



Impact of COVID-19 on agriculture, food systems and rural livelihoods in Eastern Africa: Policy and programmatic options

KEY MESSAGES

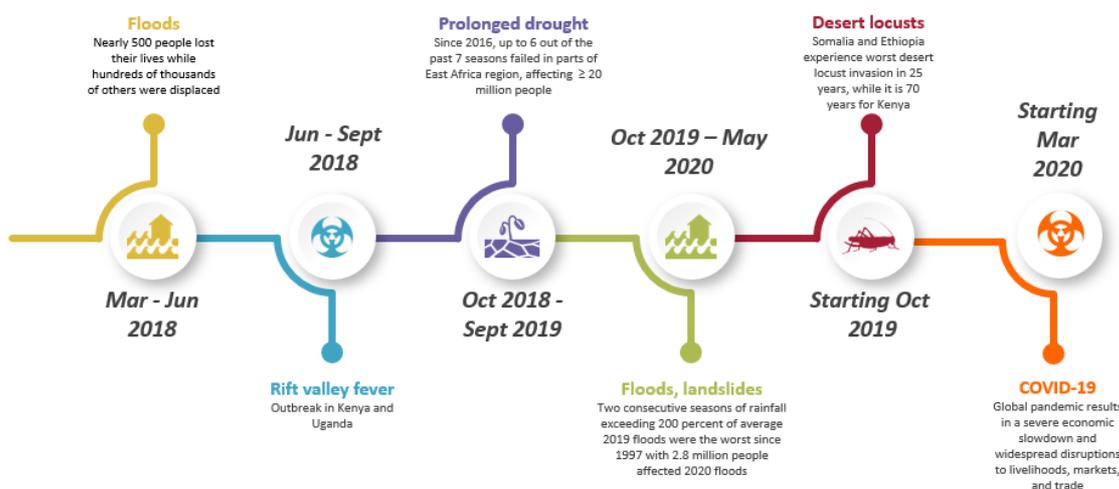
1. The triple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, desert locust invasion and floods has adversely affected food and nutrition security and rural livelihoods in Eastern Africa.
2. Preliminary analyses of the impact of the pandemic in the subregion reveal disruptions to access to agricultural inputs (including labour), extension and advisory services, and output markets for many farmers, fisherfolk and pastoralists.
3. Safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable people is important in the short term. In addition, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) calls for coordinated recovery efforts focused on building the resilience of food systems by targeting the worst affected groups: smallholder farmers (especially pastoralists), children, youth, women, migrants and informal workers, and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

The FAO Subregional Office for Eastern Africa is a technical hub which supports nine countries in Eastern Africa: Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda. It has a core team of professionals with multidisciplinary expertise. It is responsible for developing, promoting, overseeing and implementing agreed strategies for addressing subregional food security, nutrition, agriculture and rural development priorities.

COVID-19 hit the Eastern Africa subregion at a particularly critical time when the economies of a number of countries in the subregion were recovering from the impacts of recent droughts and severe flooding and dealing with the worst desert locust invasion in 25 years. In addition, conflict- and climate-induced displacements are prominent in the subregion, with more than 7 million displaced people in camps or settlement situations in only four countries (1.78 million in Ethiopia, 1.67 million in South Sudan, 2.65 million in Somalia and 1.43 million in Uganda). The cumulative effect of these shocks has eroded the resilience of large segments of the population and strained governments and humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, 2020).

