

AT ISSUE

Food Security and the Right to Food during Covid-19 in Africa

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Abstract: The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) a global pandemic on the 11th of March 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic is a human crisis that poses substantial threats to the health, food security and nutrition of the people of the African continent. Our concerns are to the fact that food insecurity and lack of adequate financial resources to provide basic socio-economic needs is exacerbated by the COVID-19. Just like the 2007-2008 global financial crisis that took many by surprise so also is the COVID-19 causing misery for the most vulnerable in the world. This paper assesses the African governments' response to Covid-19 and asserts that although measures taken to curb the spread of the virus seemed effective to some extent, these directives have left the African continent more vulnerable to food insecurity. Legal and policy measures to balance public responsibility to provide for the citizens and to stop the spread of the pandemic are crucial. This research also interrogates African governmental efforts in accordance with international and domestic laws. The paper concludes that some of the regulations imposed by the state violate people's rights to food security.

Keywords: Covid-19, rights, food, security, Africa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as the world struggles to address climate change and its consequences for food sufficiency, especially in low income, poor and vulnerable populations of the global south. In addition to mortality from severe illness, the impact of COVID-19 reduced access to food, changed local diets, and resulted in economic losses from lockdowns imposed as a means to curb the spread of the disease.¹ The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation report of 2022 indicates that before the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity in Africa was already high.² There were 235 million undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019, an increase of 15.6 percent compared to 2015. In addition, over 73 million people experienced severe acute food insecurity in the region in 2019.³

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After recording its first Covid-19 case in Egypt on 14 February 2020, the virus spread to other parts of the continent.⁴ In response, many African governments adopted strict measures to help flatten the curve and reduce the spread of the virus. These measures included a total lockdown in most countries and border restrictions. Only essential services like hospitals, and food shops were in operation. Most African countries are dependent on imported agricultural products and are therefore vulnerable to international price and demand shocks related to these commodities. Indeed, African countries make up 65 percent of high commodity-export and low-commodity import-dependent countries (HE-LI), and 44 percent of high commodity import and export-dependent countries (HE-HI).⁵

As in the 2007-08 global food crisis, we do not yet know how many people were driven into poverty by the present crisis or how long it will take for millions in low-income countries to adjust or recover.⁶ Ensuring access to sufficient food—especially during a health crisis such as the COVID-19—is an enormous task given widespread high rates of unemployment. Some scholars have noted that unsustainable agricultural practices and technologies also contribute to the poor state of food security in Africa.⁷ This paper seeks to interrogate the right to food security during the COVID-19 pandemic and the regulatory measures undertaken by some governments in Africa to flatten the spread of the pandemic.

Measures against Food Insecurity in Africa

To combat the threat of COVID-19 to food security, African states are trying to adopt and adapt appropriate technologies, innovations, and systems proven effective for managing the impact of the pandemic. The AU Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA) encourages member states to domesticate the relevant regional and continental frameworks for advanced application of science in food systems.⁸ STISA 2024 is the first ten-year incremental phasing strategies to respond to the demand for science, technology and innovation to impact critical sectors such as agriculture, energy, environment, health, infrastructure development, mining, security, and water, among others.⁹ This might be a good move for the ‘Africa we want’ in the future. The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on food security, with direct and indirect consequences on the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe. With the complexity of things at risk, some of these consequences are still to emerge.¹⁰ The African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) technical review webinar held in 2020 reviewed the proposed guidelines on the harmonisation of food safety standards, legislation and regulations in Africa whose objectives are to assure a high level of protection of human health and the free movement of safe food within and across countries in Africa.¹¹ The adoption of these guidelines will show commitment and may improve the food security situation in Africa. The African Union Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Policy Framework 2020 projected that food demand within Africa may increase by 178 percent by 2050 due to demographic changes and consumer preferences.¹² To address the challenges of food security, the policy framework seeks to support more productive and efficient food systems on the continent to help countries meet up with these rising demands.¹³

The African Union Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)—known as the 2003 Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security—

highlighted food shortages as a source of enormous concern. The declaration estimated that for the food self-sufficiency ratio in sub-Saharan Africa to remain at 1995 levels by 2015, the sub-continent would have to meet the bulk of its projected cereal needs through increased production within the region itself.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to stagnating progress in this direction.

The weakness of economies and their institutions places African countries at a great disadvantage when faced with emergencies.¹⁵ The FAO warned in 2010 that Mozambique, Uganda, Mali, Niger, and Somalia were extremely vulnerable to instability because of rising prices of food. This must include many more countries since 2020 due to the coronavirus crisis. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic witnessed another spike in food prices.¹⁶ The announcement of government-mandated lockdowns in countries like South Africa to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus witnessed panic buying and emergency price controls of food products.

