



National agrifood systems and COVID-19 in ECOWAS

Effects, policy responses, and long-term implications

This country profile covers responses and effects up to end of July 2020

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant pressure on health systems all around the world. The drastic measures established to contain its spread are creating serious impediments to economic activity (including agrifood systems) and, consequently, to livelihoods and food security and nutrition.

The COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates both how health and food systems are linked to one another, and how local food systems are linked to global systems. High rates of urbanization and the globalization of trade and travel have contributed to the spread of the virus across countries. Lockdowns and movement restrictions within countries and across borders have disrupted national and local food and agricultural output and input markets and have caused sharp reductions in overall economic activity globally. In poorer countries, disruptions have further exacerbated the fragility of systems (including agrifood systems) and livelihoods.

The Global Report on Food Crises 2020 found that 135 million people in 55 countries and territories are facing acute food insecurity at “crisis” level or higher – a situation that requires urgent action. The report further concluded that over 183 million people were experiencing a “stressed” level of acute food insecurity and bore a high risk of sliding into a “crisis” level if confronted by with additional shocks (FSIN, 2020). The situation is particularly worrisome in light of the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the situation evolves, the question arises as to how, or whether, food, health and financial and economic systems could become better prepared to prevent similar outbreaks from escalating into a full-blown economic and social crisis.

This report is part of a series of country profiles that describe: (i) policy measures enacted by governments to contain the spread of the virus; (ii) policies and measures to stabilize the functioning of agri-food systems; (iii) potential effects of policies on agri-food systems and vulnerable groups. Finally, the profiles also assess longer-term options for agri-food system policies and investments so as to make them more resilient.

POLICY MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID-19

What major measures have been taken to contain the spread of the virus? How are they evolving?

All governments of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) member States have taken measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and limit the harm that the pandemic could inflict on the region. All member States have adopted more or less similar measures, albeit with different timelines. The main measures have included:

- the establishment by decree of a public health state of emergency and a nighttime curfew;
- restrictions on domestic travel (between most capital cities and the rest of the country) and the closure of borders with other member States;
- the closure of markets, schools, restaurants and places of worship (mosques and churches);
- strictly enforced temporary full lockdowns in some States (Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria), with varying durations;
- compulsory wearing of masks.

Most countries have allowed certain exemptions, especially in the health and agrifood sectors, to protect the growing season, which is just beginning, and to mitigate the risk of shortages in the agriculture, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture sectors in the coming months.

AGRIFOOD POLICY MEASURES TO RESPOND TO THE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

What are the major measures (in place or expected) to be enacted aiming at the food system directly?

Most ECOWAS countries have exemptions in place to allow the movement of agricultural produce and food. For highly import-dependent countries such as Liberia, however, these exemptions are unlikely to compensate for shortfalls over the coming months due to reduced exports by the main agricultural exporters (China, the European Union).

ECOWAS quickly highlighted the importance of keeping trade flows among its member countries as high as possible, especially for health and food products. In a video conference on 30 March 2020, the ministers in charge of agriculture and food in the region agreed to set up several programmes (ECOWAS, 2020a) containing a range of measures, such as “safeguarding food supply chains, including through the free cross-border movement of food; supporting local food supplies (shops with referenced food prices and other schemes); securing access to production areas and units to support production (access to production resources such as inputs, credit and agricultural advice); promoting group buying from producers in order to guarantee supply to consumers and ensure fair prices for farmers; monitoring and controlling crop pests; and preventing, monitoring and controlling transboundary animal diseases”. The ECOWAS Commission shall implement all these forms of intervention in a coordinated manner with its member States by setting up a regional task force to ensure synergy and efficiency.

The Commission will also implement measures at the regional level to bolster member States' efforts. The measures will include mobilizing internal and external resources to boost the

intervention capacity of the Regional Food Security Reserve,¹ with an additional 100 000 tonnes by the end of 2021, and mobilizing internal and external resources (stronger regional partnership), in particular to prevent and control transboundary animal diseases, plant diseases and plant pests by effectively implementing regional mechanisms adopted by member States.

What policy measures are in place or expected that aim to mitigate the effect of the crisis on vulnerable groups and their livelihoods?

During the Extraordinary Session of 23 April 2020, the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government reaffirmed their firm commitment to take appropriate action to “implement urgent measures to support the local production of consumer goods, including agricultural commodities, thereby reducing the import bill for these goods”, and “to avoid the imposition of import restrictions on other ECOWAS countries, particularly with regard to essential goods (drugs, food, etc.)” (ECOWAS, 2020b).

Social protection measures:

Most member countries have set up support funds for vulnerable populations in the form of social transfers (Chad, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire). When it comes to making food affordable for everybody, and especially for vulnerable people in the lean season during this health crisis, “the focus is on:

- promoting social food and nutritional safety net projects and, in particular, productive net actions strengthening the economic and social integration of vulnerable populations in peri-urban and rural areas;
- mobilizing water and developing its multiple uses, particularly for human needs and agriculture;
- mobilizing the expansion of the Regional Food Security Reserve stocks at its three levels (local, national and regional);
- carrying out grouped negotiations of supply contracts between the region and countries supplying equipment and agricultural inputs;
- developing contractual storage with the private sector in the countries and supporting intra-regional trade in local agricultural products from surplus production basins to deficit areas both within the countries and between ECOWAS member States” (CEDEAO, 2020a).

