

Policy Brief

Organic Versus Conventional Farmer Crisis Responses

Implications under Covid and Russia-Ukraine War

The case of Ethiopia

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 Ethiopia.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health and humanitarian crisis disrupting the food security and nutrition and economic activities of millions of people all around the world (FAO 2020). Ethiopia was not exempted from this, and the situation was made worse by the ongoing conflict in Tigray, desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*) invasions, and steep inflation.

Ethiopia reported its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 13th March 2020. While neighbouring countries like Kenya and Uganda instituted drastic measures to slow down the spread of COVID-19, (travel restrictions and lockdown), the government of Ethiopia instituted a variety of prevention and intervention activities as early as February 2020 that were less drastic to control the pandemic. This included intense surveillance at the airport for infection, suspension of flights, screening of individuals at high risk of infection, isolation of confirmed cases, campaign for social distancing and preventive practices such as travel restrictions, closure of international borders, flexible working arrangements, schools, universities and religious organizations were closed among others. The pandemic exacerbated the prevailing food insecurity and disrupted the livelihood of the people in Ethiopia (Kassegn and Endris 2021).





The Biovision Africa Trust (BvAT) is the lead executing agency for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) -which supports 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, first on a pilot basis in six countries namely: Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, and Zambia. The rollout rose to eight countries, four in Eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) and four in West Africa (Mali, Benin, Nigeria and Senegal). The overall goal is to mainstream 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 potential in Africa, the key question repeatedly raised by the stakeholders is its ability to withstand the storm, particularly, the advent of COVID-19 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: to assess how farmers practising organic agriculture & conventional agriculture have been affected by the pandemic, and how they are responding to it (Adaptation).

The impact of COVID 19 in Ethiopia

39% of the households heard about the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 (January to March). The period coincided with the time the first case of COVID-19 was reported within the East Africa region on March 13th, 2020. Of the households that experienced difficulties, 33% observed April to June 2020 as the months they experienced many difficulties as a result of the pandemic. These were the early households to be impacted by the pandemic after the first 90 days, post-announcement. The impact of the pandemic reduced as households built their resilience over time.

This could be associated with the various measures the government had put in place to mitigate the economic impacts of COVID-19.

The study observed that 82% of households interviewed depended on agriculture as their main source of livelihood. 82% of these households reported losses of their livelihood, particularly women due to disruption of the supply chain between Jan 2020 - August 2021. The most affected value chain in terms of production (42%) and marketing (46%) was local vegetables such as tomatoes, carrots and potatoes. Any disturbance such as lack of farm input and services or limited access to the market in this value chain therefore negatively affected the livelihoods of the households.

79% of the respondent farming community had their farming activities affected by government restrictions. The dairy value chain among livestock and its products sector was the most highly utilized sector as a source of income as 42% of the households sold milk to generate income from January 2020 to August 2021. This was followed by the poultry sector with 28%. Among crops, vegetables were highly utilized (46%) as a source of income, followed by teff (28%).

71% of the farmers reported that COVID-19 affect their sources of income outside the farm. The two sectors most affected were services (39%) such as hairdressing, tailoring, repairs restaurant and retail shops and employment (33%). The study observed that 79% of the households' farming activities were affected by government restrictions to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Of these 79 per cent, 45% of the household reported a loss of income as the main felt the effect, followed by difficulties in accessing farm inputs and services for both crops and livestock (34%).

The study observed that 71% of 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 the farm level caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is associated with the capacity strengthening provided to organic farmers by organic-promoting organizations.

The government COVID-19 containment measures, the stay-at-home advice and travel restrictions heavily affected local vegetables' agricultural value in terms of production as well as marketing. Based on our FGDs, the effect on the production and marketing of local vegetables was associated to:

- High labour involvement as well as perishability.
- Difficulties in importing farm inputs and an extreme shortage of foreign exchange needed to trade as well as a cessation in Ethiopian cargo planes.
- The reduction in consumption in urban towns and the few trading activities in major vegetable wholesale markets significantly affected the value chain.
- Assumptions that vegetables were carriers of the COVID-19 virus and therefore many households withdrew as a precautionary measure.
- The closure of major restaurants and a slow economy resulted in reduced consumption and trading of vegetables.
- The general on-farm training extension services were also greatly affected by the government's COVID-19 containment measures.

