and smallholder farmers work on over 60% of farmland in Nigeria, with women making up over 70% of the labour force. They also produce over 60% of the total agricultural produce, despite suffering challenges such as access to lands and markets, access to modern farm equipment/storage facilities, and subsequent high post-harvest losses.

Back in March, while the pandemic continued unrelenting, the federal government imposed a lockdown order. They commenced information sharing on all traditional and social media platforms and launched safety and protective protocols, which include social distancing, constant hand washing under running water and wearing safety face-masks. Most significantly, they implemented strict control of movement.

The order, which affected both local and interstate travel, ensured that food and other agricultural produce could not be moved interstate. The result was a state of artificial scarcity and a hike in prices, which promoted hoarding and spoilage as smallholder farmers had little or inadequate storage facilities.

The implication was that farmers', transporters', and consumers' losses have tripled as all suffered rising costs within weeks. Following the outcry by citizens about the hardship caused by the lockdown, an exemption was given to health workers, media, farmers, and traders to ensure free movement and access to essential services.



Marceline Wanu is a twenty-five-year-old fish seller and mother of four. “When the Government said nobody should go anywhere, I couldn’t go to the market and when I couldn’t go to the market, there was no money to feed my children and sometimes that was very difficult.”

She recalls that her children received food when they were going to school, but when their schools closed, that became an extra burden. This is despite the Nigerian government’s promise to continue the school feeding programme.

Marceline is yet to benefit from government aid but was a happy recipient of assistance from the World Food Programme (WFP). “The palliatives have helped us a bit,” she says.

Margaret Istiphanus, a farmer and mother of three, is from Gonan Rogo. The small community has suffered from terrible violence, and many of the villagers are displaced.

“Prior to the pandemic, my people were troubled by Herdsmen and unknown gunmen, so going to the farm has not been easy,” she says. “Our people are killed, almost on a daily basis, so we are careful and have to wait to visit our farms in groups.”

She maintained that COVID-19 was the least of her concerns as her kin are already suffering from terrorism and dying with no recourse. She calls upon the Nigerian government to help with the security situation, to protect their farmlands and livelihoods, but it seems government attention is elsewhere.



*Nigerian small-scale farmers, stands in her maize field.*

Margaret Nkiru Nwakeago, the coordinator for the Youth Farm (Y-Farm Project), tells us that all the youth farm projects in Mpape have been suspended.

“First due to pastoralist invasion,” she says, “then COVID-19. Right now nothing is happening on the farm. Very saddening, but what can we do?”

She is reassured that no-one was killed but fears for the future of the farm. "Sadly COVID-19 has not made it easy to resume activities" she says.

The statement by WFP spokesperson, Elisabeth Byrs states that more than 3.8 million people, mainly those working in the informal sector, face losing their jobs amid rising hardship, adding that this could increase to 13 million if movement restrictions continue for a more extended period.

"We are actually scaling up our operations in the Northeast to serve more people in response to the new challenges of more food insecurity posed by COVID-19," says Byrs. "However, there have been a few delays with COVID-19 containment restrictions that are affecting supply chains. These have been generally managed and we have continued providing assistance. We continue to appeal to all parties to ensure access to people in need and respect humanitarian space."

President for All Farmers Association of Nigeria, Kabir Ibrahim, says the organisation is working around the clock to support farmers during the lockdown.

"We prepared and issued passes to enable the farmers to have unfettered access to their farms," he says. He also added that farmers received some palliatives to enable them to continue their production to avert food shortages, so they are hopeful that there will be a reasonably good harvest in the region.

As the world continues to seek a cure to the virus, there is no doubt that public institutions' continued closure only undermines the nation's food security and citizens' livelihood. As experts insist that the virus is going nowhere soon, it is incumbent on the government to relax all lockdowns and enforce the application safety measures. Particular focus is needed in rural communities to ensure they are protected against the virus and against the food insecurity that would ultimately affect the whole nation if not tackled at once.

# Farming saved my life: Small-scale farmers who weathered lockdown credit their farms as the key to their survival.

**By Ruth Tene**

*COVID-19 has foisted a new reality onto Nigerians and one in which many have resorted to farming to feed themselves and their families. Ruth Tene Natsa, in collaboration with the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), reports.*

The world is beginning to embrace the idea that it may have to live with the presence of COVID-19 for some time yet. So Nigeria has accepted it must resume economic activities while seeking other ways to curtail and curb the spread of the virus.

The government has allowed a gradual easing of the lockdown, which had brought most workplaces to a standstill for three months. Shortly after, interstate travel and the resumption of local air travel was permitted.

As life returns to normal, an interesting trend shows that high numbers of Nigerians are turning to small-scale farming.

The United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP) has announced a critical rise — as much as 82 per cent - in food insecurity due to the devastating socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on low- and middle-income countries.

In their recent report, Executive Director, David Beasley said, "Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos."

The substantial increase in the number of smallholder food producers on both rural and urban land since the beginning of the pandemic demonstrates the desperate need for many Nigerians to have an independent source of nutrition.

Miakpiburo Emiaso is a vegetable farmer. When he first started farming, he only grew pumpkin and cucumber. "Now I am into papaya, pineapple and plantains. I also plant cassava," he told us. He never planned to work in agriculture but saw some available land in his village. The experience has been worth it as he has been able to provide food for his family during the pandemic.



"It's a wonderful feeling to watch how your seeds develop into plants and then into food crops. I have come to realise that agriculture holds the future of mankind," Emiaso said. He explained his plans for expansion into commercial farming by finding more land and starting to sell his produce.

There have been challenges. Annual flooding in the Niger Delta can be detrimental to his harvest, and sometimes he has trouble with pests, which he is still learning to manage.

For Eze Nwoke, another young resident of the Federal Capital Territory, farming has saved his life. "Agriculture has helped to feed me and has given me the independence I need."

Nwoke is an economics graduate and had plans to find a job in that sector. However, as he struggled to find employment, a friend suggested they pool funds and invest in a poultry farm. There have been difficulties, but he is grateful for the income. "We sell eggs but we can also eat them," he said. Now that he has seen the effects of COVID-19 on the white-collar job market, he is keen to continue his agricultural ventures.

"I am looking to invest more in our farm," he told us proudly, explaining how they have hired some local young men to help expand the business.

Both he and Emiaso both call upon the Nigerian government to introduce agriculture into the National Youth Service Scheme and make it a core subject in secondary schools.

Another Nigerian farmer, Reuben Buhari - no relation to the President - cultivates rice, maize, beans, and ginger, and occasionally delves into fishery.

He recalls his father farming when he was a child, but the introduction of the current presidential administration motivated him to take it on full time. "Prices of things, especially rice, rose high. So I decided to start farming. And so far it's been great. The rice, beans and maize I eat in my house all year round come from my farm."

For Buhari, the investment has been worthwhile. "I grow what I eat now and I am also able to help out some others with what comes from my farm."

He is grateful for the food security that smallholder farming gives him and his family but believes the government can do more to increase farmers' personal protection and boost production.

"Lot of farmers have been kidnapped on their farms and that has discouraged others," he says, of the perils of farming on rural land. "I started clearing new land but had to abandon it when a fellow farmer got abducted."

The cost of fertiliser has been a severe challenge too, he says. The one sold by the government and other private distributors is too expensive.

He hopes that the government is sincere in their pledges to improve the conditions of the agricultural sector. He wants them to increase access to financial aid with low-interest rates and grants and heavily subsidised fertiliser and farming implements.

In his speech to mark the 2020 celebration of Democracy Day on June 12, President Muhammadu Buhari promised a "progressive re-opening of the economy." Nigeria has seen a gradual increase in GDP in recent years, and the President is determined that the pandemic will not set the country back long-term.

Echoing sentiments by WFP, President Buhari, stated that agriculture remained the key to his economic diversification strategy and highlighted some of the government initiatives taking place imminently.

“Through the food security initiative, we are promoting ‘Grow What We Eat and Eat What We Grow’” he said, adding that he was delighted that more Nigerians are taking advantage of “opportunities” in the agricultural sector. What he doesn’t address is that many are driven by desperation, not opportunity.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the CBN Anchor Borrowers Programme and similar schemes will prove instrumental to small-scale farmers during this time. President Buhari wishes to focus on “integrating rural communities to the formal economy” and pledges to extend access to credit and farming inputs to those in rural communities.

As the world comes to grips with the reality of COVID-19, there is no underestimating the importance of governmental intervention to sustain the vulnerable but vital sector of agriculture. There is much hope that Buhari and his administration will adhere to their promises of investment and that food security and sovereignty are on the horizon for Nigeria.



# A crucial labour force of young people are stranded outside of Niger

**By Dambadji**

Today, COVID-19 is one of the most dangerous diseases on the planet, claiming thousands of lives across all five continents. The speed of the disease's spread is all the more worrying than its damage.

In Niger, the government quickly took the necessary measures to fight the spread of the virus following the appearance of the first case on 19 March 2020. They immediately implemented the closure of airports and borders. They placed a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people in public places — including the closure of places of worship, markets, and the isolation of the capital, Niamey.

However, these measures have affected several industries, including the agricultural sector. Agriculture is of paramount importance to the economy of Niger. It represents more than 40% of the national gross domestic product and is the main activity for more than 80% of the population. A Sahelian country, Niger has a particularly arid climate, which is characterised by unpredictable rainfall. Global warming and its hazards, such as cyclical droughts and disturbance of precipitation, impact the transition from the dry season, which begins in March, to the rainy season, usually starting in June and ending in September.

As a result, only 1% of the area receives 600 to 800 mm of rain. Therefore, it is the Sahel-Sudanian zone most conducive to agricultural and animal production. Farmers alternate between cultivating fresh fruit and vegetables, and cereals.

This year was promising a successful harvest as the first rains fell in most of the localities, meaning farmers could get sowing. It is one of the most important agricultural events of the years, and in rural areas, everyone — the men, women, children, and even the elderly — take to the fields to help.

However, as the threat of COVID-19 became a reality, farmers found themselves forced to adapt to running the season with the prevention measures. Restricted transportation has led to insufficient supplies and fluctuating prices for products and services essential to farmers who rely on outside inputs to fertilise their fields.

Another unexpected consequence was a shortage of labour. During the dry season, young people leave the villages to migrate to coastal countries to work and only return after the first rains with the resources and the workforce necessary to harvest the land.

“Our young and able-bodied people, who plow our land, cannot return to the villages because of the closed borders,” says Garba Hamadou, a farmer in the rural commune of Dan Tchadou, Kollo. “We also have a problem of availability of good quality seeds and manure with the stopping of delivery restrictions due to COVID-19. People do not have enough resources to continue their harvest.”

