

Briefing note from a webinar on

# Covid-19 and African food security

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Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies



UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE



# Covid-19 and African food security

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A webinar on “Covid-19 and African Food Security” was held by the Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (NELGA) and the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the Western Cape (UWC), on 25 June 2020 as the second in a series of seven monthly online seminars. The virtual meeting brought together civil society activists and academics to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdowns launched in response to it have affected food security in Africa.

The spread of Covid-19 represents a global public health crisis and has also emerged as a hunger crisis in many parts of the world. While food production continues, lockdowns which have been imposed by national governments to limit and slow the spread of the virus have restricted the movement of people and goods. This has curtailed livelihood opportunities for those relying on informal employment and self-employment, the vast majority of whom live in the Global South. Food value chains, particularly at the domestic and regional levels, have been disrupted, leading to a great loss of cash incomes for those producing and trading food locally. Global trade also has been interrupted, which has led to the imposition of export bans and other measures ostensibly designed to bolster food availability.

Food shortages and price spikes have occurred in places, alongside significant declines in purchasing power. One response has been food relief, which has been uneven and largely inadequate, alongside forms of social solidarity and social protection. Countries with existing challenges of poverty, inequality and hunger


have seen these brought into sharp relief, as the frailties of national economies and food systems have been exposed.

Commentators have argued that there is a trade-off between saving lives and saving livelihoods, although this position has been criticised as promoting a false dichotomy, particularly since there is no global food shortage. Indeed, there have been record harvests in recent years, indicating that the present crisis around food is systemic rather than the product of a lack of availability.

At the same time, in Africa, about 30 million people are facing extreme food insecurity, mainly in conflict zones such as north-east Nigeria and South Sudan, as well as in areas facing droughts and plagues of locust and suffering the impacts of mounting climate change. The World Food Programme estimates that, as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, [food production on the continent will decline by about 3% to 7% and food imports will fall by as much as 25%](#).

Against this background, participants at the webinar discussed the impacts of the virus and the agency and actions of African people and institutions in response to it. The impacts of the crisis were considered in relation to disruptions to food production, distribution and entitlements; underlying inequalities and frailties within the food system; and the politics and effects of food-aid initiatives.

The participants further analysed the implications of the present crisis for the future, reflecting on the damage done and whether this moment of disruption offers an opportunity to

 This briefing note is based on a webinar you can watch [here](#).

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reconfigure systems to improve food security. In this context, evolving ideas within the political economy about how to produce more equitable, resilient access to food were presented, including that of “food sovereignty”.

## Impacts

### *Production and entitlements*

In West Africa, markets for smallholder farmers have been closed by authorities in response to the spread of Covid-19 – and resulting food shortages have led to rising prices. In Burkina Faso, 36 local markets, 50% of the total number, have been closed, contributing to a hike in food prices of more than 30% over the past year. In Nigeria, almost all the markets have been closed, restricting access to food for smallholder farmers and cutting their revenues by 42%.

A similar pattern has been observed in relation to national livestock markets in the region. The greater the proportion of markets closed, the higher the price rises. By contrast, in Mali, where markets have not been closed, the prices of produce and livestock have remained stable.

In Guinea-Bissau, where between 65% and 83% of household revenue for smallholders is from vegetable growing, access to seed has been a problem under lockdown. Smallholder farmer incomes have been slashed by as much as 80% as a result and food security and nutrition levels have also been damaged.

Among pastoralists, the movement of animals across borders was restricted after the pandemic struck, creating increasing contention with farmers, who face further challenges in the form of shortages of inputs such as seeds and fertilisers as the rainy season approaches. Accordingly, the full impacts of the food crisis may be yet to be realised, as farmers without sufficient income and access to inputs find themselves unable to plant until after the next harvest.

The crisis also extends beyond issues of food production. For example, in more urbanised countries such as South Africa, where relatively few people work on the land, there is great hunger, indicating that food security is threatened by inadequate distribution and entitlements; there is food, but it either cannot be brought to market or is unaffordable.

### *Food aid*

Food aid donated to address national shortages, which can be crucial in cases of absolute production failure, such as in the wake of natural disasters and in conflict zones, has also led to the depression of local food markets, lowering prices and inhibiting small-scale farmers from producing and bringing their crops to market.

