

# Policy Brief

## *Organic Versus Conventional Farmer Crisis Responses*

### *Implications under Covid and Russia-Ukraine War*

#### **The case of Cameroon**

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The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategies in Africa assessment was initiated by Biovision Africa Trust in eleven countries in Africa, including Cameroon.



**Growing Sustainably**

# Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategies in Africa assessment was initiated by Biovision Africa Trust in eleven countries in Africa, including Cameroon. A cross-sectional design and a mixed research approach guided by participatory tools and techniques for data collection were employed. The first case of the pandemic in Cameroon was announced on 6th March 2020. 94% of Cameroonians were aware of the pandemic between January and March 2020, while 34%, started feeling the negative impact of the disease in the July-September 2020 quarter. This was approximately 150-180 days post being aware of the pandemic. The Government, therefore, needs to initiate safety and protective measures within the initial 150 days for increased resilience among the population

Farming is the main source of livelihood for 94% of the Cameroonian population, with poultry producers being the most affected as confirmed by 88%, followed by vegetable producers, represented by 38%. This indicates that any shocks that affect farming impact millions of Cameroonians. 83% of the organic producers' livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic compared to 95% of the conventional farming households, indicating that organic producers were more resilient to the pandemic compared to conventional due to low dependency on inputs, increased access to market and adoption of climate-smart organic technologies. 94% were food insecure 63% were due to a reduction in disposable income as indicated by 72% for food purchases. High food prices due to disruption in transport systems, closure of markets and increased post-harvest losses affected 66% of respondents who were not able to purchase expensive foods. 97% of the respondents reported that they experience a reduction in income due to loss of employment and livelihood sources. 88% of the respondents didn't have access to extension services, while 88% experience post-harvest with the most impacted being 59% conventional producers compared to 53% organic producers. 84% of the respondents were not able to access inputs, with 54% being organic while 64% conventional were not able to access inputs.

The study recommends the following policy interventions as part of building resilience among Cameroonians against current and future pandemics and shocks. (1) The government need to establish a strong and sustainable social protection system to build resilience among the population especially the most vulnerable, to fulfil people's rights to social security and an adequate standard of living. (2) There is a need to enhance local, regional and international trade facilitation and linkages will be important. (3) In partnership with the private sector, the government need to establish a market information system to create a marketplace for trade (4) There is a need to promote village-level financial institutions as a catalyst to credit access, especially among women. The provision of loans that do not require collateral will be key in reaching the majority, especially during the pandemic.



BIOVISION Africa Trust (BvAT) initiated a study to assess the “Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategies in Africa” between October and December 2021. Cameroon was one of the countries selected to participate in this study. This study employed a cross-sectional design and a mixed research approach guided by participatory tools and techniques for data collection. Qualitative data was collected through the application of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodology. In total, 32 households, involved in the organic and conventional production of Cassava and poultry value chains were interviewed in the Littoral and Southwest regions. 16% of the producers were youth, indicating low participation in the cassava and poultry production systems. In general, organic production occupied 72 million hectares of land globally, of which 2.03 million hectares were in Africa, contributing 2.8% to the global landscape. In 2019, Cameroon recorded an area of 25,757 Ha under organic production systems, which represents less than 1.3% of the African continent, with 6,350 producers reported to be producing organic products, representing less than 1% in Africa .



# COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, which first emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and spread rapidly to other regions, was declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30th January, and a global pandemic by WHO on 11th March 2020. The first case of the pandemic in Cameroon was announced on 6th March 2020. The number of deaths as of October 24th, 2021, was 1,600 from 100,289 infections. So far, only 150,894 individuals have received vaccinations, which represents 1% of the population. There is a need for intensive sensitization of the population on the importance of vaccination as a protection mechanism. 94% of Cameroonians were aware of the pandemic between January and March 2020, while a significant number of households, 34%, started feeling the negative impact of the disease in the July-September 2020 quarter. This was approximately 150-180 days post being aware of the pandemic. There was a relationship between the time the government announced the first case of COVID-19 and the awareness level, and therefore governments need to initiate safety and protective measures within the initial 150 days for increased resilience among the population.

## Effects of COVID-19

### Livelihood sources

Farming is the main source of livelihood for 94% of the Cameroonian population. Only 31% depends on off-farm income-generating activities, while 3.1% depends on remittance. This indicates that any shocks that affect agriculture and therefore farming impact millions of Cameroonians. All the respondents indicated that COVID-19 affected their livelihoods in one way or another, with 97% of the respondents reporting that they experience a reduction in income. Discussions with farmers revealed that during the lockdown, households were not able to access vaccines for their chickens due to poor access to extension service providers and inputs stores, leading to high mortality rates (FGD, Cameroon). Poultry-producing households were the most affected as confirmed by 88%, followed by vegetable producers, represented by 38%. Generally, 83% of the organic producer's livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic compared to 95% of the conventional farming households.