Another rural community, Kiota finds that, in addition to labor shortages, resources are also scarce. According to Issa Moussa, Mayor of Kiota, there is a problem with accessibility to seeds because they do not have storage silos and any deliveries with supplies have ceased.

This precariousness situation caused by the pandemic is also affecting suppliers of inputs and products.

“We are facing a decline in the purchase of our products,” Niandou Boubarou, manager of a farming inputs store in Kiota. “People used to come with enough money to buy but we have seen a shortfall since the start of the epidemic. Replenishing our stock relies directly on our daily income, and as transportation routes are limited, our whole supply chain is struggling.”



*Niandou Boubarou waits for customers in his store in Kiota*

The lockdown of the capital, Niamey, is a further blow to smallholder farmers as it is where many go to sell their produce.

The closure of rural markets compounds the issue. Many smallholder farmers do not have the facilities to store fresh produce, which is wracking up expenses and causing enormous losses of perishable goods.





*Hamadou Djibo on his farm in Dan Tchandou*

One such food producer is Hamadou Djibo, who struggles to move his fresh produce now that the markets are closed. To prevent them from rotting, he needs cool, humid storage facilities, but he does not have access to them. He finds himself making more losses and growing further into debt.

As a result, fresh produce is growing more scarce as farmers strive to reach isolated customers. The situation became more complex as the country entered May. Traditionally, at this time of year, neighbouring countries start importing their products: tomatoes from Ghana, chillies from Nigeria, peppers from Burkina Faso, mango from the Ivory Coast. The closed borders have ensured no such influx of deliveries.

It calls into question the importance of food sovereignty and agricultural development. As the COVID-19 restrictions remain in place to protect the country from a health crisis, their very existence is creating food shortages and financial hardship.

As winter approaches, it is important that the State implements a national resilience strategy that supports the agricultural sector. A reliance on imported goods — food and farmings inputs — has made the country extraordinarily and unnecessarily vulnerable to food insecurity during a global crisis. It is time to readdress the problem and place resilient and self-sufficient agricultural practices at the heart of Niger's socio-economic strategy.



# Experts label government subsidiaries as “insignificant,” as those in the Senegalese fishing industry struggle to survive

Faydy Dramé



*Fishing boats at Youff*

At first, locals wondered if the coronavirus pandemic would have much impact on Senegal’s small-scale fisheries. Though some early cases were reported, the death rate was, and remains, low on a global average. But the closing of borders to contagion was a crucial link that has toppled a whole supply chain. Combined with an absence of customers as many stay home and a drop in the market value of fish, the restrictive measures have plunged the small-scale fishing sub-sector into crisis.

The evening curfew and the ban on group gatherings mean all stakeholders are affected, from the fishermen to the fishmonger, the mud-flats fisher to the small restaurateur.



On the Yoff quay, fishing activities never stopped, but the fishermen did find a reduced number of fishmongers who could or would buy their fish.

“The fish was still available but the prices have dropped drastically,” explains Ibrahima Diène, president of the fishermen the quay.



*Mame Diarra Anne passes the time in the nearly empty market in Yoff.*

We spoke with a few from the industry and many told the same story. A fish seller, Mame Diarra Anne, told us how she has lost a lucrative contract. “COVID-19 is losing me important customers, including a restaurant where I deliver the value of 45,000 francs (\$ 77) of sea bream a month.”

Meanwhile, Mr Aïdara, a resident in Yoff, is reaping the benefits. “Very rarely could I find Thiof (white grouper) here,” he says. “Or if I could, the kilo was worth 6000 francs. Now, I admit I’m quite enjoying the pandemic. The price of Thiof has dropped to just 2,500 francs. The fishermen tell me that it is because the fishmongers who export it no longer come to buy it.”

## **PRICES PLUMMET AND FISHERFOLK SUFFER**

The nation-wide state of emergency has called for a whole new organisation of the industry and the logistics of fishing. At Joal — a fishing village 130 kilometres outside Dakar — only 100 canoes are permitted to sea daily as opposed to more than 400 that would fish before. Each week, this necessary measure has resulted in the unemployment of most of the fishermen on the wharf.

“Due to physical distancing measures, canoes cannot exceed a crew of six fishermen,” explains Mbaye Seck, head of the local small-scale fishing council. “Canoes can carry up to 25 fishermen on rotation, but this measure means they are reduced to six per boat.” The reduction in fishing effort naturally impacts the quantity of the hauls; the tonnage has fallen by a quarter.

The curfew causes more issues. Markets must close by 3 pm but fishermen can only fish between 6 am and 3 pm. With no access to storage facilities, Joal’s wharf has lost 75% of its produce. Those who land after 5 pm cannot find customers and their product rots on the landing,” says Captain Cheikh Diagne, Curator of l’Aire Marine Protégée [Protected Marine Area] of Joal.

In addition to limiting trips to sea, falling prices have caused a bottleneck for fishermen. “Sometimes, we need to disembark at other docks such as Kayar where the price is better, but the restrictions prevent us from doing that,” laments Mamadou Diop, a fisherman from Yoff. For example, a kilo of beltfish can sell for 1,500 CFA francs (\$ 2.60) in Dakar, while in Kayar, it is 2,500 CFA francs (4.30 \$). No access to the export market is causing a substantial loss of income for fishermen at both ports. Chinese factories create a lucrative market for Senegalese fishers, and their closure means a significant drop in revenue. A lobster sold to Chinese factories at 18,000 francs (\$ 30) per kilo now sells for just 6,000 francs (\$ 10) to local consumers.

## THE FISHMONGERS HANG ON

For the fishmongers who supply local markets, authorisation to restart transporting their refrigerated trucks between regions was not enough to save their businesses. “Only the truck and the driver are allowed to travel, preventing us from going to buy fish at other markets,” says Malick Sylla Thiaw, a fish wholesaler at Yoff.



*Mamadou Diop waits with his crew at Yoff.*

At the Saint-Louis fishing wharf — 265 km north of Dakar — there was always an abundance of fish, but there too, fishmongers suffer from the scarcity of customers.

“Usually I could sell a truck of fish in one day in Dakar or in Kolda. But with the pandemic it takes me a week and a half,” Mamadou Diagne, a fishmonger in Saint Louis, tells us. “On top of this, prices have plummeted. A case of sardinella has dropped from 40,000 (\$68) to 15,000 francs (\$ 25).”

Salif Mandian, President of the Union of Fishmongers Exporters of Senegal, is concerned: “It is a waste for the fishermen who go to seek these species as far as Sierra Leone.” He predicted that soon enough, these fish, which are harder and more dangerous to come by, will drop out of the market. No fisherman will take risks to find them while there is no viable market.



Fishmongers are also incurring substantial expenses before they even enter the market. The restrictions on movement mean that a refrigerated truck and sourcing ice has become an expensive endeavour. Profit margins have plummeted.

According to Mandian, businesses are operating at 50% or less. As a result, a company that used to buy 6 tonnes of fish per week was only buying 1.5 tonnes at the beginning of May, and 2.5 tonnes by the end of June.

## **AND THE SHELL WOMEN TOO.**

Some 350 women who collect shellfish along the mudflats in Joal have been affected by the distancing restrictions too. Firstly, no more than 100 people can meet to harvest the oysters and other seafood at one time.

“At the beginning, we were forced to stop our activity and that caused a drop in earnings,” says Mother Anna, president of a local collective of female shellfish pickers in Fadiouth, Joal.

Captain Diagne of the AMP clarified the loss of earnings. “When deprived of activity in the mud flats, these women each lose on average more than 86,000 francs per month”.

Since the pandemic measures are not ceasing, the collective has since arranged themselves in groups of 20 to respect group restrictions and overcome distance measures.

## **“INSIGNIFICANT” HELP**

To relieve the most important actors, the State, as part of its response and solidarity fund against the pandemic’s economic effects (Force COVID-19), has endowed the fishing industry with two billion francs (\$3.4 million).

But Mbaye Seck of the fishermen’s alliance finds this amount “insignificant.”

“Two billion for all those involved in fishing? From Saint-Louis to Cap Skirring? Each fishing site will not obtain more than 100 million francs (\$170k) to be shared between fishermen, fishmongers, processors and other actors. In other words, this help will be an empty gesture.”

As marine ecologist, Patrice Brehmer, points out: “80% of catches are made by artisanal fishermen.” The fishing sector employs 20% of the population, provides 70% of the population’s protein intake, and 22% of export income. Therefore, the economic stake of small-scale fishing remains tangible and integral.

The effects of climate change have driven a sharp decline in the practice of agriculture in Senegal, with the populations of coastal areas having turned to fishery. So the government is facing phenomenal pressure to provide for one of its most significant and most impactful sectors, both during COVID-19 and beyond.

# “COVID-19 doesn’t just kill people, it kills businesses and livelihoods”: The organic farming sector in Senegal is in turmoil

**Faydy Dramé**

The agricultural sector has suffered and is still suffering from the coronavirus pandemic in Senegal. Women practicing organic small-scale farming have paid a heavy price. From production to processing, the entire chain of production has suffered the consequences of the social distancing rules, curfews and above all, the ban on the movement of people between the regions.

Tomato, zucchini, cucumber, potato — Wayzani Mirvat’s arms are overflowing with paper bags full of organic vegetables. Every Tuesday, she comes to buy her weekly baskets at Sell Sellal. It is a cooperative for smallholder produce from organic and sustainable farms, bringing together 107 organic producers across five areas of Niayes.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the Sell Sellal market, located on the Carnot road in Dakar, continues to operate.

“I did not feel the impact of the health crisis on the prices of the organic vegetables basket,” says Ms. Mirvat.



*Vegetable stall at Sell Sellal market.*

Fatou Sall was not so lucky. A resident of Scat Urbam, a suburb of the capital, she has not found organic vegetables since the start of the health crisis.

“The kiosk that sells them to me has closed due to supply difficulties,” she said. Not wanting to take the risk of catching the virus in large markets, Sall now frequents the tables of local vendors, where “the products are not organic and cost twice as much”.

The restrictive measures of the state of emergency have struck a blow to the value chain of organic produce. The market manager of the Sell Sellal cooperative, Ndèye Bineta Ndionne, spends 97,000 francs (US \$166) each week on transport between Niayes and the four itinerant outlets in the capital. It is three times the cost of transportation before the pandemic.



*Bags brimming with fresh produce, waiting for home delivery.*

To offset the costs, the market now supports home delivery, a system that Ndionne developed. On the whole, it has been a success. “The rush of orders has forced us to hire delivery services. The client pays between 1,000 and 2,000 francs, depending on where they live,” she explains.