In addition, the Commission proposes ensuring that member States receive humanitarian assistance under the regional humanitarian assistance mechanism, with the support of technical and financial partners.

How is the government funding the measures described above?

Certain regional funding mechanisms for measures already in place, or expected, that aim to considerably mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 food crisis were proposed during the virtual meeting of agriculture, forestry, livestock and fisheries ministers organized by the ECOWAS

¹ The Regional Food Security Reserve was created by the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire on 28 February 2013. In particular, the reserve aims to complement the work carried out by the member States and provides quick and diversified food and nutritional aid.

Commission on 31 March 2020. According to the summary of conclusions and recommendations of the meeting, the mechanisms involve, in particular:

- “the operationalization of the Regional Food and Agriculture Fund, the holding of the 1st session of the Supervisory Board and the implementation of assistance operations in the field;
- compliance by the ECOWAS Commission with the commitments made to replenish the Regional Food and Agriculture Fund with resources at the minimum and timely allocation of USD 2 million per annum;
- sensitization of technical and financial partners for the replenishment of the Regional Food and Agriculture Fund in accordance with the commitments made;
- animation of information systems (production, markets, stocks, etc.) and strengthening them so that they can continue to provide a basis for analysis and decision support;”
- advocacy by ECOWAS for member States' creditors to provide “relief, or even the cancellation of countries' external debt service and the allocation of the resources released to finance priority expenditure, including that of the agricultural sector as a whole”;
- rapid preparation by the ECOWAS Commission of “structuring investment projects in the mobilization of water resources and the development of multiple uses of water, with priority being given to emergency projects in response to the situation in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Northern Nigeria and Cabo Verde;
- preparation of new investment projects to develop cereals (rice, maize, millet, sorghum, fonio), tubers (manioc, yam, taro, etc.), cowpeas, soya, livestock (poultry, aquaculture, pig farming, small ruminants, cattle, camel, etc.), milk, fruit and vegetables and the processing of agricultural products” (CEDEAO, 2020a).

3 · IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS ON MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM

What are the immediate effects of the crisis and the different sets of measures on agrifood systems?

In most ECOWAS member countries, the crisis and the response measures have already had several impacts on agrifood systems:

- Food production could be harmed by the disrupted growing season and input supply problems.
- Prices have risen for certain local staples such as cereals (rice, maize, millet, etc.) due to food supply-chain disruptions in most member States.
- Access to markets for food and agricultural produce has been hampered by transport problems in many countries, leading to a slump in farmers' prices in production areas and a shortage of produce in high-consumption areas.
- In import-dependent countries such as Liberia and Cabo Verde, the reduction in international commercial transport could affect market supply.

What have been the immediate effects of the pandemic and the various measures taken on people's livelihoods, food security, malnutrition status and future prospects?

The sub-region of West Africa is already experiencing food security and nutrition problems. Although production during the 2019–20 agricultural campaign was, on average, slightly higher than during the previous campaign, in some countries (Cabo Verde, the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Niger), production was significantly down on the yearly average for the last five years. In addition, the pastoral situation is also difficult, due to significant fodder shortages in Senegal, Mauritania, and in parts of Mali and Niger. These shortages are compounded by restrictions on cross-border transhumance and reduced access to pastures due to the security crisis, which could become worse as a result of COVID-19 response measures.

Food market prices have shown an upward trend since the start of 2020. COVID-related mobility restrictions could further fuel that trend. Inflation, local currency depreciation, and cotton and oil price slumps could all further exacerbate the impacts of the health crisis. The resurgence of a locust or fall armyworm invasion and transboundary animal diseases could also impact food and nutrition security (FCPN, 2020).

In addition, prices of perishable foods (fish, fruits, vegetables, etc.) have collapsed, considerably harming the livelihoods of producers and local populations because of measures taken by countries to drastically reduce movements between areas where products are produced (rural areas) and areas where they are sold (urban areas), especially capital cities.

Which groups are most likely to be severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated measures?

Many key groups in the region are likely to be severely affected by the COVID situation. Vulnerable, high-risk groups include:

- households of farmers, agropastoralists and pastoralists (Chad, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso);
- artisanal fishers (all coastal ECOWAS member States and Chad);
- victims of conflict, insecurity and terrorism (Sahelian countries);
- children under five and malnourished pregnant and breastfeeding women;
- households headed by older people and persons with disabilities and chronic illnesses (Chad, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso);
- adolescents and youth in schools who use school canteens;
- workers in the informal economy;
- seasonal migrant workers (farm workers, small-scale fishermen, traders, etc.) who migrate between ECOWAS member States.

4 · FOOD FOR REFLECTION: LONG-TERM POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This section serves to initiate thinking and dialogue on the longer-term implications of COVID-19 in terms of management of the food system to prevent a health crisis and that a health crisis turns into a food security and nutrition emergency.