Irrespective of Africa's vulnerability to food insecurity, the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods highlighted the commitment of African states toward ending hunger by 2025. On Point 3 (c) of the Declaration, the member states resolved [to]

...strengthening early warning systems to facilitate advanced and proactive responses to disasters and emergencies with food and nutrition security implications...encouraging and facilitating increased consumption of locally produced food items, including the promotion of innovative school feeding programs that use food items sourced from the local farming community.¹⁷

The Malabo Declaration intended to end hunger in Africa by 2025 but the outbreak of COVID-19 has thwarted the move. Besides, the declaration does not have any binding force—like many other AU declarations—to guarantee its achievement.

Hunger and food insecurity create instability and increase the burden of providing for the basic needs and rights of citizens. Poor nutrition also raises the costs of healthcare across the lifestyle of persons.¹⁸ The secretariat of the AU *High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies* recently highlighted food security challenges as the result of the deficiency in research and development on agriculture. This deficiency is hindering increased agricultural growth that would boost food self-sufficiency.¹⁹ In 2018, the Pan African Parliament (PAP) Resolution on Nutrition and Food Systems in Africa enjoins African governments and development partners to improve—quantitatively and qualitatively—nutrition and food systems, especially indigenous crops. The long-term solution to food and nutrition security is broad-based inclusive economic development.²⁰

Raising output of small farmers can have a significant impact on hunger and poverty but may also widen food access through a combination of redistributive measures via the FAO Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) to achieve sustainable food security in Africa.²¹ Some countries in the continent adopted alternative approaches to boost agricultural production known as “input-intensive agricultural development.”²² For example, the Sasakawa Global 2000 programme is an association of fifteen countries in Africa with the mission to empower small-scale farmers to increase productivity sustainably in response to market demand.²³

COVID-19 might prevent realizing the commitment of the Malabo Declaration to end hunger in Africa by 2025 as the health crisis has diverted the commitment by African governments to “accelerate agricultural growth by at least doubling current agricultural productivity levels, by the year 2025.” This includes “strengthening early warning systems to facilitate advanced and proactive responses to disasters and emergencies with food and nutrition security implications.”²⁴ The World Bank Commodity Markets Outlook expressed concern over the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, its severity, changes to trade and domestic support policies.²⁵ The World Bank estimates that 40 to 60 million more people will be living in extreme poverty due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶

Implications of National Lockdowns on Food Security: South Africa and Kenya

The call for national lockdowns as the only means to slow the spread and mitigate the impact of the virus posed significant setbacks to already struggling African economies. This section evaluates the impact of lockdown measures on food security in two selected countries—South Africa and Kenya. The evaluation is to compare the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions in countries already grappling with food security.

South Africa

A country is food insecure when access to food is only marginally adequate, a condition that limits the population’s ability to obtain adequate and nutritious food.²⁷ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognizes the right to food as a human right.²⁸ Section 27(1) (b) states that “everyone has the right to access sufficient food and water.” Also, section 28(1)(c) provides that “every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services.” As a result, the state is required to respect this right even in times of a health pandemic such as the COVID-19. For example, section 27(2) enjoins the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realization of each of these rights.²⁹

Irrespective of this constitutional promise, food insecurity remains a major challenge in South Africa. The combined effects of the pandemic have deteriorated food security in the country. While it may seem that the country is food secure at the national level, numerous households remain food insecure.³⁰ Studies conducted by Statistics South Africa in 2017 revealed about 20 percent of all households had inadequate or severely inadequate access to food.³¹ High rates of unemployment and low-income levels are primary reasons for food insecurity.³² Also, the agricultural sector is still dominated by a small number of large, mostly white-owned farms and, increasingly, by large agribusiness corporations. Food insecurity largely impacts black South Africans as do the wider patterns of inequality and poverty in the country.³³

Arndt et al. assert that the shocks of lockdown actually pushed many vulnerable households into food insecurity following a drastic collapse in household incomes as many industries and companies were compelled to shut their doors.³⁴ According to a study by Statistics South Africa, the number of respondents who reported experiencing hunger since the beginning of the lockdown increased from 4.3 percent to 7 percent.³⁵ In the words of Sello Hatang, CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation. “COVID-19 has brutally exposed the deep

inequality in most societies and has thrust the world deeper into a crisis of poverty."³⁶ Against this backdrop, hunger and malnutrition most impact people in communities with weaker safety and social systems.³⁷ Food insecurity also impacts mental health and relationships, ultimately resulting in a rise of intimate partner violence.³⁸

South Africa's economy faced a downturn of about 7 percent in 2020, reportedly the greatest since 1946.³⁹ The closure of international and national borders disrupted supply chains and hindered food distribution systems. Lockdown measures halted non-essential services that led to the collapse of large and small businesses with many people retrenched. For the majority of the population in the informal sector, lockdown measures left them languishing in want with an increase in hunger and access to nutritious food.⁴⁰ Furthermore, food prices spiked due to scarcity.⁴¹ The government responded with increased social grants and provided stimulus packages for vulnerable groups. To this effect, the sum of R50 billion was allotted to temporarily increase existing social grants, and to fund a newly introduced COVID-19 grant.⁴² The government, in collaboration with other stakeholders, made significant efforts in providing food packages to vulnerable communities to address the crisis.