FIGURE 1 | Timeline of recent shocks facing households in Eastern Africa



Source: FAO

To date, all countries in Eastern Africa have recorded cases of COVID-19. To contain the spread of the pandemic, lockdowns, curfews, and travel restrictions were put in place by all countries, to varying degrees, based on reports from FAO country offices. The subregion is predominantly composed of low-income countries (The World Bank, 2020a), with the exception of Djibouti (The World Bank, 2020b) and Kenya (The World Bank, 2020c) that are lower middle-income, and with the majority of the poor populations living in rural areas or informal settlements. Reliance on agriculture and casual daily wages for survival is very high. Livestock is the backbone of the economies of Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan. The livestock sector supports livelihoods of over 40 million people and comprises almost half of the livestock population in sub-Saharan Africa.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD SYSTEMS AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN EASTERN AFRICA

Impacts at the farm level: disruptions in input supply, labour availability and extension services

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the start of the long/*Gu/Belg* rains in Eastern Africa (particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda) and is the peak season for labour-intensive staple food and vegetable production across the region. Human movement restrictions due to COVID-19 have resulted in farm-labour shortages, especially for high-value crops and share cropping farmers. Share cropping is common in parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Countries in the subregion have also reported COVID-19-related disruptions to access to agricultural inputs (seed, fertilizer, veterinary inputs, fish fingerlings and feed), albeit to a varied extent across countries, which will likely drive a reduction in crop yields. Countries that depend on imported supplies, such as Burundi, Djibouti and Eritrea, and landlocked countries, including South Sudan and Uganda, are most affected. Agriculture extension and advisory services have also faced severe disruptions since lockdown measures have been imposed, reducing farmers' access during this critical growing period.

In pastoral regions, livestock-rearing households are also negatively impacted by movement restrictions, especially those preventing cross-border movements, which have interrupted their access to grazing and watering points.

Impacts along the agrifood value chain: interruptions in logistics, processing and market access

Transport along commodity routes have been disrupted by restrictions on cross-border movement. Truck drivers are increasingly reported in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda as a high-risk group for transmission of the disease (Global Voices, 2020), which may lead to further measures on cargo transports that in turn could further disrupt the movement of agricultural goods. In Kenya, concerns over safety and requirements for COVID-19 tests for the long-distance truckers crossing borders in Eastern Africa resulted in a shortage of food truck drivers and delays in the delivery services (Roussi, 2020).

While all governments have declared agricultural products as essential to ensure movements in view of the COVID-19 containment measures, the stay-at-home advice and travel restrictions mean that traders have logistic difficulties, leading to supply delays and post-harvest losses.

Fish trade has been impacted by border controls. For example, the stringent border control measures applied between Kenya and Uganda have interfered with the free trade of tilapia. Even though veterinary services were declared essential services by most countries, they have been affected by movement restrictions (such as live animal and meat inspection at slaughterhouses). Movement restrictions and limited public transports have also halted most vaccination campaigns, and those that are still ongoing have slowed down as organizations have had to adapt to physical distancing.

Labour shortages, due to the stay-at-home policies, are expected to impact production and processing of food, especially for labour-intensive meat and dairy-processing plants. As overall logistics are slowed down, food safety and quality can be negatively affected. With over 90 percent of the volume of meat and dairy processing being informal, COVID-19 prevention and response leave this target group without market, due to lack of access to formal markets. This is particularly true for women, as they often play a key role in high value food-processing activities.

The closure of many informal markets in the urban and peri-urban areas to avoid crowding has disrupted food supply systems, especially for fresh produce such as meat, eggs and milk. In view of this, shifts in consumer demand have been reported. The impact is felt mostly in low-income urban households who rely on these informal food markets. Middle- and higher-income families can buy fresh produce from supermarkets and grocery shops.

The livelihoods of fisheries and aquaculture actors will also be negatively affected due to decreases in consumer demand, disruptions in markets access and logistical bottlenecks (FAO 2020c). For pastoralists, there will be the loss of income from selling livestock and products (milk, butter, gee and eggs), resulting in an increased reliance on the environment (charcoal burning) and overall reduction in the purchasing power of households.

Impacts at the household level: livelihood disruptions for casual labourers and non-farming households

Countrywide lockdown measures, including reduced access to markets, have resulted in job losses and have negatively affected the poor's income-earning opportunities reducing their purchasing power, pushing them to resort to negative coping strategies and widening the poverty gap. Related to the agricultural sector, these include casual labourers supporting on-farm planting or harvesting activities (including migrant labourers), transport operators, petty traders, market vendors, and village-based loan and credit operators.

