

How Are African Governments Responding to Avert a COVID-19 Hunger Crisis?

With the global economy reeling from COVID-19-related measures, the world faces the risk of a dramatic rise in hunger and malnutrition. On April 16, the [ministers from African Union member states](#) recognized that efforts to contain the spread of the virus need to be accompanied by measures to minimize disruptions to food and agriculture systems and to support the livelihoods of all African citizens during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The United Nations Secretary-General has since [called for immediate action to avert a COVID-19 global food emergency](#). “Our food systems are failing, and the COVID-19 pandemic is making things worse,” he said. He emphasized three policy measures for countries to prioritize: designating food and nutrition services as essential while supporting trade flows, instituting stronger social protection for nutrition, and building better food systems.

Speakers:

- 1) H.E. Noël Koutera Bataka, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, Togo
- 2) H.E. Madjidian Padja Ruth, Minister of Production, Irrigation and Agricultural Equipment, Chad
- 3) H.E. Josefa Leonel Correia Sacko, Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, African Union Commission
- 4) H.E. Sadou Seydou, Minister of Trade and Private Sector Promotion, Niger
- 5) H.E. Vincent Ssempijja, Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Uganda

Moderators:

Francine Picard Mukazi & Carin Smaller, IISD

Key Discussions and Takeaway:

Resilience in food systems during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

- The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed various fragilities in the food system, particularly the heavy reliance of African countries on food imports. With various export bans imposed by Asia and Russia on grains, states need to re-think and prioritize resilience in food systems, intra-African trade, and food self-sufficiency after the pandemic.
- Addressing malnutrition is central, as countries mobilize resources to assist the most vulnerable in the wake of the crisis. “*People who are more well-nourished are more resilient than those who aren’t,*” said H.E Josefa Sacko, Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, African Union Commission.

- Countries are dealing with the double/triple burden of COVID-19 and its impacts, especially on vulnerable populations. They are also facing climate change effects such as flooding in Uganda and mitigating against desert locusts and armyworms in Chad and the wider central and east Africa region.
- In Togo, Chad, Niger, the Gambia, and Uganda, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a larger impact on women than men, given the number of women engaged in smallholder farming. The containment measures have severely disrupted supply chains and debilitated access to farm inputs and markets. It is in this light that governments are taking targeted measures to alleviate the burden on women through input subsidies.
- To ensure local production and transport of food from rural to urban areas, some countries, like Uganda, have listed agribusinesses as essential services.

Increasing intra-African trade to bolster economic and agricultural growth

- Though countries had made progress on alleviating poverty and diversifying economic activities, COVID-19 has had a deleterious effect on all sectors, reducing GDP growth for most, if not all, countries.
- Prior to the pandemic, diaspora remittances largely contributed to trade and capital for businesses in large cities, but now decreased flow is evident with the go-slow in businesses, such as in the case of Togo.
- Governments across the board are making efforts to support farmer inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, mechanization (tractors), and pesticides to allow for the continued local production of food. A key strategy among governments has been to ensure the continued flow of goods between rural and urban areas and across borders.
- Regional economic blocs such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where Niger is represented, are similarly prioritizing the storage of crop harvests and ensuring that the free flow of goods between borders remains intact.
- The African Union is working with partner organizations and member states to boost intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), elaborate on social protection in food systems, determine crop calendars among countries to better prepare for fertilizer and seed assistance, support domestic markets, and safeguard input supply chains for small-scale agriculture producers.
- Participants were keen to know if governments are currently undertaking agro-ecology and whether the seeds being used are patented or indigenous. Similarly, they asked if the African Union would mobilize national governments and donors for research funding on issues like plant breeding to mitigate the impact of COVID. Most countries are making efforts to enhance production in rural areas to boost their capacity. In this light, the Chad government is simultaneously strengthening its policies to protect the environment.

- Participants wanted to know what was being done to address border closures and the disruption of trade flows. Others were keen to know how governments were monitoring food prices, given their volatility: *“Who benefits and what are governments doing to deal with these disparities?”* Member states, for instance in ECOWAS, continue to collaborate on open borders; similarly, the African Union Ministers’ Declaration on April 16 is a political commitment to ensure continued trade of goods during the crisis and in its aftermath.
- During and after the pandemic, some countries, such as Uganda, are prioritizing partnerships with the private sector to bolster harvesting and strengthen commodity value chains.

Increased Use of Technology

- African states are increasingly using mobile (cash) transfers to assist farmers during this period. This allows for proper transparency and monitoring, given current measures on social distancing.
- The Togolese government is using mobile phones to locate producers and to trace recipients benefitting from credit facilities, while the Ugandan government has established e- extension and e-vouchers to allow the transfer of knowledge while minimizing physical contact with farmers.