## **RESTRICTIONS: CAUSE OF ALL ILLS**

Outside the city, restrictions on transport have resulted in dysfunctional rural markets and impacted the activity of producers. In a press release dated April 24, the Dakar office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, stated that more than 5,200 tonnes of fresh produce is left rotting in the fields due to difficulties in accessing markets.

“Many of the fruit and vegetable producers were unable to harvest because they lacked manpower,” explains Karfa Diallo, an advisor at Enda Pronat, an NGO that supports farmers in healthy and sustainable agriculture. In fact, the restrictive measures prevented the workers from reaching the production areas all together.



## **SELL FAST OR LET ROT**

COVID-19 arrived at the height of the harvest season for the small-scale farming sector. It was a period of low temperature which producers take advantage of to sow and harvest as much as possible. A particularity of small-scale farming means that most farmers do not have their own storage means. They grow to sell immediately.

In the middle of her abandoned tomato field, Mrs. Mariama Ba expresses her despair: "I usually harvest three crops in this field. At one time, I harvest five to six cases of tomatoes which I sell at 6,000 francs each (US \$10). But with the pandemic I only did the first round and preferred to leave my tomatoes to die out on the vine rather than rot in my hands." With this option she says she is at least sure to gain a natural fertiliser.

## **RISK OF DELAY IN THE WINTER SEASON: LIFE AFTER COVID-19 COULD PROVE MORE PAINFUL**

In Keur Matar Guèye, Khady Guèye lost a substantial part of her tomato production. After COVID-19 hit, she says she had trouble getting money owed to her from wholesalers for her earlier harvests. Suddenly, her fields of chillies and peppers, which are not yet fully grown, are threatened.

"Our crops lack water because of a lack of fuel to run our pumps. A situation that affect the next season because I need income now to prepare for it," she worries.

In Nganda, Aïssatou Cissé, president of the Federation of Women Producers (FFPT) is concerned about the access to seeds and the impact it will have on later harvests. "We have not been able to set up our nurseries, crops grown from nurseries have a faster maturity time and require less water and inputs than direct sowing."

## **FOOD PACKAGES FALL SHORT**

As part of a plan to provide emergency food aid to vulnerable populations, Senegal has targeted 411,955 households affected by the health crisis. Each household receives a food kit worth 66,000 francs (US \$113) consisting of rice, oil, sugar, pasta, and soap. After some criticisms, there were changes to include carrots, potatoes, and onions to the food kit. The efforts were in vain.

"The authorities told us that these products are perishable foodstuffs liable to rot during distribution," regretted Mr. Nazirou Sall, president of the National Council for Rural Dialogue (CNCR). Visiting Niayes on 21 May, Papa Amadou Sarr, leader of the Delegation of Rapid Entrepreneurship for Women and Young People announced the granting of a billion CFA francs (US \$ 1,709,400) fund. Its function is to buy unsold stocks from horticultural producers. However, small-scale producers claim that anyone is yet to make contact, meanwhile estimates claim that the sector has lost more than 40 million francs between May and July.

## HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

In Senegal agriculture employs 60% of the working population. There are more than 19,000 practicing organic farms. The Niayes alone area provides 60% of the horticultural production of Senegal and the consumption of the capital, Dakar. It also supplies 80% of the country's horticultural exports.

Unfortunately, the absence of State subsidies intended for inputs — organic fertilisers, organic phytosanitary products — reveal a broken system. There is little infrastructure for sustainable or self-sufficient conservation or the marketing of these practices. The pandemic is having a paralysing effect on a whole industry.

With the lifting of the ban on travel between regions and the reduction of the curfew from 11 pm and 5 am on 6 June, smallholder farmers are now hoping to make up for lost time. The lack of aid is frustrating and many will continue to struggle, but for now, their sights are firmly set on making a success of the next season.

# “With helplessness and bitterness, we watched our produce rot”: Niayes women farmers face COVID-19

**Lena Bena**

*Small family farmers who work in the Niayes area, supply 80% of Senegal's fruits and vegetables but have been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Female leaders in the community have developed response mechanisms to face the crisis head-on.*

After two hours of driving, Darou Khoudoss, a languid city in the Niayes area, rises up before us under the blazing sun. Once a flourishing city with abundant vegetable markets, this local area has struggled in the face of the pandemic.

“We were caught off guard by the coronavirus,” says Maguette Diop, President of the processing unit which employs several local women. “It restricted all of our market gardening and processing activities that allow us to live and support our families. We have had to cancel a lot of orders and shut down the unit since the first positive case of coronavirus in March.”

The other livelihood which is undertaken by the majority of the village's women is small-scale farming. It too is an industry that is facing dark days ahead.

“We used to stock up on vegetables in the fields to sell in the market and we could earn between 10,000 and 20,000 francs (€15-30) per day. But with the closure of the markets following the pandemic our business was wiped out,” sighs Fatou Ndiaye, a vegetable seller.

Forming a coastal strip along northwestern Senegal, Niayes is made up of dunes and favourable weather conditions perfect for market gardening. It is the true epicentre of Senegalese farming, but the pandemic has brought on what feels like an endless night.

In response to the international COVID-19 outbreak, President Macky Sall declared a state of emergency on 23 March coupled with a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. The various markets across the country were initially closed before being partially opened.

For small-scale food producers and vendors, considerable losses were incurred: “Normally hundreds of trucks crisscross the area to buy vegetables to resell throughout Senegal and the sub-region,” a local female farmer tells us. “With the pandemic we could no longer access transport which resulted in the loss of several hectares of crops. We watched with great bitterness and utter helplessness as our fresh produce rotted for lack of buyers.”



Women in the village told us varying stories of hardship, but food security and providing for their families is everyone's primary concern. Sitting in front of her stall full of leafy greens, Fatou Ndiaye tells us her story. "To feed my family, I have had to sell off my stall merchandise or barter vegetables or salad for rice and sugar."

Astou Diallo found herself abandoning her usual job to look for work elsewhere to support her family. "I was able to find a job at the chemical industries where I was employed to help workers wash their hands with hydro-alcoholic gel and put on equipment that protects them from coronavirus. It allowed me to meet my needs as a woman and mother," she says.

Maguette Diop has been less fortunate. She has had to use up most of her savings, which she had been keeping for her retirement, to support her family. Even so, her family's three daily meals have been reduced to two.

If there is one advantage, it is a small but significant change in eating habits which has seen many families turn away from the starch-based rice diet. Many have returned to the culinary repertoire of their ancestors, relying on locally available food such as sorrel and peanuts. One group of women in Darou Khoudoss tell us how they have been making cereal-based dishes such as 'lakhou bissap' and 'sombi guerté'. They are simple and nutritious and to their surprise and joy, loved by their children.

As food aid in the forms of food kits with rice, oil, sugar, milk and pasta, arrive from the government, the women of Niayes are demanding to know what they will implement next. They want more enduring help, such as economic investment in equipment and storage facilities for smallholder farmers. They want help too penetrating the more lucrative national and international markets that have been closed off to them for so long.

In the meantime, they just want what's best for their children.

"It hurts my heart asking them to stay home and not play in the neighbourhood," says Maguette. The town is a close-knit community and they have felt the social consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown. The fear of contamination, as well as stringent restrictions in place, means Darou Khoudoss has lost a little of its warmth and charm in recent months.

"Socialising is part of African life," says Maguette, "and when that act loses its splendour, we lose the value that gives us humanity."

# Playing to survive: In the eye of the storm of Senegal's struggling fishing sector

Lena Bena

*In Senegal, the coronavirus pandemic has plunged the fishing sector into food insecurity. Far from facing defeat, fishermen and small vendors at the Soumbédioune fish market are developing resilience mechanisms to ensure their survival*

It's 4 pm on 18 June 2020 at the Soumbédioune fishing dock, and the fish stalls are glowing under the afternoon sun. Sitting in front of her shop, Awa Ndiaye, a vendor in her thirties, struggles to find buyers. "It is tough to get clients during this time, the authorities have asked us to learn to live with the virus, and since then the curfew has been extended from 8 pm to 11 pm. Despite this, nothing can be done; walk-in trade has dropped," says Awa.

Her gaze is turned out to the sea as she recounts her story. "We sometimes have to sell off our fish to meet the needs of our families. For example, in May, amid the coronavirus crisis, we sold a case of sea bream for 15,000 CFA francs (US \$25), which cost 35,000 CFA francs (US \$60) before the pandemic."



*Soumbédioune market in a small corner of Dakar.*

Like Awa Ndiaye, many of the fish sellers in the Soumbédioune market, a western corner of Dakar, have seen their turnover decline. To deal with the pandemic, President Macky Sall, declared a state of emergency on 23 March coupled with a curfew from 8 pm to 6 am. Several landing docks like Soumbédioune were only partially opened. Two months later, the curfew was eased but at Soumbédioune fish market, the situation has not really changed.

Like Awa Ndiaye, many of the fish sellers in the Soumbédioune market, a western corner of Dakar, have seen their turnover decline. To deal with the pandemic, President Macky Sall, declared a state of emergency on 23 March coupled with a curfew from 8 pm to 6 am. Several landing docks like Soumbédioune were only partially opened. Two months later, the curfew was eased but at Soumbédioune fish market, the situation has not really changed.

## **17% OF THE NATIONAL EXPORT COMES FROM FISH**

“The halt in exports caused by the pandemic was a disaster for companies licensed to supply fresh produce to countries like France, Spain and Italy. With the closing of maritime borders, we no longer see these major clients,” sighs the fishmonger, Mame Laye. The father of a family of ten people, he saw his life completely turned upside down: “I spend 13,000 francs (US \$20) per day feeding my family. With the onset of the disease, business declined and I was forced to dip into my savings... today with the gradual easing of the restrictions, I am going to have to rebuild my life,” he says, sitting under a tree on the edge of the water.

At each landing, the fishmonger usually earns between 100,000 to 150,000 francs (US \$170-260). “With this slow resumption of activities, I find it difficult to obtain 50,000 francs” he explains.

## **FROM VULNERABILITY TO ACTION**

Standing in front of the Soumbédioune sea waves, fishmonger Mame Laye stares down at his mobile phone, something he does regularly during our conversation. It is for a good reason; the pandemic has forced this father to turn to other means of income to survive.

“Instead of staying at the fish market and selling at a loss, I prefer to roam the districts of Dakar with my team to sell my fish. Every day, we travel miles to reach families and sell our products,” he says. “We discovered online sales during this pandemic and it has been very successful and allows us to easily sell our products through WhatsApp and Facebook. We display our products online and get a lot of orders,” he explains.