In recognition of the potential negative impacts of such aid on domestic markets, the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Chad and Mauritania agreed a “[Charter for Food Crisis Prevention and Management in the Sahel and West Africa](#)”.

[and the Sahel](#)” in 2011. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has placed pressure on the principles espoused by this document. For example, rice aid from Japan is disrupting the market for this staple in Mali, which already produces enough to meet 93% of national demand and has sufficient stocks to cover the shortfall. The Japanese rice is sold at what is called “social cost”, which is far below the actual cost of production, undermining local small-holder livelihoods. Its introduction also leads to a shift in consumption patterns, changing eating habits with longer term impacts for the food system.

### *Women’s burden*

The Covid-19 outbreak and the official responses to it have increased the burden on women as mothers and household providers and as food producers and traders. For example, in small-scale fisheries in Eastern, West and Southern Africa, women fish traders have been unable to access catches and sell them. In addition, they have also been home-schooling children and trying to manage households in straitened circumstances, often without state grants or aid which offer relief to the fishermen rather than the women.



IMAGE: C. MARINHEIRO/FAO

### *Distribution in Africa*

The move to open national markets through the establishment of an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has been frustrated by the Covid-19 outbreak. The [treaty to implement the free trade area](#) which has been signed by many countries, although ratification is still pending among a number of them, was supposed to be implemented in July. Freer trade across the continent at this time could have supported increased food production and more effective intra-African distribution, reducing the continent’s reliance on international food imports.

At the same time, the African Union’s (AU’s) decision to categorise food as an “essential” item not subject to restrictions on movement



## Commentators have argued

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has led to congestion at border crossings, with drivers and loads being forced to return to their own countries or being placed in quarantine. In the short term, this indicates a lack of effective testing for the virus at national borders – and, in the longer term, a lack of administrative capacity to manage increased trade effectively.

### Responses

#### *Continental and national measures*

Africa imports most of its food. So, governments which are concerned by disruptions in the supply of agricultural inputs and food, are seeking to ensure they have the food reserves they need. Although the AU has declared that should be enough food in the regions, the organisation of these reserves has fallen short and imports remain crucial.

Continentially, the initial priority was to produce personal protective equipment (PPE), pressing cotton and fabric manufacturers to convert their factories accordingly. However, the focus has increasingly shifted to the agricultural sector. The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been pushed to include food, as well as medical supplies, as an “essential” item in programmes to mitigate the impacts of the outbreak.

On the production side, as the planting season arrives, a particular goal has been to ensure that farmers have the inputs that they need, such as fertiliser and seeds, at a reasonable price even

as resources have been diverted into the health sector. Concern that national governments may not be able to provide such support has led to the AU and associated agencies working with administrations to forge bankable projects that will enable governments to access appropriate concessionary loans.

#### *Opportunistic exploitation*

In 2008, the price of key food items soared in an increasingly unstable global food market, while oil price spiked and a financial crisis undermined the credibility of large banks – all of which led to the revaluation of land as investors sought a new frontier for their funds in what was dubbed a new “scramble” for Africa.

The present crisis also has produced opportunities for exploitation, as national governments which have closed down operations are unable to police land disputes and the courts which may consider such cases have been shuttered. Members of the elite can take advantage of the situation to invade land and steal resources owned by the poor with relative impunity. More broadly, with mounting demand for agricultural produce leading to a rise in land values, those with the information, power and finance to exploit crises such as the present one are liable to move against relatively marginalised small-holders and pastoralists and those in communal land situations. Civil society organisations and national governments have a responsibility to support and protect communities against such depredations.

# When the international food system is disrupted,

dependency on global trade paths can undermine the livelihoods of food producers in ways that bear no relation to the direct impacts of the pandemic in their locality.

## Ways forward

### *Food sovereignty*

Juergen Voegelé, vice president of the World Bank, noted: “We can’t have social distancing if every smallholder farmer in Africa or Asia needs to get on a truck to get through to market every day.” The view is that the nature and extent of small-scale production in African and Asian countries, which may involve 60% to 70% of the population, poses a fundamental health risk that is best mitigated by cementing reliance on global markets. Accordingly, there should be no export bans or hoarding of food supply, but rather emergency aid for farmers in terms of inputs and food relief for consumers as necessary. However, this prescription fails to address how the food systems in these countries actually operate – and the crucial issue of local agency to provide ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate kinds of food.

