

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON AGRICULTURE SUPPLY CHAINS AND CHILD LABOUR – JANUARY 2021

The [PACE consortium](#) is a partnership of private sector, academic, media development and civil society organisations working together to combat the exploitation of children in the worst forms of child labour (WFCL). Working in some of the world's most challenging places for children, PACE aims to identify the most effective approaches to tackling the worst forms of child labour through a combination of innovation and tried and tested methods.

The global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has fundamentally upended the global economy and its supply chains. Data reports are almost all unanimous in their view that the economic consequences are far-reaching, damaging the livelihoods of billions worldwide. These impacts will be experienced most dramatically among the poorest and most disadvantaged communities, whose livelihoods are mostly dependant on informal economies in often volatile sectors, such as agriculture and the food industry.

Agriculture and food supply chains are heavily impacted by the pandemic due to border closures, changes in demand, limited trade, imposed quarantine measures and production disruption. The impacts of COVID-19 on agriculture are two-fold and have varying effects in different regions of the world. Firstly, COVID-19 disrupts planning and production in the agricultural process. While many supply chains actors in the formal economy struggle to meet the increased demand for products, others, in the informal economy are unable to market their products due to lockdown restrictions.ⁱ Secondly, economic disruption within agriculture can cause additional consequences that affect a much broader population, where extreme food insecurity levels puts health and lives, as well as livelihoods, in immediate danger.ⁱⁱ This leads to further hunger and famine, as well as an increased level of poverty and child labour. Thus, the secondary impacts of COVID 19 on agriculture are both more severe and far-reaching. Comprehensive research on the COVID 19 impacts on economies, supply chains and agricultural production processes are therefore crucially important in mitigating the severity of these potential consequences and the prevention of downward spirals into complete economic collapse, extreme food shortages and deprivation.

GENERAL IMPACTS ON AGRICULTURE:

The agriculture sector produces economic benefits for a large proportion of the global workforce. The total employment of workers in the agricultural sector globally is 26.8%, providing livelihoods to more than one billion people. Subsequently, 60.4% of those 26.8% are workers living in developing and low-incomes countries, to which the contribution of agriculture is up to two-thirds of gross domestic product in some of those countries.ⁱⁱⁱ Agriculture represents a critical and often sole source of income for disadvantaged communities and the people within in, most of whom work exclusively within the informal economy. Therefore, any fluctuations in the production process and disruption to supply chains as a result of COVID-19 triggers dramatic consequences for those living on the edge of hunger and poverty.

Logistical challenges within supply chains created by the closure or reduction of cross-border trade routes, restricting movement, demand and production of goods, resulting in food insecurity, poverty and deepened economic vulnerability to future shocks. The situation before the current global pandemic paints a disturbing picture. Agricultural workers were already experiencing the highest incidence of working poverty, with a quarter in extreme poverty.^{iv} Previous food crises and disruptions in the agriculture sector in 2007 and 2008 caused an estimated 130 to 155 million people to fall into poverty.^v According to the 2020 Global Food Crises report released in April, in the 55 countries and territories covered, 75 million children were stunted and 17 million suffered from wasting in 2019.^{vi}

The cuts in production as a result of COVID-19 resulted in direct income loss for the most vulnerable, further increasing these poverty levels. Restricted movement is particularly de-stabilising for agriculture workers in the informal sectors who depend on direct physical access to markets for their products in neighbouring locales. Inaccessibility to alternative markets leads to food waste, increased poverty and child malnourishment in fragile economies. The temporary suspension of tea trade in Kenya in April 2020 as a result of the pandemic had a destructive knock-on effect into tea supply chains with factories, warehouses and transporters, as well as farms, forced to stop production and lay off pluckers, who are among the most disadvantaged workers and highly vulnerable to economic reversal.^{vii} The stagnation of the tea trade during this period was believed to have negatively affected around 600,000 small-scale farmers and

wage workers in Kenya.^{viii} Moreover, high-value perishable commodities, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, fish, milk and flowers, are more particularly affected.^{ix} The global crash in demand from hotels and restaurants has seen prices of agricultural commodities drop by 20%.^x In addition, agricultural workers are more likely to be excluded from protection programmes and national labour laws due to the seasonality of agricultural production, a pre-existing problem even further exacerbated by the Covid-19 health crisis. The ILO reports that many of the affected regions faced significant increases in school drop-out rates and the incidence of child labour, due to unaffordable school costs and a lack of adequate food.^{xi}

