

SPECIAL FOCUS – May 2020

Overall contained COVID-19 impact on staple food availability at the moment, but rising concerns for multiple crises resulting from farm labour and input shortages combined with pests and weather extremes

According to the UN's State of Food Insecurity in the World 2019 report, the number of undernourished population in the world is at a 4 years high of 821 Million people, while as just revealed by the Global Report on Food Crises 135 Million are directly affected by acute food crises in 55 countries. In April several agencies have released estimates about the increase of population affected by food security crisis before the end of 2020, ranging from a 25% increase in people in need of food assistance (FEWSNET 2020) to a more dramatic 100% increase of people in food crisis or worse conditions (WFP2020). The economic downturn caused directly by COVID-19 and its containment, reduced remittances flows and declining employment opportunities are negatively affecting livelihoods in poor countries. This is particularly the case for fragile and conflict affected states where logistics and public infrastructure were challenging already before the pandemic.

For the world's poor, the percentage of income spent on food is already very high, meaning that decreased income directly translates into food access problems. On the other side food supply, despite high levels of global availability due to recent bumper harvests, is threatened by the interruption of value chains and trade flows (FAO, 2020). A rapid appraisal of food systems based on interviews has shown that staple food availability on both urban and rural markets is not perceived as a major problem yet, while availability of fresh vegetables and fruits is clearly declining and food prices are increasing (WUR 2020).

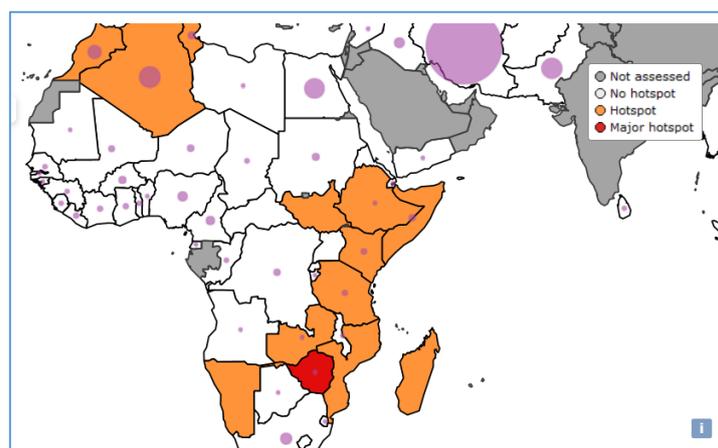


Figure 1. ASAP Hotspots assessment of April 24 with COVID-19 death cases (Source: Johns Hopkins University) as of May 2nd. Countries most affected in Africa are Algeria (495 COVID-19 death cases), Morocco (173) and Egypt (415). The first two are also large cereal importers with below average production prospects for the ongoing winter cereal season. In East Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea countries, the main maize season is just starting and COVID-19 containment measures could cause shortages of farming inputs. In East Africa COVID-

19 deaths are increasing at a relatively low rate so far, but agricultural production is threatened by a desert locusts outbreak and floods in late April. <https://mars.jrc.ec.europa.eu/asap/>

In this situation, food production is at this stage not the main concern in most African countries, whereas food access linked to spiking food prices and plummeting purchasing power at macro and micro level, are the biggest perceived threats. That could however change in the next agricultural season with prolonged lockdown measures, reduced flow of agricultural inputs and with COVID-19 expanding into rural areas, where containment measures have been imposed only to a limited extent so far and where health infrastructure is often weak. COVID-19 containment measures in rural areas and along internal and international administrative borders are also expected to have a negative impact on pastoralists mobility and in particular on seasonal migrations. Also, actual COVID-19 infection data are believed to be in many cases above the reported figures, which have to be used cautiously due to low testing capacity, underreporting and decreasing utilization of health structures as reported for example by the Guardian for Somalia <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/02/somali-medics-report-rapid-rise-in-deaths-as-covid-19-fears-grow>.

According to a World Bank statement of April 9th (World Bank 2020), the agricultural production decrease in Africa due to COVID-19 is expected to be between 2,6 and 7%, which does not seem major under normal circumstances and functioning trade flows and markets, but could imply serious food availability problems at the local scale and especially where trade barriers are implemented.

Also, the fight against COVID-19 health impacts is diverting resources from other sectors including agriculture. This is problematic for example for the current fight against the locust outbreak in Eastern Africa, for humanitarian aid delivery in countries affected by food crises and for countries which were already facing economic crises before COVID-19 such as Zimbabwe or Sudan.