The idea of “food security”, which has been defined as the stable provision of affordable, nutritious food through local networks, has recently been adapted to take greater account of the importance of such agency. [The autonomy and sovereignty of local people over the means of production, including the land and the agricultural inputs, has been increasingly emphasised.](#) In part, the perspective derives from a rights-based approach to food which

argues that national governments are obliged to provide food to people as part of their responsibility to their populations. In part, the perspective derives from an analysis of the inequitable and chaotic impacts of a corporatised approach to agriculture, which has ceded dominance to large firms producing agrochemicals and genetically-modified (GM) seeds and plotting the digitisation of food production.

The idea of “food sovereignty”, which owes a debt to the Via Campesina international peasant movement which struggled in support of the concept, proposes that food be produced in a healthy way – both to the people and the environment – using people’s knowledge. The idea further proposes that ownership of the means of production and distribution should be managed by the people. In addition, the food that is produced and eaten has to be culturally appropriate. So, for example, growing and processing calorie-rich food for external markets would no longer be a priority. Indeed, the priority would be to protect the food security of the most vulnerable.

A further complementary idea that is being promoted to transform farming systems in West Africa is that of “agroecology”, which has considerable currency among civil society activists but less among officials. This seeks to foster biodiversity in seeds and crops, which is considered essential to nutrition; and addresses the issue

of boosting productivity, as well as socio-cultural issues. It also offers an approach to mitigating some of the new forms of vulnerability that are being produced by climate change.

The Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to the extent to which African food systems are connected into global supply chains and rely on buying inputs from across the world and selling cash crops into international markets. When the global food system is disrupted, as at present, dependency on these trade paths – particularly in the large commodity-based economies of West Africa – can undermine the livelihoods of food producers in ways that bear no relation to the direct impacts of the pandemic in their locality.

Food sovereignty may be seen as an approach that prevents such vulnerability. For example, if farmers had held stocks of their own seeds under lockdown, they could have planted them; and if local markets over which people had control had been available, smallholders could have raised incomes and helped to feed local communities. In this regard, one of the lessons of the crisis may be that governments should seek to promote socially and ecologically sustainable food production processes and campaign for reform of the international food governance system accordingly.

### *The importance of local markets*

The market for the catches of the 2.3 million small-scale fishers along Africa's coasts and rivers has been severely disrupted by the restrictions on the movement of people and goods imposed in response to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Travel bans have brought the tourist industry to a standstill, closing restaurant and hotels and decimating demand for big fish – particularly, in West Africa and Mozambique. Export markets for seafood have closed. Falling demand for high-value catches have damaged fishers' livelihoods and led to gluts in domestic markets.

Although small-scale fishers may be eligible for food-aid packages – such as in Nigeria and South Africa – official responses have generally failed to address the specific challenges they face. In this regard, the present crisis has indicated that it may be beneficial for small-scale fisheries (SSFs) to prioritise shorter value chains. In Tanzania, where the government did not impose a hard lockdown, the local supply of good fish increased. Efforts to relocalise national food systems, focussing on domestic consumers rather than tourists, could lead to the provision of a highly nutritious, protein-rich source of food to vulnerable communities, as well as more sustainable, resilient livelihoods for SSFs.

## **The disruption to export and tourist markets**

under lockdown has indicated that it may be beneficial for small-scale fisheries to prioritise shorter value chains. Efforts to relocalise national food systems could lead to more sustainable, resilient livelihoods for SSFs.

## Key messages

- The spread of Covid-19 represents a global public health crisis and has also emerged as a hunger crisis in many parts of the world. While food production continues, national lockdowns have curtailed livelihood opportunities for those relying on informal employment and self-employment, the vast majority of whom live in the Global South. Food value chains, particularly at the domestic and regional levels, have been disrupted, leading to a great loss of cash incomes for local food producers and traders. Existing challenges of poverty, inequality and hunger have been brought into sharp relief, as the frailties of national economies and food systems have been exposed.
- Commentators have argued that there is a trade-off between saving lives and livelihoods, although this position has been criticised as promoting a false dichotomy, particularly since there is no global food shortage. At the same time, it is estimated that food production in Africa will decline by about 3% to 7% and food imports will fall by as much as 25% as a result of the present crisis.
- In West Africa, markets for smallholder farmers have been closed by authorities, and the resulting food shortages have led to rising prices. Access to seed has also been a problem under lockdown in the region, leading to smallholder incomes being slashed and reduced food security and nutrition levels. Among pastoralists, the movement of animals across borders has been restricted, creating increasing contention with farmers.