In addition to e-commerce strategies, which are growing increasingly popular here, the young fishermen have found another investment strategy by using their savings to buy sheep or chickens. From fishing to livestock rearing, these seamen have found themselves grounded to ensure their survival.

“In just 40 days, the chickens reach maturity and will be paid off. As the Eid al-Fitr feast approached, I was able to sell around fifty chickens and this enabled me to ensure my family had a proper celebration,” says the young Abdoulaye, who adds that he will never permanently give up fishing, an ancestral practice in his family.

Another fish vendor, Awa Ndiaye, has been working a loan system instead.

“The idea is to sell our all products before they are ready so they do not rot. Our clients give us money as an advance and the rest is a loan they pay afterwards. This system works well and it allows us to cover the expense because, among the women who work here, many are widows who find themselves with children to feed and have to manage on their own,” she explains.





*Fishmongers show off their wares but are selling well below cost price.*

## **LEFT TO THEMSELVES: RALLY OR PERISH**

As part of managing the pandemic, the state of Senegal has developed a response plan. Called the COVID-19 Force, this financial package totals 1,000 billion CFA francs (US \$1.3 billion).

However, here at the Soumbédioune fishing pier, the workers admit that they have not seen anything of the COVID-19 aid package. Nevertheless, the Maritime Fisheries Association's director reassures them that the food will be granted to a million vulnerable households.

Aware of their precariousness, the occupants of the Soumbédioune quay want financial support like all the other affected sectors.

"There is not a strong organisation here, in the past there were well structured groups of workers but now it is every man for himself and that does not help matters, we need structure," says Oumar Diagne Sow. He has attempted assembling a small group called the National Union of Artisanal Fishermen of Senegal. With a bag swung over his shoulder, and a lively gait to his walk, Sow crisscrosses the fishing docks to call new recruits to his cause. "I want a strong and structured organisation speaking with one voice and capable of positively changing living conditions in the artisanal fishing sector where people are often marginalised," he says.



*Two elderly fishermen watch the world go by in Soumbédioune market*

Artisanal fishing is part of the informal sector, yet it represents 17% of national export revenue, and its demise will have severe consequences on the country's economy. Combined with other fish-related industries, fishing is the second biggest export item (after gold) and one of the principal receipts of foreign currency for Senegal.

Consequently, it must be supported to lift the burden of costs from individuals and allow it to revive itself in the short term. The industry must develop a structure to better anticipate future crises, both those linked to the pandemic and to recurrent climate change issues. The overwhelming majority of those who practice it comes from a vulnerable strata and live dangerously close to the poverty line and this should not be ignored.

Meanwhile, back in the Soumbédioune fish market, as the sun sinks lower in the sky, the fishermen, vendors, and fishmongers are already thinking about heading home. Everyone is starting to pack up—everyone except for a small group of reckless young fishermen down by the water's edge. The time has come for the ritual preparations of their canoe to face the dangers of the sea, and, if they're caught, the consequences of breaking curfew.

"They are playing to survive," says Mame Laye, watching them, and you cannot mistake her admiration.



# “Even before COVID-19, we were suffering a hunger crisis”: Coronavirus intensifies food insecurity in South Sudan

**Pach Ayuen Pach**

The Republic of South Sudan is a country with many challenges — coronavirus is just the latest in a long line. However, since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in South Sudan, many citizens have worried about navigating the new reality within the constraints of national resources. Those in the agricultural sector are particularly concerned that they will continue to fail to engage in farm work freely.

Today, in the rural areas, there is still uncertainty about when this pandemic and its measures will end. A lack of official information has caused misconceptions and stigma around coronavirus. In the Jebel Lado village, there were rumours of the virus contaminating some families. As a result, the rest have quarantined themselves in their homes without means to provide for their family.

“These days we eat once a day. I have never seen a situation like this in my lifetime. I used to get food from my husband and son, who are casual workers,” explains a local woman. “Since the lockdown, they have stopped working. They are our only source of support. We depend on their provision.”

Another resident, Tabitha Amuor Magot, worries that South Sudan does not have the infrastructure to withstand this crisis.

“Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, South Sudan was already battling a hunger crisis,” she says. “Most citizens cannot afford the basic items in the market because the prices have skyrocketed. I am struggling with my family alone because my husband was caught up in the lockdown in Uganda.”

About 96 per cent of the people in South Sudan are dependent on farming, fishing, and herding for food and income to send their children to school and pay for medical bills.



A small collective in Jonglei has been banding together to support one another through the pandemic. Deng Makeny Alier, one of these smallholder farmers, worries for the future now that her steady income has gone. She and her peers are prevented from farming, and they contend with a deep fear for their families' future.

The cultivation period on their farms is generally from April to July and from August to November. The second phase is looking precarious if the restrictions on movement are not lifted.

"We work in a group and reserve part of our farm products for food and save some seeds for the next planting season," Alier explains. "But with lockdown, mobilising farm labour is difficult. We will need people for planting and other farming activities. There is also the required social distancing and provision of hand washing facilities recommended by the Ministry of Health. These all place heavy burdens on farmers. If I work alone, I can only produce a little."

Poni Joseph Kenyi, another farmer in the region, shares Alier's concerns.

"COVID-19 is threatening us because we depend on farming to feed our children. At a time when we hoped to give our children the best life after several years of conflict, COVID-19 takes away our hopes and dreams."

The farming collective has worked together throughout many crises, sharing tools, seeds, and working together on one another's land.

"We provided strong support to each other in tough times but COVID-19 has disrupted everything. There is a delay in land preparation and other farming activities are at a halt."

Akon Peter Mach explains how working together has been life-saving. "Life is not easy. Working in a group is very helpful because we respond to each other's needs and provide each other with seeds and proper farming methods. My children never lacked anything but with this kind of disease, how will I protect my children from hunger and even get them medication if they fall sick?"

Mach started his farm in 2004, growing only tomatoes and today, he produces onions, groundnut, and maize. He was planning to extend his farm onto more land next year and start cultivating watermelons. In the meantime, his tomatoes have helped his neighbours.

"I borrow tomatoes from Mach and pay him back when I have sold them; it has helped me a lot," says Yar Aleer Malual. "I can now feed my children. Now, my only challenge is the high cost of fuel for my motorcycle."

As the coronavirus spreads, farmers are strained by preventive measures taken by the government. While social distancing may be easier to practice on rural farms, especially for those who are self-sufficient and produce their own seeds, it has been detrimental to those in densely populated towns, and those in villages who rely on shop brought inputs. With limited transportation into the cities and villages and many shops closed, these farmers find themselves struggling.

“We know that people have COVID-19 and have no idea that they are infected,” explains Becky Achol Majak, a civil servant in Juba. “The more asymptomatic people that get tested, the sooner it will be safe to slowly re-open parts of our communities while still adhering to social distancing and wearing masks.”

It seems like a simple solution, but facilities for testing are just not available to those in more rural communities. Lack of education on the virus and how to prevent it compounds the matter.

In addition to coronavirus, heavy rains in parts of South Sudan and an already swollen River Nile have flooded towns and settlements along the river banks and other flood-prone areas, including land in Central Equator State. Stories from Bor are disheartening and this is just the beginning because, in the face of a health crisis, the government has no plans to handle the flooding.

Although people were warned to evacuate flood-prone areas in the face of the unusually high risk of flooding, this did not happen on a large scale due to a number of impediments.

COVID-19, food insecurity, inter-communal conflicts, flooding, desert locust invasion, and an economic recession are strangling the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. The slow implementation of the peace agreement between warring parties adds to the problem. It is a long list of woes.

“Once again we are calling upon the NGOs to come to the rescue of the most vulnerable among our people,” says Majier Mach Ayuel, a civil servant in Jonglei. “However, the extent of such response in the middle of this pandemic and other competing priorities in donor countries remains to be seen. These are the consequences of governmental inaction.”

With the plethora of problems, it appears that the year following the pandemic will be marked by food shortages unless serious steps are taken by the government and social organisations. It is clear that the preservation and sharing of indigenous seeds and self-sustainable farming methods need to be given a high priority, as a small step toward stabilising food insecurity in South Sudan.

# “My kids have nothing to eat”: Small-scale farmers in South Sudan struggle in the chaos of COVID-19

**Pach Ayuen Pach**

South Sudan has been engulfed in a complex political crisis since 2013. Sectors across the economy have struggled to survive through war, political unrest, and social upheaval. Now, with a global pandemic to contend with, it still feels like their troubles are only just beginning.

COVID-19, which is claiming lives worldwide as cases of infection continue to rise, is strangling South Sudan's small-scale farming sector. The fallout is already being felt across the nation, from major towns to the remotest villages.

Many South Sudanese are frustrated by the unfolding tragedy caused by COVID-19. The impacts of the pandemic combined with existing conflicts, have compounded the crisis.

Historically, small-scale farmers rely almost exclusively on funding from both government and local NGOs. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, attention has been drawn away to fight the pandemic at the expense of farming. Consequently, agricultural activities across the country have slowed to a halt.

“Since the outbreak of Coronavirus, we have not received anything from our donors,” says Mrs Akur Dengic Mabior, a small-scale farmer from Mingkaman, Aweil State. “I personally don’t know what to do right now, my farm is ready but I can’t afford to buy seeds.”

It would be a fair observation to say that the local government in South Sudan has been overwhelmed by the coronavirus and the impending collapse of an already weakened health system.

Day by day, as numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases continue to grow significantly, the government is forced to channel all its foreign exchange reserves into tackling the emergency. Other sectors of the economy remain neglected.

“We used to get all the support we needed for our poultry farming from the state government,” said Kenyi Wani Gore, a poultry farmer from Central Equatoria State. “But there has not been any recent communication from the authorities. This disease has affected us in many ways.”

In April, the government announced several restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus. All interstate travel was banned, and later, a dawn-till-dusk curfew was imposed in all major towns. Hotels stayed closed, and market places remained a no-go-zone.



At that point, the local farmers' immediate concern was finding a new market for their produce. By locking down the country, the part of the population whose livelihoods relied on markets, retail, hawking and street selling were condemned to abject poverty and starvation.

"My kids have nothing to eat, there is no market," says Michael Amam Kennedy with despair. He is a smallholder kale farmer from Yambio, Western Equatoria State. "I have lost a contract with an hotelier who used to buy my kale before the lockdown. Now they are drying up on my farm."