Some scholars criticized these measures, pointing to the wide gap between social grants and the actual amount of money needed to feed a household. For instance, an analysis of the cost of thirty-eight basic food items by the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group found that an average family spent about R3,470 per month on food.⁴³ This amount is well beyond government grants and monthly earnings for most South Africans.⁴⁴ Still, government efforts and other initiatives to reduce food insecurity in the wake of the pandemic were more substantial than those of many other countries on the continent.

Kenya

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, Kenya's economy was functioning below an anticipated 5.4 percent annual growth rate.⁴⁵ Aside from the low growth, Kenya suffered the shocks of both locusts and persistent heavy, flooding rains.⁴⁶ This situation had already affected production of food crops, creating increased concern for food insecurity. The institution of lockdown policies placed a ban on public gatherings, restricted movements, and closed businesses, including produce markets.

The informal sector encompasses over 80 percent of the population in Kenya.⁴⁷ Informal sector employment accounts for up to half of economic activity in Kenya and thereby contributes significantly to GDP.⁴⁸ Government orders to maintain social distancing by staying at home rendered many in the informal sector without income and small farmers had no outlet for their produce. Reports by the Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI) indicated that numerous households changed their eating habits. Evidence suggests that 50 percent of the sample group could only afford vegetables.⁴⁹ The restriction on movement has hindered farmers' access essential farm inputs.⁵⁰ Interrupting the link between farmers, markets, and consumers resulted in less food availability, limited variety, and an increase in prices.

Some 12 million Kenyans face food insecurity and need food assistance.⁵¹ Two-thirds of this population reside in rural areas where access to sufficient calories for a healthy lifestyle is limited. The closure of international borders exacerbates food insecurity in Kenya. For example, the screening process introduced at border posts with Tanzania and Uganda, coupled with a

transition from manual documentation to an online system allowing employees to work remotely contributed to delays aggravating food shortages and insecurity.⁵² Such delays caused damage to perishable agricultural products. These measures contravene the people of Kenya's rights to food security in which, Article 43(1)(a)(c) of the Kenyan Constitution of 2010 provides that "Every person has the right to the highest attainable standard of health...free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality."⁵³

The Government of Kenya (GoK) and other stakeholders initiated a Kenyan COVID-19 emergency cash transfer relief fund called Give Directly. The program donated cash to low-income earners in Kenya to overcome the socio-economic shocks caused by COVID-19.⁵⁴ In addition, the GoK introduced a 100 percent tax cut to individuals with a gross monthly income of KES 24,000 (~USD 230) or less.⁵⁵ The GoK lowered certain income taxation rates to lessen the burden created by COVID-19 on households.⁵⁶ In support of small and medium enterprises, the turnover tax rate also saw reduction. Borrowers who defaulted on payment of loans and registered by the Credit Reference Bureau (CRB) had collection postponed to a later date.⁵⁷ In addition, a sum of KES 10 billion (~USD 95 million) was allocated to support vulnerable populations such as the elderly, orphans, and other marginalized groups.⁵⁸ Efforts to lower the impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods led the government to drop the value-added tax rate from 16 per cent to 14 per cent.⁵⁹

It is worth noting that the GoK in May 2020, further announced a post-COVID-19 economic stimulus package worth 53.7 billion shillings (\$503 million) to support businesses severely affected by the pandemic. The stimulus packages sought to provide credit guarantees, and loans to small businesses and especially small-scale farmers to boost agricultural production. However, allegations of poor planning, corruption, mismanagement, and embezzlement surrounded the process which some described as inadequate and benefiting the wrong target group.⁶⁰ The absence of clear directives in the distribution process meant that some targeted populations such as the urban poor and those in rural areas faced long delays in accessing stimulus packages.⁶¹

Conclusion

Food insecurity and malnutrition are forms of deprivation that undermine human development and infringe on basic human rights. COVID-19—like climate change—demands proactive and emergency actions to safeguard the right to food. Food security interventions should involve food aid shipments to meet immediate needs as well as agricultural production strategies to increase food supplies in the long term.⁶² Although South Africa and Kenya may not represent the food insecurity situation across the continent, these cases provide insights on how several governments have faced the pandemic. The devastating effects of COVID-19 are a call to African states to accelerate the implementation of the Malabo Declaration and the African Continental Free Trade Area and its protocols. A healthy African continent is achievable through priority policies in which African governments implement sub-regional and regional legislations addressing nutrition and food security.

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