

Policy Brief

The impact of COVID 19 Pandemic on organic and conventional farmers and mitigation strategy

The case of Congo DRC

January 2021

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 Congo DRC.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the food security and economic activities of millions of people all around the world (FAO 2020). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was not exempted from this health crisis amidst conflicts, economic challenges and climate change. The COVID 19 pandemic actual destabilized the situation further as the country is facing a year-long food crisis compounding an already existing health crisis. DRC reported its first confirmed case of COVID19 on 10th March 2020. This was said to be a Congolese national who had recently returned home from France. 8 days later, 14 new cases were diagnosed with COVID 19. When the number got to 45 new cases, 6 days later, the president declared health crises state of emergency for the whole country. He government outlined and reinforced a number of restriction measures including curfew, and the closure of all educational institutions to curb the risk and respond to the threat of further spread of the coronavirus and mitigate the impact on public health. In addition to strict restrictions on travels were put in place, public and social gathering was reduced to a maximum of 50 peoples, with social distancing. individual and collective hygiene measures were reinforced inclusive of prohibition of handshaking and embracing. The disruption from both government policies aiming to slow the spread of the virus as well as the individual fears of contracting the virus exacerbated an already existing health crisis, the prevailing food insecurity and the livelihood of the people as the local food market chains were disrupted.

The Biovision Africa Trust (BvAT) is the lead executing agency for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) -support to the Ecological Organic Agriculture Initiative (EOA-I). It hosts the Continental Steering Committee Secretariat for the initiative which supported this policy brief. The EOA-I is a continental initiative that holds promise for increasing the productivity of Africa's smallholder farms, with consequent positive impacts on food security. The initiative emerged after the African Union Commission (AUC) supported work held in Kenya in 2011. This resulted in the development of the concept note, proposal and later formation of a Central Steering Committee (CSC) on organic agriculture.

EOA-I initiative has been implemented in Africa since 2012 with the overall goal of mainstreaming ecological agriculture into national agricultural production systems, plans and policies. This is to support organic farmers and exporters, and to support the establishment of organic agriculture platforms among the member states of the African Union to access markets, certification and sustainable development in Africa. Although organic production has the potential in Africa, the key question repeatedly raised by the stakeholders is its ability to withstand storm, particularly, the advent of COVID19 and its disruption of the food system. The BvAT institution initiated a study to establish the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on agriculture and food systems in Africa: with the aim of assessing how farmers practicing organic agriculture & conventional agriculture have been affected by the pandemic, and how they are responding to it (Adaptation).



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 .



The impact of COVID 19 in DRC

In DRC majority (41%) of the households heard about COVID 19 pandemic in the second quarter of the year (April-June 2020). This delayed awareness is expected as the government and its citizenry were expected to have some experience of dealing with contagious diseases and was already responding to the Ebola outbreak and probably the same measures used was expected to respond to COVID 19 pandemic. Only a small number (28%) indicated hearing about the pandemic in the first quarter (January-March) of the 2020. This indicates that the knowledgeability among the local population increased with the government announcement of the 1st case. There is a need for the government to increase sensitization before even the 1st case and continue with the mobilization as part of preparing the population psychologically.

The study observed that all (100%) the households interviewed depended on agriculture as their main source of livelihoods. In DRC 98% of the respondent farming community had their farming activities affected by the government restrictions to mitigate the spread of the virus between January 2020 and August 2021. Of these, 26% of them had their livelihood impacted by the pandemic between the period July-September 2020 due to disruption of supply chain. A less similar number of participants (25%) experienced the impact on April to June of the same first year 2020. This is an indication of the spillover of the Ebola health crises affecting the food production system (Fig 1). This was compounded by the various measures the government had to put in place in March to mitigate economic impacts of COVID 19. The most affected value chain in terms of production and marketing are the cereals such as rice, maize, sorghum, millet and tuff (72%). Any disturbance such as lack of farm input and services or limited access to market in this value chain therefore negatively affected the livelihoods of the households. Small ruminants among livestock value chain was the most highly utilized sector as a source of income as 35% of the households' sold sheep and goats to generate income in the months of January 2020 to August 2021.