Kong Chuol, a pastoralist from Malakal, Upper Nile State, tells us how he used to sell his oxen to a local butcher before the outbreak. Now the contract has ended. "This disease is a life threatening," he says.

Despite COVID-19 spreading faster than expected, there is little to no direct communication or support from the government to the South Sudanese public.

"The government workforce is overstretched," reveals Amuor Alier Ajak, a Civil Servant from Jonglei State. "We don't have enough workers to look into the most pressing issues. There is no funding to undertake recruitment of new employees either. So there's nothing we can do to support other sectors right now. People's health has to remain a priority," she emphasised.

With no cure for the virus in sight, the government's only guidance is emphasis on the importance of maintaining strict social distancing and lockdown.

The campaign has been largely effective in keeping people at home, but with little additional information, local people are confused and afraid.

"I fear coming in contact with other people," says Chol Kiir Machar from Wau, Western Bar el Ghazal State. "I can't risk my life going around selling potatoes. So I let them rot on the farm." He is just one of many farmers who told us they fear face-to-face interactions because of the risk of contracting the virus. However, as many small-scale farmers remain home, their farms flounder, and their crops suffer.

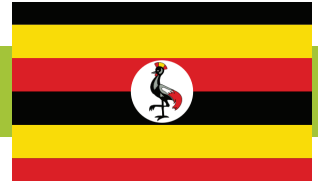
"They say that 'you reap what you sow,'" says another civil servant, Jok Alier, from Juba. "We are surely now reaping the consequences of a state who did not invest in medical services."

Indeed, those who are sick often struggle to find care. In earlier times, before border closures, families of the critically ill would transport them to Nairobi in Kenya or head north to Khartoum in Sudan. Even then, they would frequently die on arrival or in transit, incurring family members huge expenses while trying to bring their bodies home.

But going to a hospital in Juba is considered risky as mortality rates are high. "We have well trained doctors," explains Jok, "but they do have tools to work with."

The coronavirus has put a strain on even the most highly funded, well-equipped hospitals worldwide. Its contagion rates are hard to curtail without strict hygiene, protective equipment, and the ability to quarantine the sick. This is no simple challenge facing Juba's underfunded medical services.

Jok's frustration is evident: "we have invested a lot in war machinery," he says, but his meaning is clear: what use are weapons against an enemy you cannot see?



# “They will not help us”: Small-scale farmers suffer as extension service workers withdraw during COVID-19

**Polycap Kalokwera**

The virus has no mercy on any essential services, or so we have learnt as, around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks mayhem.

In Uganda, coronavirus has infected over 805 people and caused an unprecedented number of shutdowns of schools, businesses, government, and, significantly, partner services to farmers. According to the World Bank’s 2018 report, Uganda agricultural sector employs about 70 per cent of the labour force, which is critical during planting and harvesting seasons.

The sector also supports economic growth and economic inclusion, particularly for women and youth. However, it is noteworthy that small-scale farmers make up the majority of this group and constitute about 85 percent of the farming community.

Amid the coronavirus preventative measures - such as social distancing, staying at home, and curfews - most small-scale food producers are grappling with managing their crops with no access to extension services.

For many small-scale food producers, most farm activities are carried out by the support of governmental extension workers. They give technical advice about agricultural technologies and farm input supply, credit, marketing, and farm management.

Smallholder food producer in Gulu, Vicky Lukwiya, says she relies on extension workers to train her on recommended agricultural practices.

“The majority of us small-scale farmers in the villages are in collectives. Then gathering was suspended by the government and we failed to get extension workers to support us during this COVID-19.”

When the government made extension workers exempt from the lockdown provisions, farmers like Lukwiya were still left without aid.

“They were not motivated to move around to support us during this period, with many saying they didn’t have transport,” Lukwiya explains, adding that she’d heard rumours that extension workers were offering their services to private farmers. Small-scale farmers were missing out as the majority couldn’t pay them.

“They were only going to commercial farmers who can afford to facilitate them. Every time we contacted them to meet us, they kept saying its COVID-19 and we shouldn’t meet,” says Lukwiya.



*Vicky Lukwiya wants the government to step up and support small-scale farmers*

She is frustrated by how the severity is ignored by government leaders and even the country at large. “Most media publications ignore the key topics on farming that the farmers need but focus on COVID-19 and how it was affecting the economy.”

Another farmer, Samuel Otim Oryem, says that small-scale farmers are failing to fight pests attacking their crops, explaining that many do not know about the diseases and fear to go seeking advice from fellow farmers.

“Besides my bananas being under attack by fungal diseases, weevils have destroyed over half an acre of my maize and I am stuck because I don’t know what to do. I have tried to apply local ashes but it is not working and there is no extension workers to support me,” he says.





*Samuel Otim inspects his pest ridden crops.*

Gulu District's Senior Agriculture Officer Paul Kilama Timothy stands by the original story, that extension workers fear for their health since they cannot determine who is following WHO guidelines and who is not.

"Training farmers to adopt the best agricultural practices takes time and, as technical personnel, we need to constantly engage them before, during, and after planting. COVID-19 has denied us the chance this planting season. We are well aware that the inaccessibility of extension workers will affect production and productivity of crops this year," Mr Kilama says.

He adds that "certain activities in extension and advisory services can't happen because our vehicles and motorcycles were all taken to district headquarters to help in the fight against COVID-19 so we couldn't travel to individual farmers even with repeated calls from them."

Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers' Forum's (ESAFF) Uganda Policy and Advocacy Officer Bagaga Ronald says the government should invest in farmers-led agricultural technology that guarantees extension services to the small-scale food producers amidst the crisis.

"If farmers were well trained with technological extension and advisory services, they won't be suffering now but rather adjusting just like other countries — like China did," says Bagaga. "However our technology is rudimentary even when we have the roadmap to put it in place. We must invest heavily in knowledge provision through extension services to train small-scale farmers on sustainable farming methods that increase production."

For the 2020/21, the Directorate of Agricultural Extension (DAE) was allocated just 0.42% of the annual budget for agricultural support. Although the Ministry acknowledged that the sub-sector continues to face an insufficient number of extension workers, the ratio still falls to one extension worker to 500 - 1800 farmers.



"Stringent state restrictions has disrupted agricultural value chains, creating restlessness and uncertainty within the 85% of small-scale farming, of which over 65% are women who solely depend on the sector as a source of livelihoods," Bagaga tells us. "Prudent public spending in the sector has a pivotal role in building resilience of small-scale farming, driving economic growth, food security, employment creation and ultimately reducing poverty in the face of COVID-19 crisis." Mr Bagaga says that the government has failed to adjust the 2020/2021 financial year budget to help farmers recover from the pandemic. For the sector to survive, the allocated budget must be increased, and the recruitment of a further 1200 extension workers must be finalised.

The Minister of Agriculture, Vincent Ssempijja Bamulangaki, has since acknowledged that the district leaders misinterpreted the presidential directives by removing the transport means from extension workers, thus failing farmers.

"Uganda relies on internal production and it's in its best interest to ensure that farmers are supported; as a ministry we shall ensure that the extension workers are supported to extend their services to farmers," Mr Ssempijja said.

"We shall feel the pain as a country later in the year," he says, "we want to recover the time we lost and I will reignite the systems on ground."

It will remain to be seen whether it's too little too late.

# “I can’t access my land for fear for my life”: Aggressive land disputes caused by lockdown threaten livelihoods in Uganda

**Polycap Kalokwera**

On 11 June 2020, Kabuki Santanio discovered three acres of his fields destroyed and his livestock - four goats and two cows - dead.

Earlier this year, Santanio, a small-scale producer from the Omoro district, took a land dispute to court where they ruled in his favour. He claims the plaintiff then used the COVID-19 lockdown to attack him. “They burnt down my house,” he said, “several members of my family were injured in the fracas and were rushed to hospital.”

Land disputes - which are bloody and sometimes even fatal to those involved — are an ongoing issue in Northern Uganda and continue to form a perilous threat to food security for many.

However, since Uganda declared lockdown in March in response to the spread of COVID-19, the number of land disputes cases has soared. When cities were shut down, and economic activities slowed, landowners began returning to the villages to claim or sell their farming land. Unfortunately, those who been absent for a considerable amount of time found that other relatives or locals were occupying it.



*The remains of a home in Acholi village which was burnt down in a land dispute.*

The altercations that ensue are rarely beneficial to either party, but particularly detrimental to those small-scale farmers whose entire livelihoods rely on the crops grown on the controversial land.

Amuru District Chairperson, Michael Lakony, said that they are registering a steep incline in cases of violence over land disputes.

“Before we would mediate about three to five cases of land wrangles among families or clan members in a whole week. That has suddenly turned into five cases a day and over 50 in the whole week,” he said. “This is dangerous for our community as the majority of our people rely on farming as a source of income.”

Nwoya District Agricultural Officer, Alfred Kilama, shares the same fears. He says many have turned to farming during this time as a reliable source of income and food.

“However, instead of us celebrating as an agricultural sector, the continuous cases of land wrangles have scared us,” he said.

Kilama fears farmers are not adequately utilising the land due to fears that it will be repossessed by third parties. “Rural households experiencing land disputes with relatives or neighbours are indisposed to applying farmyard manure or planting perennial crops on disputed plots,” he said. By turning away from beneficial, organic farming practices that enhance productivity and make crops more resilient to poor weather, many farmers limit their chances of food security.



*Hope Namutoro à son stand au marché Otwee*

However, with stories of looting and violence becoming more widespread, the crisis is reaching critical. Farmer Stephen Ojok, 47, says that he failed to access the part of his land contested by his neighbour, who threatened to kill him if he set foot on it. “I have been farming here since I was a young boy,” he explained, “little did I know that the land was sold to two other people by my late brother until they came back during the lockdown to claim it.”



Ojok went to court with the newcomers, but the ruling was in their favour.

"Now am left with a small portion of land behind my house," he told us, "I have planted staple foods for the family. I know it will not be enough."

He is not the only one in Amuru to fall victim to eviction, both lawful or otherwise. Residents in Apaa were attacked twice in lockdown, and their crops destroyed, and houses burnt down.

"More than 13 families were rendered homeless following the attacks," reported District Chairperson, Michael Lakony. During the lockdown, with nowhere to go, these families are even more vulnerable. Land Rights Advocacy Officer for PELUM, Moses Onen, points out that land disputes are frequently due to insufficient formalisation of land ownership. "Usually rights to land are recognised and respected, even without the formal institution of title deeds," he explained.



*A family in Apaa stands before the remains of their home, which was demolished in an attack.*

It is customary for small-scale farmers to use land without proof indicating the area belongs to them. Yet, in the face of a financial crisis, cultural norms are disregarded in desperation. There are suddenly "countless" cases where land ownership is contested.