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

A report by Deloitte on the macroeconomic outlook for East Africa, titled "Resilience through tough times," revealed that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is expected to have an adverse influence on Ethiopia's economy as well as that of the continent of Africa through disruptions to agricultural production and supply chains. Ethiopia's total wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine in 2020 were USD 52.6 million. Ethiopia had a much higher reliance on Ukraine, with its imports totalling USD 269 million in 2020. Compared to what Kenya imported from Ukraine in the same year, this was USD 199 million more, reads the report.

According to the International Growth Center (IGC), the ongoing conflict has caused severe supply disruptions, resulting in sharp price increases for commodities of which Russia and Ukraine are large global suppliers as well as their close substitutes. Prices of essential commodities like grain, petroleum, and fertiliser have consequently surged significantly. This, in turn, can severely affect welfare in terms of higher food and energy prices and can also undermine productive capacity as essential inputs for agricultural and non-agricultural production become more expensive.

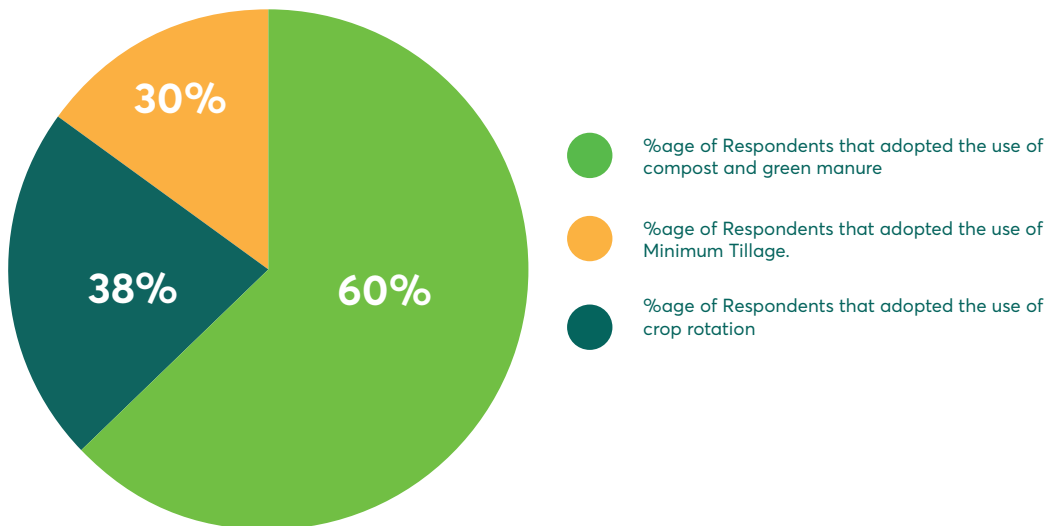
The mitigation measures

The three most adopted organic agriculture production systems used by the organic farmers' respondents in Ethiopia were compost and green manure (60%), crop rotation (38%), and minimum tillage (30%). The use of compost and green manure in the organic farming system in Ethiopia emphasizes maximum reliance on renewable natural resources as a form of organic fertilizer. This improves soil structure and aeration, increases the soil's water-holding capacity, and stimulates healthy root development (Twarog, 2006). The adoption of agroecological practices was able to build the resilience of organic producers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since organic production is based on ecological principles, it positively affects the environment by strengthening adaptation strategies. An interesting observation is the low utilization of inorganic fertilizers.

The study observed that access to extension and advisory services faced severe disruptions due to government movement restrictions. 48% of the farming households turned to radios and television for their extension services as a coping strategy to the difficulties in accessing the face-to-face extension services affected by the pandemic.

Based on the FGDs, farmers indicated that the low prices and reduced profitability in vegetable production and lack of market had resulted in many abandoning the production of local vegetables as a mitigation measure.

Most adopted organic agriculture production systems



Policy recommendations

Sustainable Agriculture promotion: The high utilization of compost and green manure as a means of replenishing the lost soil nutrients and the low utilization of inorganic fertilizer is a key policy consideration that farming technologies that rely on renewable natural resources should be encouraged and promoted for adoption.

COVID-19 Information on diet campaign: The misconception about vegetable consumption as a carrier of COVID-19 in Ethiopia needs to be corrected and widespread education and campaign implemented, and this can be done through radio and television.

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