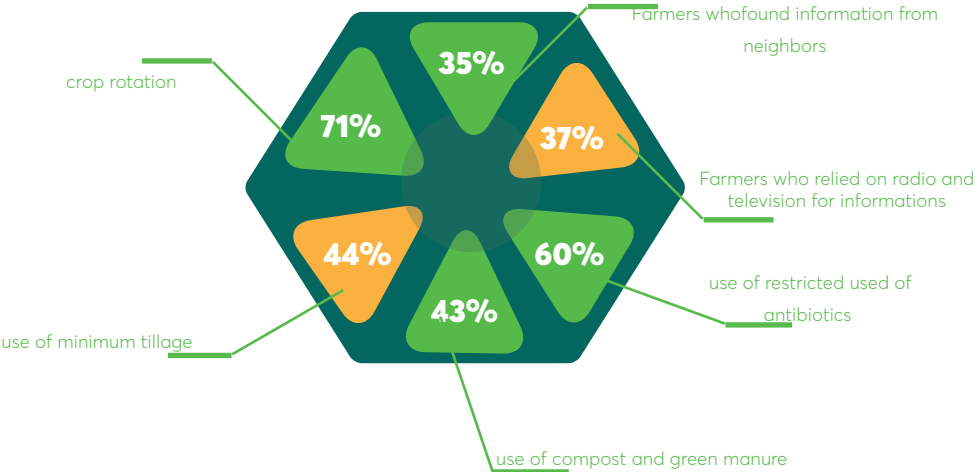
This was followed by poultry (32%). Maize (72%) among crops was highly utilized as a source of income. The study evaluated the impact of COVID19 on the sources of livelihoods among women and men. 90% women, compared to 85% men, reported that their sources of livelihoods (Agriculture, Business, services) were affected by the pandemic. This led to 40% reduction in incomes, of which 93% compared to 86% men, reported reduction in overall incomes during the pandemic period.

Based on our FGDs, participants indicated that some regions (Shabunda) were already experiencing food insecurity and often depended on other regions for their supply and roadblocks only worsened the situation.

The study observed that 71% of the conventional farmers and 62% of organic farmers were affected by government restrictions and public health measures negatively affecting their sources of income. These indicate that organic producing households had built their resilience over time and were better equipped to handle the disturbances at farm level caused by COVID 19 pandemic. In DRC, this is associated with the determination the farmers have with the support of trainers from local institutions to produce safe food. The government COVID 19 containment measures heavily affected farming activities in general and any shocks that interfered with the delivery of extension services, access to farm inputs and post-harvest handling affected all the farming community and their livelihood. In terms of access to farm inputs, conventional farmers who over relied on exotic farm inputs particularly government subsidized fertilizers were heavily affected by the subsequent lockdown and movement restrictions compared to organic farmers who rely on recycling resources in the agroecological systems. The farming community too experienced postharvest losses and had limited access to extension services. 66.4% of the respondent reported loss of income as the main felt effect of COVID 19, (Fig 3). This together with the 2020 August 2020 Ebola outbreak and insecurity in the county worsened the food insecurity issues in the country.