The ASAP hotspots map of April, compared with the number of deaths at the end of April (source: Johns Hopkins University) shows that some of the current main agricultural production hotspots countries are also among those most severely hit by COVID-19. This is the case for example for Morocco and Algeria in North Africa. Both are major wheat importers and currently hit by drought and in the case of Morocco, are facing poor cereals production for the second consecutive year (Figure 1).

Countries in East Africa are showing relatively low COVID-19 impact at this stage, but are in a situation where COVID-19 containment measures and higher transport prices are increasing the challenge of fighting desert locusts in the main agricultural season, currently at an early stage. Some, like South Sudan and Somalia, are also affected by protracted conflicts and the first is part of the current 10 worst food crises globally. COVID-19 containment measures are perceived to be a limiting factor to seeds and agricultural inputs availability in parts of East Africa (in particular in Tanzania and Ethiopia according to WUR 2020, Figure 2). In addition major floods have been reported across Kenya, Somalia, Uganda and Ethiopia in East Africa in late April (see example of Kisumu County on Sentinel 2 imagery: <https://mars.jrc.ec.europa.eu/asap/s/bb38bcf9>, while Tanzania experienced major flooding in February and March.

The expected COVID-19 related decline of farm labour availability is putting at risk labour intensive vegetable and cash crop production with detrimental effects on agricultural exports (e.g. cotton, coffee, cocoa and tea) which are the economic backbone of many countries in Africa, Asia and South America (FAO 2020).



Figure 2. Early effects of COVID-19 on farming inputs (Source: WUR 2020)

In Southern Africa, the agricultural season is ending with mixed results with a bumper maize harvest expected in South Africa and poor production in Zimbabwe and parts of Mozambique. According again to the WUR 2020 study and other sources, agricultural staples production is generally not a major issue, but the impact of COVID-19 containment measures on the economy and in particular on the informal sectors is significant and urban poor population are vulnerable to declining availability of fresh food.

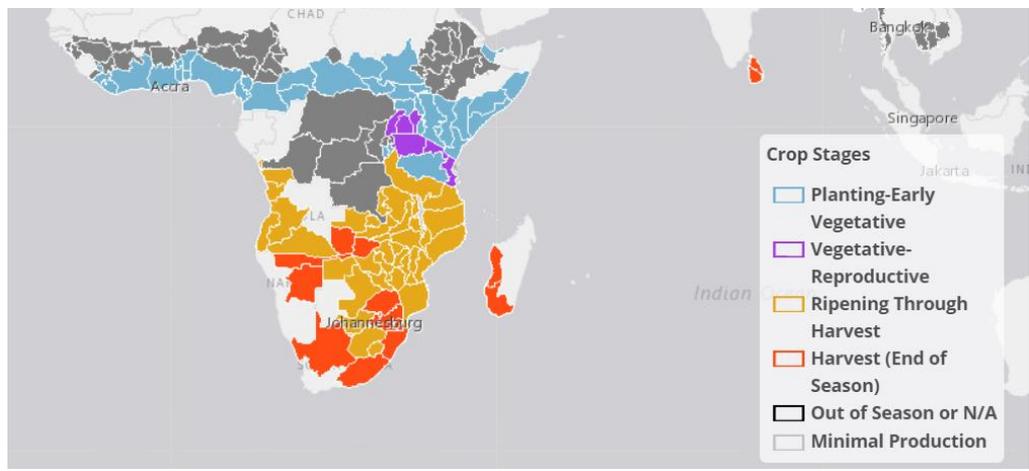


Figure 3. Crop calendar of Sub-Saharan Africa, in blue crop seasons in planting or early vegetative stages that could be affected by decreased farming inputs availability and access (Source: GEOGLAM).

In West Africa, the main maize production season is starting in the southern part (Figure 3), and despite a prevailing positive farm inputs availability on the main markets, a negative impact of COVID-19 containment measures on agricultural subsidies and inputs is feared, for example in Ghana, according to media sources.

More information can be found here:

- FEWSNET 2020 <https://fews.net/global/alert/april-27-2020>
- WFP 2020 <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>
- FAO 2020 <https://maximotorero.com/2020/04/15/how-to-stop-a-looming-food-crisis/>

- Global Report on Food Crises <https://www.fsinplatform.org/global-report-food-crises-2020>
- IFAD 2019: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/blog/asset/41207683>
- World Bank 2020: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/09/covid-19-coronavirus-drives-sub-saharan-africa-toward-first-recession-in-25-years>
- Wageningen University (WUR 2020): Rapid Appraisal of food system risk with COVID-19 measures: Voices from the field. Els Leoutere, Inge D. Brouwer, Marrit van den Berg, Ruerd Ruben

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