The coronavirus lockdown made the mechanisms for resolving land conflict more difficult. "Most recently no more than five people are allowed to gather together yet resolving land wrangles means involving the whole community," says Ambrose Olaa, the Prime Minister of the Acholi Cultural Institute.

Mr Olaa acknowledges that the rising conflict affects the agricultural production of small-scale farmers in the region as harvests are interrupted when farmers are evicted from their land."

The majority of these conflicts are inter-family and inter-community conflicts," continued the Prime Minister. "The perpetrators just want to sell off the land during the COVID-19 lockdown to make quick money. It is costing us the source of livelihood for many small-scale farmers in the Acholi Sub region."



*Prime Minister of the Acholi Cultural Institute, Ambrose Olaa addresses the public on the issue of rising land dispute cases.*

A critic from Gulu, Martin Alier David, argues that 80 per cent of the land disputes affecting access to land is due to the local courts' failure to handle cases during the crisis. He says the result is that many have resorted to taking matters into their own hands and using violence.

"COVID-19 has given a new understanding as to why land rights are important when the financial economy fails," he says. "There is too much pressure on the limited land available for some families to use and hence conflicts erupts among them."

Mr Alier adds that the government should open up a low-level justice process to help reduce land conflicts and pave the way for access to land for production.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, Mr Denis Obbo says that the Ministry is registering land and giving certificates of communal and customary land ownership to curb conflicts affecting access to land for producing food.

"Before the lock down we had given 20,000 certificates but our efforts to continue issuing them were frustrated by COVID-19 and there was nothing much we could do with the land disputes," Mr Obbo claims.

Yet he admits that the President didn't label the Land Ministry as "essential" during the pandemic, so they decided to suspend all evictions and land transaction cases. He didn't explain how the Ministry now plans to tackle the consequences of a manoeuvre that has escalated food insecurity in the face of global upheaval. The crisis continues.





# “It’s time to believe in indigenous foods”: Stories of hope from Zambia during COVID-19

**By Timothy Kamuzu Phiri**

As Africans, watching the developed world grapple with the coronavirus was both intriguing and terrifying. Intriguing because surely the virus could not bring countries with renowned economic might and far advanced health services to their knees? At the same time, terrifying to see the death toll rise globally.

We watched it unfold on social media and television.

Finally, on one fateful day in March, the news broke that the first cases had been reported in Lilayi Lusaka. The nightmare that, for months, had not crossed our borders was finally here. A virus, with its terror, intrigue, and accompanying conspiracy theories, was finally in Zambia.

How would we cope as a country? What would the impact of the pandemic be on food producers, food vendors, and NGO’s? We spoke to three different people living in Zambia about their experience of living through 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic.

## **MARY SAKALA, THE RURAL FARMER**

### **Farming as a livelihood**

Mary Sakala practices agroecology on her farm in the Malombe area of the Mumbwa District, Zambia. She arrived in the area 40 years ago to marry her husband. She has only ever known farming, which is her family’s principal source of sustenance and income.



*Mary Sakala outside her storage barn in Malome*



When she arrived in Malombe all those years ago, the soils were fertile and rainfall plentiful. From the off-set, she practiced integrated farming methods and registered abundant crop yields. However, in the last 10 to 15 years, there has been a drastic decrease in rainfall, soil quality, and crop yields.

Mary blames the decline on the excessive levels of deforestation in the depleted Nsanje Forest Reserve. She explains that the poor rainfall pattern experienced in recent seasons has resulted in lots of farmers resorting to charcoal burning as an alternative livelihood to farming.

There has been an increased demand for charcoal in the capital of Lusaka since loan shedding — controlled blackouts — are becoming more and more frequent. Many in Malombe see it as a lucrative business, but the harvesting of so many mature trees from the Reserve is growing more worrying. Mary is convinced that the devastation of the forest and surrounding habitats is part of the reason for such poor harvests and land degradation, compounding the vicious circle.

The pesticide is known to kill insects, mice, rats, and owls. Meaning plenty of the creatures vital for a healthy ecosystem are dying, not just the targeted pests.



*A highly toxic pesticide currently in use in Mulombe*



*Theresa Chileshe at her stand along the main road in Ibex Hill, Lusaka*

Mary worries about the health of local farmers and their families too. Out of desperation to move and sell crops, many do not wait for the mandatory residual period, where the pesticides lose their strength, to harvest their vegetables. She suggests that a lot of people are consuming vegetables with chemicals that could eventually affect their health.

## MARY'S DIVERSE COLLECTION OF INDIGENOUS SEEDS AND CROPS

Mary advocates for more farmers to shift from their conventional and unsustainable farming techniques to agroecological practices.

In place of vegetables like cabbage and rape, she suggests that farmers invest in the traditional crops she grows that never require any pesticides such as Kanunkha (BlackJack), Bondwe (Amaranth leaves), and Chiwawa (pumpkin leaves). She would like to create local indigenous seedbanks with the government's support to store the precious indigenous seeds that grow well locally and have so many benefits.

"It is time to believe in our own indigenous foods because we are what we eat," she tells us.

## COVID-19 AND FOOD PRODUCTION

Mulome is largely untouched by COVID-19. Asked whether people in the area are concerned about getting sick, Mary chuckles.

"Here in the rural areas, COVID-19 is an illness for the western world and the urban centres," she says.

She is quick to add that she understands that it only takes one person to bring the virus to the village and wishes there were more public awareness campaigns for the rural communities. In the meantime, life continues as usual, and gatherings for funerals and football matches go on as if there is no global pandemic.

Mary does explain that they have been impacted economically. The price that farmers can sell their maize has dropped substantially due to an inability to export because of closed borders. On the other hand, the absence of imports into the country has positively impacted groundnut prices.

"The national crisis is an opportunity for government to introduce new programmes that emphasise value addition and pro-local farm produce campaigns," she tells us. "COVID-19 has already shown us that the much neglected local producers have potential to meet the national demand for so many food items that have traditionally been imported from outside Zambia."

## THERESA CHILUFYA CHILESHE, THE CITY FOOD VENDOR



*Theresa Chileshe at her stand along the main road in Ibex Hill, Lusaka*



## Vegetable trading as a livelihood

Today, take a slow drive along any main street in Lusaka, and you soon realise that in the last three months, a staggering number of women and children have lined the streets to sell their wares.

Stands groan with pumpkins, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, melons, oranges, lemons, ginger. In fact, there has been a tangible increase in demand for citrus and ginger in direct response to people wanting to boost their families' immune systems during the pandemic.

Fresh produce trading has become the go-to business for the many who lost their jobs during the lockdown. A new army of vendors has taken to the streets to support their families. Theresa Chilufya Chileshe is one of them.

Theresa is a widow and the mother of four children. She has been selling fruits and vegetables for the last two years, but prior to relocating to Lusaka, she was a farmer in the Chibombo District of Kabwe.

After several bad harvests due to poor rains, she decided to move to Lusaka to start street trading as a more stable and predictable means of earning income. She cultivates a few vegetables in her urban garden, using her farming experience and knowledge she gained as an agricultural science student at school.

She recently joined the Mitego Women's Association, which imparts skills such as sustainable composting, food preservation (smoking of fish, chicken, and other types of meat) and mushroom growing.

When the conversation turns to COVID-19, Theresa says that the people in Lusaka's shanty compounds are sceptical.

"It hard to believe in an illness if you have not personally seen an actual COVID-19 patient nor attended any funeral of an actual COVID-19 victim," she explains. She does not blame them, though, and criticises the government for their poor communication on the virus.

"The rush of misinformation and conspiracy theories creates an environment that makes it hard to deal with the reality of COVID-19," she says.

Neither Theresa nor her business has suffered too much thus far. She notes an increase in the number of women and children setting up wooden stalls along the main street in Ibex Hill. Sourcing food to sell is not hard either, as farmers are desperate to move their produce. As concerns grow about the impact lockdown has had on the 2020 harvests, how long will this abundance last?

But for Theresa, who is self-sufficient, she only needs to rely on the fact that people still need to eat. For now, her family is provided for.



## BARBARA NÖST, THE CIVIL SOCIETY EXECUTIVE

Barbara Nöst is the CEO of the Zambian Governance Foundation for Civil Society (ZGF). Established in 2009, ZGF seeks to utilise available and untapped resources for sustainable development in Zambia.

Asked on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on ZGF, Barbara explains that the staff went on a rotational schedule for reporting for work for one month, in adherence to the Ministry of Health safety recommendations. Now, things have returned to normal.

On working during the pandemic, she observes that although many organisations speak highly of the role that technology has played in trying to keep productivity levels high, this technology is only available for the affluent. The average Zambian was hard-pressed to access internet services, gadgets and cope with the intermittent power supply due to load shedding at home.

She is mostly critical of the many expatriates from the civil society landscape who left the country in haste even before the crisis had taken any serious hold. She says it was “not fair” and that they did the Zambian community and local NGOs a disservice by leaving.

“Will we always abandon our stations and friends in times of emergency and crisis?” she asked. It will be hard for the Zambian community to count on and trust the international community if they simply leave at the slightest hint of trouble. The vacuum of support and communication left by expatriates’ departure means that local organisations have been left alone.

Three months down the line, it is clear that Zambia’s situation is not as bad as was initially projected, though Barbara notes that the true negative impact may not be felt until later in the year.

Funding for many projects was diverted from the traditional problems to deal with the COVID-19 humanitarian crisis. In the medical world, cancer and diabetes patients suffered restricted access to the health services as the limited resources were turned to fighting and preventing the coronavirus.

Barbara notes that the COVID-19 crisis provided international organisations an opportunity to examine their outgoings for travel, expenses, and conferences.

“If there one lesson that can be learnt from the restrictions from COVID-19 crisis, it is that money can be better spent and prioritised in favour of solving the problems that local NGOs are trying to solve in local communities.”

Although the presence of COVID-19 is only felt in the city centres, its ramifications may take a while to be fully felt in urban and rural communities. Despite the doubts arising from conspiracy theories fuelled by social media, the effects of COVID-19 are real and here to stay.

COVID-19 has been a crisis that has presented civil societies, food producers, and vendors with challenges but also lessons. We will do well to learn from both.

# “This is a social crisis, not just a medical one”: Three stories and three perspectives on COVID-19 in Zambia

**By Timothy Kamuzu Phiri**

Problems impact us and our communities in different ways, depending on who we are and what we do and where we come from. It is very rare that everyone is affected by a problem on a global and local scale regardless of our economic status, chosen field of work, and location. COVID-19 has united us all.