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) demonstrated particular concern with regard to food access in the medium and long run in its April 2020 report. The COVID 19 induced economic challenges were predicted to result in a stagnation of employability, leaving many jobless and without urgently needed incomes. According to FAO analysis, “in the absence of timely and effective policies, millions more are likely to join the ranks of the hungry as a result of the COVID-19-triggered recession”.^{xii} In turn, as demand for food continues to decrease over the next months, prices drops are likely to ensue beyond 2020, directly impacting on the profitability of farmers and the agricultural sector.^{xiii}

Additional issues regarding the prevailing informality of the agriculture sector in the shadow of the COVID 19 crisis are the health risks faced by agriculture workers. Working in close proximity to others, coupled with typically crowded living spaces near production sites, increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19.^{xiv} Many lack access to appropriate personal protective equipment and health safety protocols. The UN reported female fish vendors working in crowded markets with limited access to sanitation and hygiene facilities^{xv} were exposed to a greater risk of infection. Moreover, the current crisis increases the vulnerability of women to higher risks of trafficking, exploitation and sexual abuse fuelled by increased poverty, unemployment and social isolation brought on by covid-19 disruption and restrictions.

COUNTRY FOCUS IMPACTS – AFRICA AND PACE COUNTRIES:

The Covid 19 crisis brings potentially serious consequences for large parts of Africa specifically. Currently, 650–670 million people in Africa, roughly half of the population, already face food insecurity. Of those, more than 250 million people are classed as severely food insecure.^{xvi} Economically, COVID-19 induced changes pose an existential threat. Agriculture is one of Africa’s most important economic sectors, making up 23 percent of the continent’s GDP. In sub-Saharan Africa, it provides work for nearly 60 percent of the economically active population.^{xvii} Africa’s exports of food and agricultural products are worth between \$35 billion and \$40 billion a year, and some \$8 billion a year flows through intra-regional trade in these products. In addition, Africa’s food and agricultural imports amount to between \$45 billion and \$50 billion a year—along with \$6 billion a year in imports of agricultural inputs.^{xviii}

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is compounding climate-induced challenges such as droughts, locust swarms, hard rainfall and water shortage, further lowering the standard of living. The crisis has devastated demand for agricultural goods in some areas and created significant demand in others, further exacerbating food insecurity on the continent, owing to loss of income combined with food price increases caused by localized supply shocks and depreciating currencies.^{xix}

According to some estimations, more than 150 million Africans could lose all or part of their livelihoods as a result of the pandemic. Job losses are likely to disproportionately affect low-income earners and informal jobs in urban areas. Factoring in the impact of these job losses on dependents, it is likely that between 400 million and 460 million people in Africa are facing the prospect of reduced incomes.^{xx} Supply disruptions could put between \$1 billion and \$5 billion of export value at risk for 2020 and affect the livelihoods of 10 million farmers through job loss or price reductions— affecting up to 40 million people.^{xxi}

Additionally, each African country is taking a different approach to the pandemic with regional impacts on trade for their neighbours. Historically, export bans have occurred during periods of food crises, such as the Ethiopian maize export ban in 2013, where the government sought to preserve food stocks for its own population. Where similar measures are implemented now, this could impact on both food security and regional trade balances, creating food shortages in subnational areas. The FAO estimate that 100,000 hectares had been affected in Ethiopia and Kenya.^{xxii}

Additional desert locust swarms in some African countries created a food-security shock in rural areas and potentially lead to an increase of prices for food crops across East Africa.