This indicates that organic producers were more resilient to the impact of the pandemic compared to conventional. The adoption of best practices was one of the indicators of resilience. While composting was the most adopted technology, as reported by 77%, more of the organic producers, 31% had adopted at least 11 climate-smart technologies compared to 20% of conventional farming households.





## Access to extension services

88% of the respondents mentioned that they did not have access to extension services due to the enforcement of government restrictions and public health measures. The study indicated that 61% of organic producers had challenges accessing extension services compared to 58% among conventional producers. There were more livestock-producing households, 66% reported challenges accessing livestock-related extension services, compared to 58% among the crops-producing households. The delivery of animal health services was impacted by the pandemic as this requires physical presence. Restriction in movement among the animal health providers impacted negatively on these producers.

The majority of the producers, 61% resorted to their neighbours in accessing extension services, while 31% relied on private extension providers. Only 13% relied on their mobile phones to access extension information. Access to information through neighbours has the potential to cause the dissemination of wrong and distorted information. Promotion of farmer-led extension services will be important from which farmers can always be referred to them for information. Reference farm model managed by a farmer in a village can be the centre for training and technology diffusion. respondents. While 61% mentioned that travel restrictions affected product movement, 36% associated losses due to the closure of weekly markets. These were the two leading reasons that led to product deterioration.

## Post-harvest losses

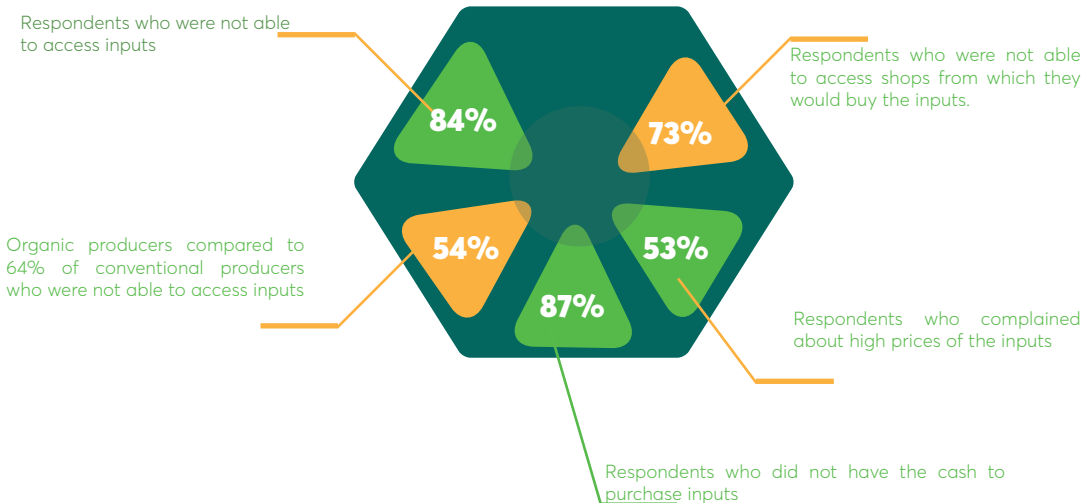
88% of the respondents experienced post-harvest losses. 59% of conventional producers reported post-harvest losses, compared to 53% of organic producers. Pest infestation was the leading cause of post-harvest losses as reported by 68% of the respondents, followed by a reduction in market quality to changes in shape and colour, as reported by 57% of the respondents. While 61% mentioned that travel restrictions affected product movement, 36% associated losses due to the closure of weekly markets. These were the two leading reasons that led to product deterioration. Due to the restricted movements and closure of markets, product storage was escalated, leading to storage pest infestation. Prolonged storage also affected the product quality as they lost moisture and product colour. Investment in cold chains will be important to reduce product deterioration under prolonged storage. The grounding of airlines, and the increasing cost of international freight as a result of lower trade volumes and a lack of commercial passenger flights, caused significant problems for the export of higher-value perishable food products, including seafood, fruit and vegetables .

## Access to Inputs

Access to inputs among conventional and organic producers was impacted by government restrictions and public health measures. 84% of the respondents were not able to access inputs. 54% of the organic producers compared to 64% of conventional producers were not able to access inputs between January 2020 and August 2021. While 87% of the respondents did not have the cash to purchase inputs, 73% were not able to access shops from which they would buy the inputs. 53% complained about high prices of the inputs. The inability to travel to the nearest agro-dealer shops was escalated by movement restrictions to enforce social distancing. Substituting the normally used inputs with those that were available was a leading coping strategy among 80% of the respondents. Since there was restricted movement in Cameroon, transportation of inputs mainly from the urban to rural was affected, leading to disruption in the supply of important inputs.