We spoke to three different Zambians on their experience of the last few months. Here are their stories.

## **THE CHARITY DIRECTOR**

Eugene Kabilika is the Executive Director of Caritas Zambia, a charitable subsidiary of the Catholic church, which promotes social justice.

Asked about the COVID-19 status in Zambia, Kabilika explains that the Zambian population knew something about COVID-19 but not enough to take it seriously.

“In rural areas they don’t wear masks because they don’t have access to masks, they don’t use hand sanitisers and they don’t partake in the precautionary measure of washing their hands,” he says. He emphasises that he believes the government’s outreach and awareness campaigns on COVID-19 have not been effective enough.

In response, Caritas assisted in setting up a Response Fund. Donations of medicines, personal protective equipment, and various hygiene items were distributed to needy families and the 59 health facilities run by the Catholic church in Zambia.

However, as the country went into lockdown, there were fears about the future of food security. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the country was only just emerging from a food deficit, explains Kabilika.

“In the latter part of 2019, 2.3 million people were estimated to be affected by food insecurity.” Thankfully, the onset of COVID-19 corresponded with the crop harvest season in Zambia. In rural and urban areas, most households were able to complete their harvests and keep afloat. Had the crisis hit later in the year, the food security situation would have been much worse.

The cities tell another story. The 'Stay Home' campaign has had a devastating impact on urban households due to the closure of bars, restaurants, and entertainment facilities. The employees for these businesses have to stay home, and not everyone has a guaranteed salary while doing so.

What's more, says Kabilika, the government's response has leaned on the medical side of the crisis, not its social and economic aspects. He points out that the much talked about a stimulus package for small businesses will be hard for average enterprises to access.

"How is a business owner from Mtendere compound supposed to access these high interest loans from the banks?" He asks. He believes they are not relevant or beneficial to the types of businesses that have really suffered in the crisis.

"The government should have conducted a thorough assessment to determine which businesses have been worst hit and need the most help," he says.

Kabilika warns Nigerians to be smart about the slowing down of virus rates and to focus on solutions to ride out the pandemic.

"The focus needs to shift from high productivity and profits to nutrition and human welfare," he says.

## THE BARBER

Humphrey Katiyo has been working as a barber in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, for four years.

Hairdressers and barbershops have been amongst the businesses most severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Though many never officially closed, the implementation of the 'Stay Home' campaign by health authorities meant very few customers visited for three months.

For Katiyo and his colleagues, the reduction in customers means delayed salaries and difficulties in paying rent for the business. The situation was compounded by unplanned expenses needed for hand sanitisers, face masks, and extra disinfectants.

Humphrey says that, initially, the community thought COVID-19 was an illness that affected well-to-do foreigners, but now they know how wrong they were. Its impact has been felt in every section of the urban population.

"Measures such as social distancing and staying home whilst well-meaning have been quite a challenge for entrepreneurs who live hand to mouth and have no financial cushion," he tells us.



*Humphrey Katiyo standing next to the sanitation station outside his barbershop in Lusaka.*



Nevertheless, Katiyo is pleased about the government's preventative measures and hopes they will continue in the face of fresh disaster. "It is not very popular with certain sections of the community," he says, "but the health of the people is a priority."

## THE AGRICULTURAL ENTREPRENEUR

Queen Lungu Mubagwe is an environmental educator by profession. She is also a passionate farmer who, together with her husband Phidelis Mubagwe and some friends, runs a farm in the west of Lusaka.

They grow an assortment of crops: cauliflower, broccoli, butternuts, peppers, rapeseed, Chinese cabbage, sweet potato, okra, carrots, green beans, lettuce, and cucumbers.



*Phidelis Mubagwe on his farm in West Lusaka. The Mugagwe veg boxes, ready for delivery.*

When Lusaka City Council first implemented public safety measures at Soweto Market, where Mubagwe sells her produce, there was a drop in business. The reduced number of buyers meant a lot of food wastage as farmers could not sell their produce at the usual speed and cost. Refusing defeat, Mubagwe and her husband began a new approach.

"We thought of marketing our produce online through Facebook and reaching out to a new niche of customers who we knew were confined to their homes," she says.

This idea proved very popular and profitable as clients responded well to the adverts for an assortment of vegetables and other food items sold as combination packages. They began distributing the food items to different clients right across Lusaka by car.

It turns out that COVID-19 has inadvertently pushed the entrepreneurs to create a more lucrative marketing strategy than the one they were using before the pandemic.

Like Humphrey Katiyo, Mubagwe commends the government for its strict approach to closing down businesses and schools that were deemed high risk at the onset of the pandemic.

She is also grateful for the announcement of financial support for small business owners though she wonders whether her peers in the small-scale farming sector will be able to access this kind of assistance.

Her other concerns lie in public safety measures.

“I now walk into shops and supermarkets and notice that the health and safety precautions that were enforced stringently a few weeks ago are not anymore. It is almost as if, by mutual agreement, business premises and their patrons just don’t care anymore,” she says.

She urges the government to intensify the awareness campaign in high-density areas and marketplaces to counter the growing fatigue towards the pandemic in most urban communities.

“The government must not relent in giving out information as this is the only way to help save more Zambian lives.”

# There will be more deaths from hunger than the pandemic: Experts warn of imminent food insecurity if the Zambian government does not support smallholder farmers

**By Kabanda Chulu**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in an unprecedented global public health and economic crisis. Protecting lives and allowing healthcare systems to cope has required social isolation and lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus. As a result, the international monetary fund (IMF) projects that the global economy will contract sharply in 2020, worse than during the 2008-09 financial crisis.

Sub-Saharan African economies are predicted to slow down by negative 1.6 per cent, and the World Bank predicts that an estimated 60 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020.

While it has done statistically better than many other African countries, Zambia has not been spared by the pandemic. The number of cases keeps fluctuating, and on 25 June 2020, there was an accumulative total of 1,497. According to information released by the Zambia National Public Health Institute (ZNPHI), there have been 1,223 recoveries and 18 deaths since the outbreak in March.

Today, some of the restrictive measures have been reversed, the hospitality industry, international airports, and gyms, among other service sectors, have been allowed to reopen and conduct business.

Despite a return to normality, IMF (2020) predicts that the Zambian economy will drop by 2.6 percent, slightly lower than the global average but higher than the sub-Saharan average, due to the recent impact on business operations.



For instance, the mandatory quarantine of transporters for a minimum of 14 days (applied mainly for transportation of goods from high-risk areas/countries) could have ripple effects on the private sector revenues, which could harm the private sector in sustaining business operations.

In the agricultural sector, many of those private businesses are smallholder farmers. While the coronavirus is yet to have a significant health impact on farming in Zambia, risks of food insecurity are still imminent.

Diana Mutambo and her husband cultivate maize, groundnuts, green and red beans, and a variety of green vegetable crops on their eight hectares of land. Initially, they were dependant on growing maize, but they realised diversification would greater enhance their chances of a higher income.

Together with other smallholder farmers in the Rufunsa area, about 60 kilometres east of the capital city, Lusaka, the Mutambo family are in a cooperative, where they pool their vegetables and sell to multinational chain stores throughout the year.



*Diana Mutambo on her farm in Rufunsa*

“Initially, we only planted maize for selling and other crops were for home consumption,” Mutambo explained. “But through the cooperative and assistance from other partners that helped us to drill boreholes and implement water pumps, we have diversified and increased our field size and crop production.”

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the government’s resultant preventative measures pose a threat to this rural community. The supermarkets have reduced the volume of their purchases as they see a decline in custom. There is no hope of finding clients elsewhere as all the larger hotels and hospitality organisations are struggling too.

Mutambo’s farm will mean their families will not go hungry during this period, but they no longer have a steady income.

“We have been advised to reduce on volumes for supply, which has reduced our moral,” she says.

To alleviate the challenges to smallholder farmers like the Runfunsa collective, President Edgar Lungu has disclosed that, through the Bank of Zambia, the government would provide a ZK 10 billion (USD 551.7 million) stimulus package as a contingency and emergency response to small business and enterprises.

Yet several bureaucratic issues in accessing these funds have left smallholder farmers without aid, and businesses are growing frustrated.

Zambia National Farmers Union’s Communications Manager, Calvin Kaley, confirmed that none of the farmers registered with the union had accessed the funds.

“None of our members have accessed the government package,” he says. “Disbursing banks are giving priority to those who already have credit with them so newcomers have gotten a raw deal.” The union is now attempting to find other avenues of support for the most vulnerable members through different partners.

“We may record more deaths from hunger than the pandemic if the situation is not handled well,” says Mr Kaley.

Rolf Shenton, a board member of Grassroots Trust Zambia, says farmers could be the least affected by pandemic measures and financial crises if more education and finance were placed on self-sufficiency, eradicating the dependency on external inputs.

He sees the opportunity for more collectives to rise up and take advantage of an era when growing and buying locally is the only viable way to food security.

“Therefore this pandemic should be seen as an opportunity for farmers,” he says. However, he is concerned by the ongoing presence of COVID-19 and says Zambia should focus on protecting its prime producers, so that food supply chains do not become compromised.

While the spread and intensity of the pandemic proliferate, the exact and full impact on the agriculture sector cannot yet be measured. Still, there are indications that there will be losses in both revenue and production, thereby impacting food security.

Illness-related labour shortages, transport interruptions, and quarantine measures limiting access to markets are just some of the industry’s challenges. Such disruptions to the food supply chain have resulted in food loss and waste that could have a long-term effect on supply.

The Zambian government must face these realities and understand that, if not urgently addressed, they will lead to rampant food insecurity among the most vulnerable of the population.



# ‘I had no money. I had no food’: Lockdown sheds light on the vulnerability of smallholder farmers and food vendors in Zimbabwe

**By Jeffrey Gogo**

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe - Bulawayo's eastern suburbs, which sits quietly between the city and the bush, used to be a popular neighbourhood hub, filled with vegetable markets abundant with fresh farm produce.

The markets were shut down across Zimbabwe's second-largest city as part of coronavirus-induced measures to decongest the central business district. The move left farmers stranded without an outlet for selling their produce and many recorded up to 60 per cent in financial losses.

To adapt to the indefinite lockdown, the smallholder farmers began adopting new distribution methods, including creating combinations of different complementary products, deploying social media, and crossing town to access the more lucrative markets in the affluent, western side of the city.