The closure of local and farmers' markets is limiting access to nutritious foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables for the urban poor. Job losses, combined with a drop in remittances, will limit households' ability to afford healthy diets and basic needs. The temporary closure of schools has resulted in the suspension of school feeding programmes with millions of Eastern African children affected. For example, due to the temporary closure of schools, urban refugee children are eating only once a day (Khan, 2020). Also, as schools are closed and movement restrictions limit more adults, children may be asked to support their families in farm-related work to compensate for adult workforce shortage, both on the family farm and as wage workers. The replacement of adult work on and off farms can expose them to hazardous tasks and strenuous work.

More nuanced analyses of the impacts of COVID-19 in Eastern Africa will be undertaken in the third quarter 2020, once data from planned and ongoing assessments become available.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES TO MITIGATE THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The policy and programmatic recommendations contained in this section are broad and should be adapted to suit the country context. This is also in recognition of the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy recommendations

- **Maintain open borders for the trade of goods and services (including agricultural inputs), especially for critical value chains** while ensuring essential phytosanitary and human health inspections. Moreover, guarantee the safe movement of agricultural workers, including pastoralists within countries and across borders in compliance with international standards and national public health guidelines. In essence, policies should ensure access to goods and services while reducing risks of transmission.
- **Enhance access to digital technologies and services and encourage their use** to minimize face-to-face transactions while allowing provision of a wide range of market-oriented services along the value chain. Cognizant of the digital divide between rural and urban areas, policies should promote different actors (public sector, private sector and civil society organizations) to support farmers' production and marketing activities and raise communities' awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic. The heterogeneity of producers and the plurality of services call on governments to take a systems approach, promote collaboration and ensure inclusiveness in the provision of services.
- **Support micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and farmers organizations/cooperatives through dedicated financial facilities and other forms of support**, such as fiscal incentives. Fiscal measures could comprise relaxation of corporate taxation to preserve businesses' cash flow. For instance, extend tax filing deadline, defer

VAT payments, delay or suspend employers' social security contribution. Emergency credit lines and loan programmes at low interest rates and guarantee facilities are essential for keeping businesses operational. Attention should be given to young agripreneurs who risk being disproportionately affected by losses and financial burdens. Many of them are trying to adapt their business models and introducing local innovations that could positively affect the overall sustainability of food systems (from online marketing and sales to shorter value chains).

- **Scale up and strengthen social protection measures to enable poor, vulnerable and marginalized rural and urban households to meet their basic needs.** Social Protection (SP) responses are essential to mitigate the health, social and economic shocks of COVID-19 over both the short and medium terms. These protection measures should improve registries and databases of beneficiaries of SP measures for effective targeting, efficiency, transparency and accountability to avoid leakages in benefits. Social protection interventions should be inclusive of the rural poor, agricultural and informal workers, women including migrants, and other vulnerable groups in the peripheries. Additionally, SP measures should follow a nutrition-sensitive approach to increase the contribution of these programmes in reducing food insecurity and malnutrition, and maximize the benefits of an increased affordability of healthy diets.
- **Strengthen regional cooperation, enhance partnerships and cross-border coordination.** Governments and organizations should share best practices and lessons to build inclusive resilient pathways for stronger rural livelihoods and food systems. Countries should revisit their national and regional trade policies to ensure alignment with the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. Additionally, explore opportunities for digital cross-border trade, and digital connectivity to support value chains and markets, as well as government services such as extension. These actions will enable rural farming communities to withstand the impact of the present and future food crises. Agricultural and food security information systems should be strengthened for effective early warning systems for sustainable agriculture and food systems. Governments and organizations should advocate for national and regional COVID-19 responses and consider the potential impacts of the pandemic on already existing conflict and peace drivers in fragile and conflict-affected areas.