What structural factors are exacerbating the impacts of crises such as COVID 19? What are the long-term policy implications?

Like in many other regional and multilateral organizations, the initial COVID-19 responses in ECOWAS were taken by each member State. "The initial instinctive reaction to the COVID-19 crisis by most countries was to look inwards and act alone. As a consequence, borders have been closed, supply chains disrupted, and thus regional economic activity has fallen" (Kalinina, 2020). West Africa's highly regionalized agrifood systems have generated some bottlenecks, which have had a negative impact on the availability of food in certain markets and on food loss and waste in production areas. This crisis should be used as an opportunity to reflect on the added value that a more integrated regional response would bring, with a stronger capacity at the regional level to respond to transboundary and global crises like COVID-19.

Notable measures taken by countries in the region to slow down and contain the number of contaminations include border closures, domestic and cross-border travel restrictions, public transport restrictions, curfews, quarantines and, in some cases, closures of markets. These measures are structural factors that strongly disrupt agriculture, forestry, livestock, fisheries, economic activity and the normal functioning of local markets. They also reduce work opportunities. This situation puts livelihoods at risks, which could exacerbate the problems people are facing in accessing basic food, which is preventing them from eating a good, varied diet and severely impacting the nutrition status of mothers and young children.

Are there any discussions on how the food system can be linked to health crises?

Discussions have been held within the ECOWAS Commission on food safety issues, and regulations/instruments are currently being developed or put forward for adoption by member states. However, the commission has not yet initiated discussions on the linkages between food systems and health crises such as COVID-19 in the context of the West Africa region.

It is important to note that this COVID-19 health crisis has tested the integrated regional food system promoted and supported by the ECOWAS Commission. Since border closures and travel restrictions have blocked traditional regional food supply chains, supplies have not reached food-processing factories and have not reached member States that receive processed food. The COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the sometimes-complex links that exist between fragile health systems and fragile food systems, especially where supply chains are fragile at the national and regional levels.

One of the main lessons learned from this COVID-19 pandemic is that it is imperative to engage in a long-term political and strategic reflection that would significantly reduce the chronic external food dependency of ECOWAS member States' food and nutrition systems by providing support for the local production and processing of food products consumed in each country. For such food systems to be sustainable, they must reflect the extraordinary potential that local institutions have to enhance people's quality of life through a range of social, economic and environmental functions and services that are essential for the whole of society. Effective action at the regional and local level could boost food and nutrition security in rural and urban areas,

ensure that economic growth is consistent and beneficial to all, create decent jobs for young people and considerably reduce the root causes of forced migration to urban areas. In practice, this would require the mobilisation and implementation of confidence-building measures to foster, *inter alia*, greater equality of opportunity, including gender equality, sustainable natural resource management, climate resilience, and access to renewable energy sources (including wind and solar power), telecommunications and health care.

A first step would be a discussion about the types of effective programmes, mechanisms and policies that would strengthen the resilience of member States' food systems through regional cooperation. The various options available include strengthening the regional agricultural reserve to make it more flexible and ensure it can be mobilized more quickly to meet the urgent food and nutrition needs of rural populations; creating an innovation hub, funded by import levies, to boost the productivity of the region's agriculture and food systems; and implementing operational mechanisms on the ground to keep cross-border food supply chains open in the event of a pandemic. These mechanisms could also include an export ban and/or the suspension of other trade barriers during times of crisis, which would be done in compliance with World Trade Organization rules.

5 · INFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

Thanks to the ECOWAS Commission's system of governance, an emergency ministerial video conference was held at the very start of the health crisis to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on food and nutrition security in West Africa. "The objective was to initiate exchanges between ministers in charge of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, to collect their analyses and orientations in the face of the health crisis caused by COVID-19 as well as other scourges such as armyworms, the announced locust invasion and transboundary animal diseases affecting the region. The aim was to initiate the preparation of a regional action plan to curb the impact of COVID-19 on food security while strengthening the resilience of the populations and to continue the progress made in recent years to achieve global food and nutritional security for the region by 2025" (ECOWAS, 2020a). On instruction of the ministers, the ECOWAS Commission's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Water Resources drafted a regional action plan.

Due to a lack of data, changes to the governance structure in the agrifood system are not yet apparent. Nevertheless, data and information collected by member States in the field will be transferred in due course to the ECOWAS Commission, which will evaluate such changes and, most importantly, their impact on economic and multisectoral integration policies in ECOWAS.

Finding appropriate and concerted responses, bringing the pandemic under control and overcoming it will require international coordination based on continual discussion within the ECOWAS area. To this end, ECOWAS intends to hold discussions with (i) the G-20, particularly regarding restrictive measures affecting international markets for food products and affecting supplies in West Africa; (ii) the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), to design a shared response plan and deploy a common strategy to strengthen national and regional food reserves; and (iii) ECOWAS's main technical and financial partners, to assess the impact of the crisis on current programmes and to define a common post-COVID strategy.

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