IMAGE: REUTERS



# The full impacts of the

food crisis may be yet to be realised, as farmers without sufficient income and access to inputs find themselves unable to plant until after the next harvest.

- The full impacts of the food crisis may be yet to be realised, as farmers without sufficient income and access to inputs find themselves unable to plant until after the next harvest. The crisis also extends beyond issues of food production. In more urbanised countries, there is great hunger, indicating that food security is threatened by inadequate distribution and entitlements; there is food, but it either cannot be brought to market or is unaffordable.
- Food aid can lead to prices being lowered in domestic markets prices and small-scale farmers being disincentivised from producing and bringing their crops to market, as has been illustrated by the provision of Japanese rice aid in Mali. The pandemic has placed pressure on the principles to protect domestic markets from the potential negative impacts of such aid enshrined in the 2011 “Charter for Food Crisis Prevention and Management in the Sahel and West Africa and the Sahel”.
- The Covid-19 outbreak and the official responses to it have increased the burden on women as mothers and household providers and as food producers and traders.
- The move to open national markets through the establishment of an African Continental Free Trade Area has been frustrated by the Covid-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, the AU’s decision to categorise food as an “essential” item not subject to restrictions on movement has led to congestion at border crossings, indicating a lack of effective testing for the virus at these sites – and, in the longer term, a lack of administrative capacity to manage increased trade effectively.
- Governments which are concerned by disruptions in the supply of agricultural inputs and food, are seeking to bolster their food



reserves. Although the AU has declared that should be enough food in the regions, the organisation of these reserves has fallen short and imports remain crucial.

- Concern that national governments may lack the capacity to provide the inputs required by farmers as planting season arrives has led to continental agencies working to forge bankable projects that will enable AU member states to access appropriate concessionary loans.
- The present crisis has produced opportunities for exploitation, as national governments which have closed down operations are unable to police land disputes and the courts which may consider such cases have been shuttered. With mounting demand for agricultural produce leading to a rise in land values, those with the information, power and finance to exploit crises are liable to move against marginalised small-holders and pastoralists and those in communal land situations. Civil society organisations and national governments have a responsibility to support and protect communities against such depredations.
- The World Bank has adopted the view that the nature and extent of small-scale production in African and Asian countries poses a fundamental health risk that is best mitigated by cementing reliance on global markets. However, this prescription fails to address how the food systems in these countries actually operate – and the crucial issue of local agency to provide food.
- The “food sovereignty” concept proposes that food be produced in a healthy way – both to the people and the environment – using people’s knowledge. Ownership of the means of production and distribution should be managed by the people; and the food that is

## With mounting demand for agricultural produce

leading to a rise in land values, those with the information, power and finance to exploit crises are liable to move against marginalised small-holders and pastoralists and those in communal land situations.

produced and eaten has to be culturally appropriate. A further complementary idea being promoted in West Africa is that of “agroecology”, which seeks to foster biodiversity in seeds and crops.

- The Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to the extent to which African food systems are connected into global supply chains. When the international food system is disrupted, as at present, dependency on these trade paths can undermine the livelihoods of food producers in ways that bear no relation to the direct impacts of the pandemic in their locality. Food sovereignty may be seen as an approach that prevents such vulnerability. Accordingly, one of the lessons of the crisis may be that governments should seek to promote socially and ecologically sustainable food production processes and campaign for reform of the international food governance system.
- The market for the catches of the 2.3 million small-scale fishers along Africa’s coasts and rivers has been severely disrupted by lockdown restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Travel bans have brought the tourist industry to a standstill. Export markets for seafood have closed. The crisis has indicated that it may be beneficial for small-scale fisheries to prioritise shorter value chains. Efforts to relocalise national food systems could lead to the provision of a highly nutritious, protein-rich source of food to vulnerable communities, as well as more sustainable, resilient livelihoods for SSFs. ●