The Mitigation measures

The two most adopted organic agriculture production systems used by the farmers in DRC were crop rotation (71%) and use of restricted use of antibiotics (60%). Other practices embraced were the use of minimum tillage (44%), and use of compost and green manure (43%) (Fig 4). This showed that the Congolese with some guidance can embrace and adoption agroecological practices based on ecological principles that positively affects the environment through improving the soil structure, aeration and water-holding capacity which subsequently would strengthens their adaptation strategies and shield the households against external shocks such as COVID 19 pandemic and climate change. In relation to lack of face-to-face extension service that severely affected production and marketing of cereals, the study observed that most farmers (37%) relied on radio and television while others (35%) found information from neighbors (Fig 5) as coping strategies to the difficulties in accessing the face-to-face extension services affected by the pandemic



Implications of the Farmers' Resilience under Impacts of Russia and Ukraine War

Democratic republic of Congo is still the world's largest food crisis in the World. As the conflict in Ukraine continues, hundreds of kilometers away, communities in Congo DRC are feeling the ripple effects. Rising prices driven by the Ukraine crises have stoked fear of devastating social turmoil in eastern DR Congo. In the region, the economy is hobbled by geographical remoteness and decades of violence. Higher food and fuel costs linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine risk slowing down the Democratic Republic of Congo's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic even as it reaps the benefits of record-high copper prices . Higher global energy and food prices due to the ongoing war in Ukraine has exerted upward pressures on domestic inflation lifting the average inflation rate from 9.1% in 2021 to an estimated 9.5% in 2022 .

"We are witnessing a dramatic increase in inflation of prices, particularly of oil and petrol and as a result transport and foodstuffs. In some areas, there has been a 100 percent increase in fuel while cooking oil has increased by 33% between January and Mid-March 2022. We expect this to impact both our project participants as well as staff if the situation persists. We are particularly concerned for the vulnerable as we know three-quarters of the people in DRC live below \$1.90 a day."

Steve de Klerk, CARE DRC Interim Country Director

Inexorably soaring fuel prices in the Democratic Republic of Congo are the latest consequence of the war in Ukraine. The conflict is stoking fears and anger especially among residents of the northeastern part of DRC. The rising costs not only affect fuel, on the markets stalls commodities get prohibitively expensive. A 50-kilo bag of sugar which previously cost around 43 \$ now goes for 60 \$. And the same goes for cooking oil, rice or maize, they are now worth the double of their price few months ago . One of the reasons explaining this inflation is that DRC heavily relies on imports. A dependence that could destabilized the country's food security.

"If at the international level we don't find a way to stop what is happening in Ukraine, it means that we have face supply difficulties, it is clear that prices will continue to surge here and I think that the next two months will be decisive for our populations here in the east of the DRC, we are going to feel the shock of this war between Ukraine and Russia",

Paulin Bishakabalya,

Economics analyst with the Congo Federation of Businesses

Policy recommendations

Producers, policy influencing organizations and development partners need to recognize the growing environmental threat posed by conventional, agriculture. There is need for a holistic approach in promoting 'ecological agriculture, which is defined as 'a new integrated agriculture system which integrates, agricultural production, rural economic development, environmental, improvement and protection of resources.

Promotion of Sustainable Agriculture: The study observed overreliance on maize production and marketing as a source of income and food in DRC. Additionally, a low uptake of climate smart agricultural practices. These two elements indicate the need to have the government play a significant role in promoting and supporting smallholder farmers in embracing latest production enhancing technologies. This could reduce the fragility of the cropping system in the country. There is therefore a need to develop supporting policies and frameworks for sustainable agriculture. This is a strategy that will effectively guarantee future shocks inclusive of climate change.

To avoid future food price shocks caused by rising oil and gas prices, Congo DRC must improve their oil and gas production and exploration capability to fill any gaps that may occur as a result of supply chain disruption among the major global producers.

Humanitarian assistance through governments, NGOs and international organizations should be adequately financed to provide it, especially targeting the most vulnerable households. Adoption of organic production systems that does not depend on inorganic input have the potential in reducing the impact of such disruptions in the supply chain.

Diversification of wheat sources has been recommended to wheat importers in Kenya to meet domestic demand. There is need to ensure availability of food supplies and fertilizers through diversify their sources of supply. This involves enhancing domestic production diversifying sources of imports and releasing existing food stocks. Where necessary, enabling people in need to access nutritious food through

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