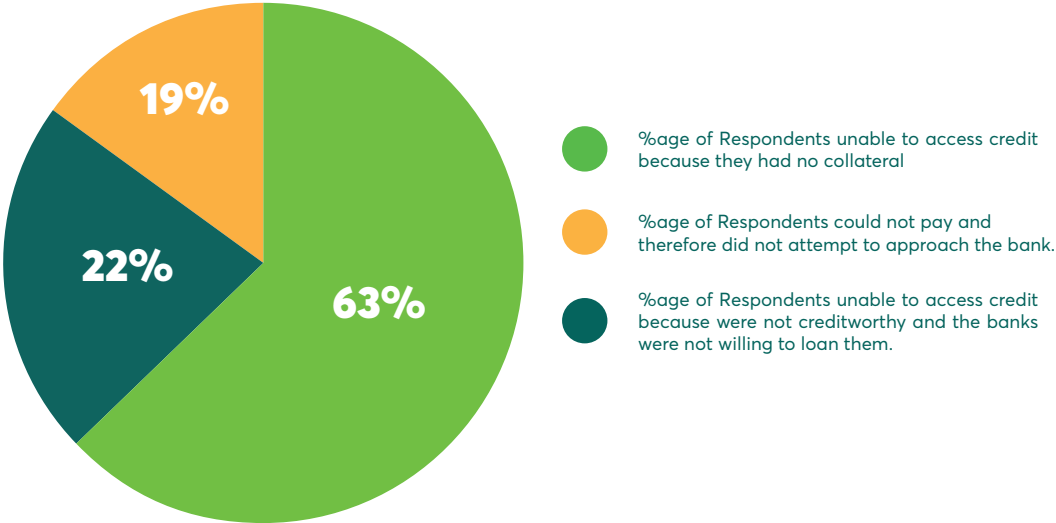
Substitution may have led to the procurement of ineffective inputs. 53% applied lower rates due to the inability to purchase enough quantity. 7% stocked piled the inputs for future use, while a similar proportion, staggered the use of the inputs. These strategies have the potential of applying wrong inputs or applying below the recommended rates. Among the inputs, veterinary-related inputs were the most difficult to access, as reported by 63% of respondents, followed by fertilizer as reported by 22% of respondents. Both inputs are majorly imported from abroad and with the lockdown and cessation in flight and ship movement, these products' supply chains were disrupted. Border closures limited trade flows of agricultural inputs, which are normally imported from neighbouring countries. This resulted in decreased area planted due to poor access to seeds and fewer agricultural labour opportunities. In the People's Republic of China, the production of pesticides declined sharply and only resumed gradually after production plants were shut down following the outbreak. Low availability and/or high prices of inputs such as pesticides could weigh on yields and crop production in 2020 and 2021, particularly in developing countries .

*OECD Scheme for the Application of International Standards for Fruit and Vegetables, Preliminary Report: Evaluation of the Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Fruit and Vegetables Trade, 31 March 2020, TAD/CA/FVS/WD (2020)1; Schmidhuber, Pound and Qiao (2020), COVID-19: Channels of Transmission to Food and Agriculture, FAO, Rome, <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8430en>.*



# Access to credit

None of the respondents accessed credit during the duration under review. While 63% mentioned that they had no collateral, 22% indicated that they were not creditworthy and the banks were not willing to loan them. 19% could not pay and therefore did not attempt to approach the bank. There is a need to establish favourable policies that will enable the community to access finance. The creation of village savings and loans (VSLAs) would facilitate producers, especially women, to access finance.



# Food security

Government restrictions and public health measures negatively affected access to food. 94% of the respondents faced difficulty in accessing food. 63% indicated access to food was reduced, while 31% confirmed it remained the same between January 2020 and August 2021. Difficulty in accessing food was mainly catalyzed by low income as mentioned by the 72% reduced disposable income for food purchases. High prices affected 66% of respondents who were not able to expensive foods. Respondents indicated that the cost of food items increased, as mentioned by 63%, while 31% indicated the prices remained the same. 47% indicated that food was not available for the households. This was aggregated by the closure of weekly wet and livestock markets, as the government enforced social distancing. Lockdowns and curfews affected food movement from production zones to urban and other locations. Among the food products, 91% indicated that meat was difficult to access followed by dairy products and vegetables as indicated by 22% of respondents respectively.

## The impact of the Ukraine-Russia war on organic and conventional farmers in Cameroon

In Cameroon, where more than half of the population was food insecure before the war, the cost of imported food is driving local food inflation, with bread and other staple foods increasingly out of reach to those with low incomes. The government says Russia's war on Ukraine is responsible for a wheat shortage that has led to a 40 per cent increase in the price of bread. Moreover, the war has led to the closures of ports and oilseed-crushing operations, affecting exports. The Russia-Ukraine war is having an outsized impact on the global supply chain, impeding the flow of goods, fueling dramatic cost increases and product shortages, and creating catastrophic food shortages around the world, according to experts at a virtual symposium hosted by the MIT Center for Transportation. By directly constraining agricultural production, limiting economic activity and raising prices, the war has further undercut the purchasing power of local populations, with consequent increases in food insecurity and malnutrition.