DRC:

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is sub-Saharan African with a population of around 77 million and 2.35 million km land. Half of the land is forest and arable land, making the country one of the two "lungs of the world". The country possesses 198 million acres of fertile land, with potential for production and development of the agriculture sector considerably high. However, in reality, DRC has around 3 per cent annual growth with farmers cultivating only 25 million of the fertile, arable land.^{xxiii} Food security remains a constant issue in DRC with 15.6 million people living in severe acute food insecurity.^{xxiv}

DRC's untapped potential in the agriculture sector and food insecurity is a result of several factors. Civil war has plagued the country for almost three decades. The insecure environment makes agriculture a risky sector to engage in for fear of life and property and discourages investment in agricultural production. The possibility of conflict outbreaks in both rural and urban areas has made many people leave housing or to be forcefully displaced. According to the UN, around 2.3 million people are displaced within the country, and another 323,000 live in refugee camps outside DRC.^{xxv} The vast majority of people living in rural areas cannot afford proper mechanisation for cultivation of arable land. According to a study by the African Development Bank, 72 per cent of rural households are poor or living on the edge of poverty.^{xxvi} The Ebola outbreak preceded Covid-19 as a severe health crisis, causing the government to invest heavily in health services and precautionary measures which stifled both investment in and development of the agriculture sector.

Failure to produce a strategy for self-sustainable food production and employment in the agriculture sector, makes DRC highly dependent on trade and import of goods from foreign markets. At the regional level, Rwanda, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa are the key source markets for imported products.^{xxvii} The country also imports maize grain from Argentina and maize flour from the United States of America (USA).^{xxviii} This high dependency on basic necessity imports only intensifies the food security of the nation in times of instability.

The recent COVID-19 outbreak has further increased the fragility and complexity of agriculture and food supply in DRC. Restrictions in trade, border closures and limited movement of people and goods has hit DRC's economy and trade severely, particularly for those under a higher threat of hunger and poverty. As OECD indicated, 'movement restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak will strongly impact the food systems and livelihoods of smallholders and vulnerable people, including access to agricultural tools, seeds, markets and credit.'^{xxix} Moreover, these limitations are adversely affecting farmers and agriculture workers in the informal economy due to declining demand for casual labour and reduced ability to engage in informal trade, which are the dominant income-generating activities for poor households in these areas.^{xxx} The limited trade has led to price rises for imported goods and commodities. This impacts on individual's purchasing power, forcing them to put aside a larger proportion of their income to pay for food and basic necessities.

Additional challenges present themselves due to the halting or termination of humanitarian programmes that bring food supplies and opportunities for small businesses in urban areas and stimulate farm production in rural areas. In order to mitigate the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis in DRC, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) required an additional USD 22 million to support the Congolese population in food production and access, local value chain development and income generating activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{xxxi}

ETHIOPIA:

With a population of 110 million, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa and one of the poorest worldwide.^{xxxii} A large proportion of the Ethiopian population rely heavily on agriculture for income generation in both the formal and informal economy. However, due to external factors such as climate change and other structural fragilities, Ethiopia is highly food-insecure, with 54 percent of the population (52 million people) consuming less than 2,100 calories a day.^{xxxiii} The impacts on agriculture resulting from the pandemic might further increase Ethiopia's food fragility and exacerbate health issues, particularly child physical development. Consequently, the COVID-19 crisis has numerous implications on the economy and livelihoods through disruptions to agricultural supply and food security.

The Covid-19 imposed movement restrictions affect farmers who rely on out-sourced labour within the production process. The lack of access to labourers subsequently leads to a significant reduction in incomes for farmers who are unable to harvest the whole land independently. School closures and limited access to casual labour has led to higher engagement of children within households and communities to help farm the arable land. The restrictions on movement also impact on pastoral and agro-pastoral communities, who sustain their livelihoods through migrating to search out feed and suitable water sources for their livestock.^{xxxiv} Trade is also restricted, leading to an inability to sell produce at traditional market level, causing the disintegration of local food supply chains and massive economic instability for small-hold farmers coupled with substantial price fluctuations. The inability to trade perishable goods such as fruit and vegetables can have devastating impacts on incomes where products cannot be sold and storage or preservations costs are unattainable.

