



**REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE EASTERN AND
SOUTHERN AFRICAN REGION**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that the spread of COVID-19 is on the rise, with the total global numbers of infected people, as of 24 April 2020, recorded at 2 719 897, with 187 705 recorded deaths globally¹. In-addition, a total of 45 countries in the African region have experienced increases in the total number of infections. The African region has reported 19 497 cases of infected people, with 812 recorded deaths.

Given the rapid speed of the spread of COVID-19, governments across the African continent have imposed measures such as lockdowns or quarantines in their countries to “flatten the curve” and slow the spread of the virus. Some of the decisive measures taken by the African governments have included travel bans to or through the respective countries. However, the global pandemic has negatively impacted economies across the board. The respective African governments’ health, social and economic responses to the outbreak of the virus have had a further adverse effect on the regional and national economies, plunging key sectors, such as the agriculture sector to socio-economic turmoil.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic will cost Africa a gross domestic product (GDP) loss of between USD22.1 billion, in a best-case scenario- and USD88.3 billion, in a worst-case scenario. It is also projected that Africa might experience a recession with the continuation of the spread of the virus².

In the agricultural sector, the available evidence has underscored the impact of the virus on access to markets and finance for women farmers and food security for the rural and urban vulnerable groups. The COVID-19 outbreak is projected to exacerbate food insecurity in Africa, with lockdown and quarantine measures disrupting supply chains and food productions³. About 70 per cent of Africa’s food is produced by women, with empirical evidence highlighting that in Southern Africa, rural women are the primary food crop producers, while men are involved in animal husbandry or labor off the farm. Correspondingly, women are also responsible for the care of children, the sick and elderly. This means women may experience increased exposure to the virus, with knock-on effects for food production and the already precarious nutrition gap on the continent.

¹ Minister of Health South Africa, ‘Progress on COVID-19: South Africa Public Health Response’, 26 April 2020.

² Akinwumi Adesina, ‘The Pandemic Is No Time for Fiscal Distancing’, *The Pandemic Is No Time for Fiscal Distancing* (blog), 3 April 2020, <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/opinion-pandemic-no-time-fiscal-distancing-35086>.

³ Libby George, ‘COVID-19 Is Exacerbating Food Shortages in Africa’, *COVID-19 Is Exacerbating Food Shortages in Africa* (blog), 27 April 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/africa-coronavirus-covid19-imports-exports-food-supply-chains>.

Consequently, context-specific responses are critical in mitigating the adverse impact of the pandemic and to inform policymakers, CSOs and the private sector in effectively responding to the pandemic, as well as the pathway to recovery.

It is against this background that the Graça Machel Trust (GMT), in partnership with the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), co-convened a webinar on 17 April 2020. GMT is a Pan-African institution whose vision is to nurture caring societies that value social justice; and promote and protect the rights of women and children. FANRPAN is a multi-stakeholder, multi-national policy network that supports the development and implementation of better food, agriculture and national resources (FANR) policies in Africa.

The webinar sought to establish the effects of COVID-19 on agribusiness and food systems in the ESA region. In particular, the webinar was to establish the direct impact on women in agribusiness, and how governments have responded to the pandemic and establishing the impact on food systems in the short-, medium- and long-term; as well provide recommendations to ensure responsive measures are provided.

The report presents summaries of presentations and discussions on country case studies as well as the ripple effect of COVID-19 on agribusiness value chains that were made during the webinar by various stakeholders.

2. SCOPE OF WEBINAR

The webinar mainly focused on the impact of COVID-19 on smallholder farming households, agriculture markets and food and nutrition security in the ESA region. Perspectives from women in agribusiness farmers, researchers, CSOs and government were explored. Further, country case studies from South Africa and Tanzania were presented and discussed.

3. SUMMARIES OF THE PRESENTATIONS

Opening remarks were delivered by Dr Shungu Gwarinda, the Director of Programmes and Interim Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from GMT, who welcomed participants and unpacked the objectives of the webinar. The Facilitator, Prof. Simbarashe Sibanda from FANRPAN, provided an outline of the program, laying ground rules and introducing the panelists.

Five (5) presentations were made during the webinar. The first was delivered by Dr Sifiso Ntombela, from the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) of South Africa. The presentation focused on the *Impact of COVID 19 on Agriculture Measures for recovery and growth* in South Africa. Specific emphasis was on: COVID-19 shocks on the country's economy and health systems; the sectoral impact of COVID-19 under three possible scenarios; the

impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and food system; evidence-based resource allocation and policy reforms; and re-imagining agriculture and the food sector.