# About this webinar

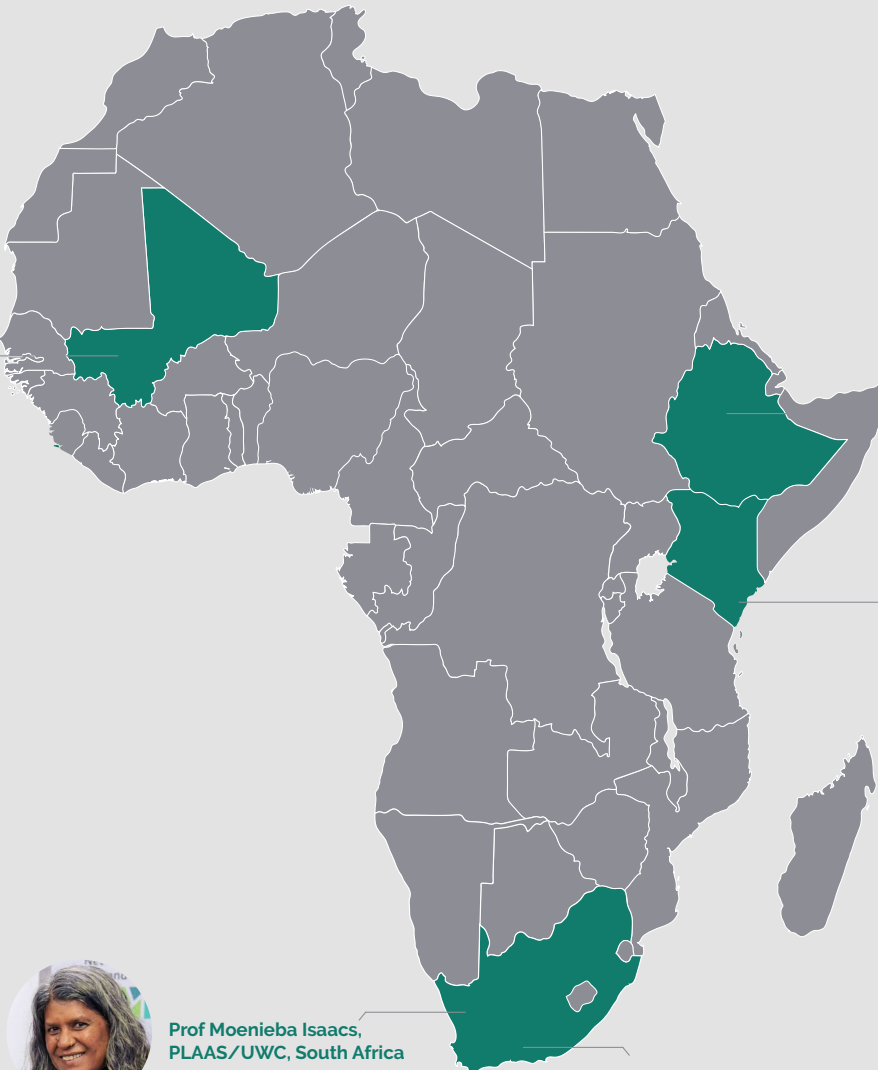
PLAAS offers a short course on “The Political Economy of Land Governance in Africa” through NELGA, which was established under a programme run by the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN) and the African Development Bank (AfDB). In the past two years, the training has been provided to 95 practitioners and scholars from 26 countries across the continent to help them to improve land policy-making and administration at the national and regional levels. In recognition of PLAAS’s contribution, the institute’s host university, UWC, has been incorporated as a “special” node into NELGA’s pan-continental network, which features five other university hubs in North, West, Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. NELGA has forged a partnership of leading African

educational and research institutions with expertise in the field of land governance to strengthen human and institutional capacities for the implementation of the AU’s agenda on land.

The webinar was moderated by Professor Ruth Hall, PLAAS, and addressed: by Dr Joan Kagwanja, Chief, African Land Policy Centre, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA); Professor Mamadou Goïta, Executive Director, Institute for Research and the Promotion of Alternatives in Development (IRPAD); Dr Million Belay, Coordinator, Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA); and Professor Moenieba Isaacs, PLAAS.



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