According to Human Rights Watch, more than half of the population was food insecure before the war, and the cost of imported food is driving local food inflation, with bread and other staple foods increasingly out of reach to those with low incomes.

The war in Ukraine has repercussions on non-food products such as fertilizers, of which 42.3% are imported into Cameroon from Russia, and fuels which have risen to more than 100 USD per barrel since the beginning of the war (OPEC, 2022). Rising prices for non-food products could have a negative impact on food commodities, as fertilizers are needed to sustain agricultural production and fuels enable the transport of regional and imported products. Besides, the construction sector risks being affected, with over a third of steel imported from Ukraine into Cameroon (OEC, 2021). The central African state is encouraging local substitutes like cassava and yams to replace the wheat usually imported from Russia and Ukraine. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is mainly affecting the production and export capacity of Ukraine. The current war is raising concerns over whether crops will be harvested.

## Government and development partner interventions

The government enacted a state of emergency in mid-March 2020 to control the spread of the pandemic. A multisectoral response through the direct involvement of the United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC) was established to monitor the spread of the pandemic and offer advice to the government. Weekly teleconferences between the Ministry of Health and development partners were done to monitor the situation and communicate to the public on the scale of the pandemic, acting as an early warning system to the public. The government took several actions to contain the spread of the pandemic, increase health spending, strengthen existing social safety nets and provide support to affected businesses and households. Measures to mitigate the negative financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable included strengthening existing social safety nets and providing support to affected businesses and households.

The Board of Directors of the African Development Bank approved a EUR 88 million loan to Cameroon as direct budget support to finance the country's COVID-19 crisis response. The loan, to the country's COVID-19 Crisis Response Budget Support Program (PABRC), fell under the framework of the Bank's COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility (CRF) of up to \$10 billion, the institution's main channel to cushion African countries from the economic and health impacts of the crisis. The IMF approved a disbursement under the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF) of US\$ 226 million to support the authorities' efforts in addressing the country's urgent balance of payment needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the terms of trade shocks from the sharp fall in oil prices.



# Policy recommendations

01

**Establishment of a strong and sustainable social protection system:** The advent of COVID-19 in Cameroon has highlighted the need for the government to create a functional and sustainable social protection system to build resilience among the population especially the most vulnerable, to fulfil people's rights to social security and an adequate standard of living. Many African governments introduced measures like cash transfers and food assistance in response to the rising poverty and hunger occasioned by the pandemic. This need to be inculcated within the policy framework for consistency. In the long term, integrating savings groups, especially those managed by women into social protection programs could have broad, longstanding benefits, especially in emergency settings

*"African governments should urgently invest in the social protection systems needed to ensure that Africans can endure the pandemic's devastating economic impact with dignity."*

*Mausi Segun, Africa Director at Human Right Watch.*

**Local, regional and trade facilitation and linkages:** The fear of intercountry transmission of the virus made many countries, including Cameroon, close down their borders. These actions impacted trade flow. There is a need to keep domestic, regional and international markets open during such pandemics to reduce the impact, be able to connect producers to market opportunities and help food get to where it is needed. Open borders and well-connected internal markets can help to contain supply disruptions. This is especially important in the case of net food-importing countries.

02

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**Establish a market information system to create a marketplace for trade:** There is a need to establish a market information system to facilitate trade between traders and consumers. 94% of the respondents mentioned that they faced difficulty accessing food, of which 47% confirmed food was not available due to weekly market closures. Integration of online payment systems within a policy framework will be key to unlocking trade during such pandemics. This can help generate trust in markets and improve trust among value chain players, thereby encouraging cooperative solutions.

**Increased access to credit:** The study observed that none of the respondents accessed credit during the pandemic due to inability to pay or not being credit worth, making banks not being able to loan them. On the other hand, similar studies from other countries working with BIOVISION indicated that women's access to credit was higher, and the majority mainly accessed credit from Village Savings And Loan Associations (VSLAs). There is a need to promote village-level financial institutions as a catalyst for credit access, especially among women. The provision of loans that do not require collateral will be key in reaching the majority, especially during the pandemic. These need to be within the fiscal policy framework to enable banks and financial institutions to effect.

04

The price of food and non-food products should continue to be closely monitored and shared by the Government and its partners involved in food security and related sectors. A more in-depth joint analysis focusing on the impact of the war in Ukraine on food security in Cameroon should also be developed.

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