The second presentation was a case study on Tanzania and was delivered by Mr Desmond Mushi from the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), with support from Mr Denis Vegulla. The presentation, titled: *RAPID Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19*, unpacked an in-depth assessment and analysis on the potential and real impacts of COVID-19 on Tanzania's economy, livelihoods and welfare of vulnerable communities based on the best case scenario; moderate - most likely scenario; and worst-case scenario. The significance of sectors i.e. agriculture, forestry and fishing, wholesale and retail trade, and the degree of risk associated with COVID-19 were also explored.

Mr Sydney Kurai Zharare from DevPact delivered the third presentation focusing on *Establishing the effects of COVID-19 on agribusiness and food systems in Eastern and Southern African*. Sydney unpacked the ripple effect of COVID-19 on agribusiness value chains, focusing on a gendered lens. The gendered lens was underscored as a critical aspect, because the impact of COVID will disproportionately affect women and the ability of the household to earn.

Dr Shungu Gwarinda from GMT gave reflections on the African Women in Agribusiness network (AWAB). AWAB aims to address challenges in food security and identify opportunities for women in the agricultural sector, the network advocates for initiatives that enhance women's competitiveness in local and global markets and seeks to foster market linkages for women, connecting them to projects in the agricultural sector that can improve their access to resources, knowledge and training.

Finally, a presentation on Policy Implications was delivered by Dr Njongenhle Nyoni on behalf of the FANRPAN CEO and Head of Mission, Dr Tshilidzi Madzivhandila. The presentation highlighted the need for countries in the ESA region to approach decision making from three perspectives; the short-term, medium-term, and the long-term, as detailed below:

Short-Term Policy Implications:

- i. Ensure that contingency plans are in place to minimize the impact of lockdowns.
- ii. Governments should closely and consistently monitor the prices of essential food products and address any unfair practices by retailers.
- iii. Implement transparent dissemination of information to strengthen government management over food markets, prevent people from panicking and stockpiling, and guide farmers to make rational production decisions.

Medium-Term Policy Implications:

- iv. Increase urban and peri-urban access to fresh produce by expanding vegetable farms in the suburbs and establishing reserves.
- v. Nip market speculation and temporary inflation in the bud, that is, governments should strengthen market regulation.
- vi. Ensure smooth logistical operations of national and regional agricultural and food supply chains, taking advantage of the recently launched African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Long-Term Policy Implications:

- i. Ensure social protection measures are either strengthened, retained, or put into place to protect the most vulnerable.
- ii. Reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable - governments should work in tandem with non-state actors such as civil society, private sector and international aid agencies.
- iii. Ensure the smooth flow of global trade and make full use of the intra-regional trade and international markets to secure food supply.

In conclusion, the Facilitator provided a summary of the webinar, highlighting key messages. Dr Gwarinda delivered her closing remarks, and the meeting was adjourned.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the COVID-19 pandemic presents an extraordinary challenge for governments across the globe, the challenges that characterize agribusiness and food systems since the global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus have resulted in heightened insecurity and signals a need for balancing public health concerns as well as economic realities.

Due to the various lockdowns and quarantine measures implemented by government officials within the ESA region, there will be significant disruptions experienced within the agricultural sectors, particularly on job security and production. This is of particular importance because agriculture forms a significant component of the economies of all African countries, with agriculture contributing 15 per cent of Africa's total GDP annually. Also, as a sector, agriculture can contribute to the attainment of both continental and global developmental frameworks - the African Union's Agenda 2063 as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example aspiration 5 under Agenda 2063, modern agriculture for increased productivity and production as well as SDG 2, end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

Therefore, the following policy recommendations are pertinent:

- Policymakers need to incorporate a systems thinking approach in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, to mitigate the immediate-, medium-, and long-term impact of the pandemic on agribusiness and food systems within the ESA region. A systems thinking approach is proposed due to food and agriculture systems having been developed and created by solving individual problems without much attention to the interconnected nature and relationships that build up the system as a whole. Through looking at solutions with a multi-stakeholder lens and including many opinions, diverse solutions, and taking into account the interconnected nature of food and agriculture systems, governments can effectively mitigate the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- There is a direct need to consider the gender lens to the economic relief measures. This is premised on the empirical evidence shows that women account for half of the globe's smallholder farmers and women farmers produce 70 per cent of Africa's Food ⁴. Most of the women farmers are smallholders, reliant on low-quality seeds; during the pandemic the women farmers will experience diminishing crop yields, income and food insecurity. When their livelihoods are precarious, this presents broader challenges for Africa's food security and fuels the already precarious nutrition gap.

⁴ Jamila Abass, 'Women Grow 70% of Africa's Food. But Have Few Rights over the Land They Tend', 21 March 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/03/women-farmers-food-production-land-rights/>.