## **SCALING DOWN AND BUCKLING DOWN**

With private transport operators suspended, except for state-run ZUPCO buses, farmers like Silingiwe Sibanda, 46, of Sunninghill have been limited in their ability to distribute their produce. Sibanda has been growing vegetables for the past six years, but this year has been one of her toughest. Before COVID-19, she would split her produce of green peppers, okra, and tomatoes between the supermarkets and vegetable markets in the city.

“From supplying 80 kg, now I can only supply 30 kg of green peppers and mostly to the supermarkets,” she tells us. “The few markets that are still operating in town are not able to buy and sell much. People are not getting into town because of lockdown. We have had to cut down on production for now.”

On her vast plot, workers water green leafy vegetable beds as she prepares her business to adapt to a more modest future.



"We dry much of these vegetables to sell as mufushwa (sun-dried vegetables). Trips to the western suburbs help because that's where most of the population is but movement is still too limited for us to drive old volumes of sales," she says, with sadness.

## **OUTSMARTING THE SATURATED MARKET**

For Nigel Mariga, 28, from Kensington, making his tomatoes stand out in a saturated market has been the goal.

Mariga leases 5,000 square feet of land with greenhouses that grow 1,750 tomato plants and breeds 500 free-range chicken. He and his team of four expect to harvest 30 tonnes of tomatoes in the next five months.

During the period of coronavirus restrictions, he has had a significant drop in trade. Mariga realised that all the farmers were growing tomatoes in his neighbourhood, and there were too many for too few customers.

He has started working with other producers to create fresh produce hampers. "I out source other produce that I don't have like lettuce," explains Mariga. "Then I deliver to families within 40km of my farm, using social media to advertise. Getting fuel is still a problem though but thankfully, I've got a pass now," he adds.

Longterm, the future is less certain. With their harvests on target for strong yields, they're hanging onto the hope of life returning to normality. "We have even more tomatoes this time but can only count on the relaxation of restrictions in the informal sector so market vendors can take up our produce."

While remaining optimistic, Mariga is clear that businesses like his can only hang on for so long. He is concerned not only for his revenue but about being able to continue paying his employees. Mariga said no corporate or administrative support had been forthcoming. "I am yet to get a response. Without assistance from anyone and nothing to fall back on, innovation and cooperation is only the way for us, young farmers."

## **NEW STRATEGIES**

The Gwanyanya brothers, Phineas and Douglas, have used 1.25 hectares of land for cultivating cabbage, green mealies, onion, sweet potato, and chickens since they sank a borehole at their home back in 2016.

The brothers are counting their losses from the lockdown but are resolved to continue distributing their products, mainly through social media and cooperation with other farmers.

"When we entered lockdown we had tomatoes ready but no one to supply them to, so we lost them," Phineas says.

A couple of cars pulled up in front of the gate for cabbages as we speak. "If you don't have your own transport, moving products is not easy in these times so people look within and maximise social media to get local customers."

Before lockdown, the brothers had a lot of custom from the western side of the city where they have a loyal following. The lockdown has forced them to grow a new market. “We have started having more sales within this neighbourhood as well as people referred here from other places,” he observes.

The supermarkets, deprived of their usual suppliers, have also proved a lucrative market. “Usually farmers prefer to supply to the markets where they are paid in cash so that they can retain value for their produce,” explains Phineas, but out of desperation, the supermarkets are offering better rates.

Douglas explains: “When we get paid in RTGS (local electronic cash), the money sometimes devalues — sometimes up to 50 per cent — before we make our own purchases so it’s easier to keep up when we do business transactions in cash.”

Zimbabwe uses its own currency alongside the US dollar, but its economy is currently in a state of hyperinflation. For informal workers, cash remains the safest currency.

## **FOOD SHORTAGES AND FOOD INSECURITY FEARS**

According to research by Famine Early Warning Systems Network, seven million — almost half the entire population in Zimbabwe — need food aid. The World Food Programme is reaching just over three million of them.

In the countryside, 1.1 million citizens are in emergency need of intervention, while 4.3 million are food-insecure. In the city, citizens grapple with an ever-rising cost of living.

To mitigate the crisis, the Zimbabwe government announced a special ZW \$18 billion (US\$720 million) “economic recovery, stimulus and social package.” Agricultural support accounts for just over one-third of the financial rescue, with small businesses taking up only three per cent of the total share.

On 11 June, a small minority of 100 Bulawayo youths benefited from the government’s COVID-19 Youth Relief Fund, a separate fund from the main stimulus package.

Successful applicants, of which government-registered young entrepreneurs or youth-driven organisations are eligible, get US \$120 to \$200. Eight hundred applications have been received in Bulawayo, and disbursements are being made through electronic transfers.

But for farmers like Nigel, Phineas, and Douglas, the stimulus package remains a distant reality, for now, they have only their wits and their entrepreneurial skills to carry them through.





*Farmers tend to crops, hoping there will be someone to sell to after the harvest*



# 'I had no money. I had no food': Lockdown sheds light on the vulnerability of smallholder farmers and food vendors in Zimbabwe

**By Jeffrey Gogo**

Mutare, Zimbabwe - FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS, Shupikai Simango has set up her stall on the streets of Mutare, a mountainous city in eastern Zimbabwe. She bids passersby buy an assortment of fresh produce such as tomatoes and onions, which she grows on her land.

Typically, she earns between US\$6 and US\$10 a day - however, the mobility restrictions put in place in response to the Coronavirus, have brought her earnings to a halt.

In a bid to curtail the spread of COVID-19, Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared a 21-day complete national lockdown at the end of March, a manoeuvre that caught many off guard.

Some did not have enough supplies to last 21 days. Others were already suffering as a consequence of high food prices after a severe countrywide drought. But in the lockdown, it was informal food traders like Simango - a 35-year old single mother of three - who were hit the hardest.

"The first days of the lockdown were the worst in my life," says Simango, who lives in Chikanga, a working-class suburb of Mutare.

"I had no money. I had no food. I survived the days by the grace of God," she adds. Even pre-pandemic, Simango lived from hand to mouth. Most of the money that she earned was spent on restocking her wares, and the little left was for food, rent, and energy bills.

In the wake of the lockdown, Mutare's fresh produce markets, including the food market at Sakubva, remained closed. Any attempts to breach the restrictions were met with ruthless action. In early April, more than 300 farmers attempted to sell their produce at Sakubva market, but it was confiscated and destroyed by fire by the authorities. The loss amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In response, the central government promised to compensate affected farmers as part of a ZW\$600 million (US\$24 million) bailout extended to small businesses, vendors, and vulnerable families. However, they are still waiting to receive compensation.

35-year old Simango has failed to benefit from government intervention aimed at helping more impoverished families during the lockdown. She is not eligible for the ZW\$200 (US\$8) transferred to vulnerable families every month, nor can she access subsidised meals as they are not readily available in her city.

DESPITE MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS RELAXING in May, it is still illegal for vendors to return to their original selling points and Simango is trying to find alternative sources of income.

"I have to move door-to-door selling my vegetables," she says. Door-to-door sales bring her earnings to just US\$2 per day. "Today, things are still tough for us vegetable vendors. It will take time for us to recover," she reflects with despair.

She is not alone in her struggles – across the country lockdown measures have made earning a sustainable income difficult for both food traders and smallholder farmers alike.

According to Charles Dhewa, CEO of Knowledge Transfer Africa - a Harare-based data firm focusing on fresh produce markets - farmers have lost millions of dollars as produce rots due to market closures. Even after restrictions were relaxed, the absence of public transport from farming areas to markets in the city continues to affect many smallholder farmers.

Biggy Mutasa, a 49-year-old small-scale farmer in Zimunya, a rural area outside the city of Mutare, lost upwards of US\$2500 worth of tomatoes. They spoiled while awaiting delivery to the market.

"It is absolutely deplorable, my friend. I can no longer go sell my produce in Mutare because of transport problems," he says. Mutasa tried to sell the tomatoes at a nearby market along a major highway, but there were few customers as people are staying home.

"I end up feeding all my ripe tomatoes to chickens and turkeys. We can do nothing apart from watch the vegetables decompose," he laments.

Some of the younger farmers have attempted more creative solutions, tapping into the few resources at their disposal not restricted by pandemic measures. Desire Jongwe from Odzi, a rural area just outside Mutare, turned to social media- Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram- to market his broiler chickens and fresh vegetables.

He made home deliveries to customers in and around the city of Mutare. "I devised a plan to sell my chicken and vegetables online using social media," he said.

While he struggles to keep up the momentum, Jongwe is happy with the response from the market -particularly younger customers -as he was able to make up to 15 deliveries of vegetable combinations three times a week.

Others have been less fortunate and are fearful of what the continuation of social distancing will mean. As of July 10 2020, the virus has infected 940 in Zimbabwe and has been directly responsible for the deaths of 13 people. However, it is restrictions to livelihoods that experts fear few will recover from quickly.

Davies English, senior pastor and founder of Shield of Victory Ministries, says that he agrees that this is the primary challenge of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.

“Most of our congregants are self-employed,” he explains, “so the lockdown has literally locked them away from their sources of income. It has resulted in unprecedented levels of hunger for many households.”

He worries too about how many of his congregation will survive in the wake of the pandemic. “Many will need to start different lines of businesses since the government has eradicated their places of work,” he says. As a church, English and his community have engaged in social assistance programmes, identifying and supporting the most affected.

“We are providing basic foodstuffs and soap using funds donated by a few of our members who run businesses that were not affected by the lockdown.”

AS RESTRICTIONS ARE LOOSENED, and life begins to pick up again, the Zimbabwean government faces the challenge of maintaining social distancing measures to curb any future spreading of the virus.

To decongest the marketplaces and avoid crowds, the city of Mutare has decentralised its wholesale market in Sakubva. Mutare’s Mayor, Blessing Tandi, explained that the municipality spoke with farmers and vendors and that they reached an amicable agreement.

“The programme has been a major success. There is a reduced number of people flocking to the markets and residents now have easy access to the fresh produce right on their doorstep,” he said.



*Farmers at the new fresh produce market in Chikanga, Mutare.*



Tandi continued that farmers were now deriving better value as they spend less time at the market, though no clear statistics were provided. He then revealed that the city was working on upgrading market places to give farmers and retailers a better working environment in the future.

Nevertheless, at the onset of the lockdown in March, the World Food Programme indicated that the number of people facing acute food insecurity in Zimbabwe had risen to 4.3 million.

While the threat of Coronavirus is dimming, it is impossible to forget the spotlight it has shone on the vulnerability of small-scale food producers and vendors. Improving the marketplaces is a step in the right direction, but let's hope it is only the beginning of new public discourse that places food security firmly at the centre.









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