As a country with a high level of food insecurity, Ethiopia imports a significant proportion of it's commodities. In the past two decades, exports have equated to an average of 22% of annual imports. Ethiopian exports are highly concentrated on a few – mainly agricultural – products: In 2018/19, six commodities (coffee, oil seeds, khat, pulses, flowers, and textiles) accounted for 80% of export earnings. The traditional major export – coffee – accounts for close to 30% of export earnings.^{xxxv} Trade limitations have restricted the import of certain products leading to food insecurity and price hikes. This lowers the purchasing power of small-hold farmers within the most vulnerable communities in Ethiopia. Inaccessible or increasingly unaffordable products that directly assist with economic growth and productivity, such as fertilizers imported from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, China, Russia and Ukraine, result in further drops in productivity for small-hold farmers, effectively creating a domino effect of loss and increasing economic vulnerability. These losses have been further compounded by environmental factors. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) media briefing in April 2020, 3.6 million quintals of grain was lost due to locust infestation. Restriction of movement to prevent the spread of COVID-19 presented a barrier for efforts to control and curb the locust infestation and access to appropriate equipment to mitigate the impacts, resulting in the destruction of crops, pasture and forest cover, creating greater food and livestock insecurity.^{xxxvi} To respond to this potential danger, the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE) decided to avail 15 billion ETB liquidity in support of private banks, to allow them to provide debt relief and refinancing to customers in need.^{xxxvii} By the end of 2020, almost half a million acres of Ethiopian farmland had been devastated by the locust infestation, with civil war in the Tigray region stifling continued efforts to implement surveillance and spraying operations due to a post-rainfall resurgence of locust infestation in October ^{xxxviii}

Food-insecurity imposes itself as a serious danger to human life and health, especially in urban areas where the local population is not engaged in the agriculture sector. COVID 19 imposed social distancing restrictions pose a significant livelihood risk to informal traders from rural areas who traditionally market products in the cities. Some reports suggest that labourers from nearby villages are not available to work in adequate numbers and therefore no more than 10% of product demand is covered in urban areas.^{xxxix} The potential food shortage caused by restricted trade, coupled with the difficulties in importing commodities from external sources are increasing food insecurities in the city areas.^{xl}

Experts are identifying further disruptions within agricultural production processes in Ethiopia due to COVID- 19. Startling price fluctuations are apparent when compared with previous years. For instance, in the first half of April, coffee trade on the Ethiopian Coffee Exchange (ECX) declined by about 30% compared to the same period in previous years.^{xli} Farmgate prices for cherries were down as well, 20% less than the previous month and almost 10% less than the previous year.^{xlii}

CAR:

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a landlocked country with a population of around 5 million.^{xliii} The country ranks among the poorest counties in the world with a high rate of poverty and food insecurity. The COVID-19 crisis has further deepened the fragility of the country by affecting agriculture and increasing food insecurity. According to the FAO, 2.4 million people are now facing crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity -- an 11 percent increase compared with pre-pandemic times.^{xliiv}

Moreover, many regions of the country, such as Dzanga-Sangha area rely on its natural resources to create livelihoods from sustainable activities like low-impact agriculture and the collection of non-timber forest products.^{xliv} However, due to the poverty, lack of safety, conflict and displacement, the regions do not maximise their agricultural potential. With

the current crisis, it is expected that the virus will cause further disruptions within the agricultural sectors, leading to increased vulnerability.

According to the European Commission report, several factors are aggravating the situation, including renewed conflict between armed groups and the resurgence of inter-community conflicts in some sub-prefectures leading to displacement. Market disruptions include climbing food prices, difficulties in supplying export markets compounded by a below-average agricultural yield, the seasonal attacks of pests such as armyworm and locusts. The pandemic has fuelled the inability of farmers to effectively use insecticide treatment due to restricted field access and the lack of funding to mitigate damage.^{xlvi}

Restrictions on movement and trade is greatly impacting food supply and demand across CAR. Traders have highlighted major disruptions to the supply chains of rice, flour, oil, soap and detergent in the country. The measures put in place at the border have led to the withdrawal of some importers with low capacity. Wholesale and retail prices of imported products noted substantial increases across all markets. This rise in prices and diminished purchasing power is increasing poverty levels among CAR's most vulnerable households and communities.

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