Priorities for agriculture and resilience programming

- **Monitoring the situation (data, information and analysis) is critical for informed action.** Joint action across agencies is needed to monitor the consequences of the pandemic on agriculture, food security and incomes. This joint action should include the interface of multiple shocks such as COVID-19, locust and floods. Monitoring should be linked to the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG), co-chaired by IGAD and FAO, and prioritize the use of the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) indicator of severe and moderate or severe food insecurity (SDG indicator 2.1.2). These groups regularly share information on food security and nutrition in Central and Eastern Africa through monthly updates, regional IPC maps, the FIES indicators and ad hoc early warning products.
- **Safeguard the most vulnerable livelihoods is imperative to food security in the subregion.** It is critical that ongoing humanitarian assistance is not hindered but adapted or adjusted to the COVID-19 situation. This entails continuing and scaling up (as needed) distributions of agricultural inputs (seeds, tools and livestock feed) and providing animal health

support to ensure continuous food production and income-generation in the most vulnerable areas, including continuing locust control operations.

- **Appraise the status of service provision from a pluralistic service system perspective.** It is central to identify the diverse actors and networks that are involved in the provision of rural services, from both the demand-side (producers and their associations) and supply-side (service providers from public, private, NGOs, producer organizations, etc.). Appraising the system will serve to understand the disruptions arising from the pandemic and inform policy dialogues on the needs, gaps, and bottlenecks in the service system as well as opportunities of improvement in supporting small-scale actors of the food system.
- **Adapting and scaling up of CASH+ interventions** through combining unconditional cash transfers with agricultural livelihoods inputs, assets and services is an effective way to boost purchasing power and prevent affected families from selling off their assets.
- **Support open food supply chains.** Governments and organizations should support the continuous functioning of local food markets, value chains and systems, focusing on vulnerable smallholder farmers and food workers. Programmes should also support areas that are critical to the food supply for vulnerable urban areas. This entails promoting group collection and direct delivery channels to consumers or processing companies of perishable products with focus on vegetables, milk and meat, including e-commerce opportunities.
- **Promote decent work and a gradual transition to formality in the informal rural economy,** while supporting the organization and voice of rural informal workers, including youth, women and migrant workers. Ensure that messages about the importance of maintaining children in schools and protecting them from hazardous work are consistently disseminated.
- **Provide support for the adoption of climate-smart approaches (e.g. agro-ecology) and 'green' innovations** (e.g. production of organic fertilizers) along the value chain. These could become a source of green job opportunities for rural youth if associated with targeted skills building programmes.
- **Incentivize smallholder farmers (through training and subsidy) for good storage methods, food preservation and value addition,** particularly for perishable items (fruits, vegetables, milk and meat products) that contribute to a healthy diet. Local aggregation centres, food reserves and village food banks should be encouraged and can also offer employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for youth. Locally based models and mechanisms for bulk-buying and distribution and selling of inputs to farmers should be scaled up along with community and local food systems.
- **Mitigate food losses and improve market access and quality** by supporting farmer groups, associations and small and medium-sized enterprises for mechanization and appropriate technology for post-harvest storage and processing.
- **Support livelihood diversification and home-based food production** (such as backyard gardens, and poultry), especially among particularly vulnerable segments of populations to protect food availability and improved access to food and healthy diets. This includes

intensifying support for subsistence food production among displaced populations in IDP/refugee camps and host communities.

- **Adjust advisory services.** Provide alternative means to reach communities in a restricted movement situation, for example, through mobile-based applications or farmer-to-farmer extension and dissemination modalities. In so doing, partner with local champions and organizations as infomediaries, especially youth, given their familiarity with digital tools.
- **Limit virus transmission risk in food supply chains.** This can be done by providing guidelines and supporting dissemination mechanisms for COVID-19 to reduce exposure, control and prevent transmission along the supply chains, including ensuring safe transportation channels for migrants, providing protective gears for agricultural workers, making workplace arrangements that ensure physical distancing and adequate hygiene in working and living areas, and supporting respective country-level food inspection.

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