

Policy Brief

Organic Versus Conventional Farmer Crisis Responses Implications under Covid and Russia-Ukraine War

The case of Kenya

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 Kenya.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health and humanitarian crisis threatening the food security and nutrition of millions of people around the world (FAO 2020). In Kenya even before the virus, poverty, food insecurity, undernutrition and income inequality were very high and approximately 1.3 million people were facing food crises by late 2019. The combined effects of COVID-19 itself, as well as the corresponding mitigation measures largely disrupted the functioning food systems and the livelihoods of many Kenyans. The pandemic hit the country at a time of immense challenges as it was dealing with the effect of desert locusts on food security in the country. As of late March 2020, new swarms were forming in Northern and Central Kenya. As Kenya went through various waves of the pandemic, BIOVISION African Trust (BvAT), continued to develop ways of mitigating the impact of the pandemic among its organic farmers as it inspired them to sustainably improve their lives while conserving the environment as the basis for all life. The Trust's mission is to alleviate poverty and improve the livelihood of rural communities in Africa through disseminating relevant agricultural information to smallholder farmers and supporting like-minded organizations and institutions through appropriate technology to improve human, animal, plant and environmental health. In Kenya, BvAT is based in Nairobi, and it is the lead agency for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) grant support to the Ecological Organic Agriculture (EOA) Initiative (EOA-I) which supported this policy brief.

Ecological Organic Agriculture Initiative (EOA-I) Background

The Ecological Organic Agriculture Initiative (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. The 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.

Impact of COVID-19 on agriculture systems

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 commissioned 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 and conventional agriculture have been affected by the pandemic, and how they are responding to it (adaptation). In Kenya, 52% of households heard about the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 (January to March). The government of Kenya confirmed the first case on the 12th of March 2020. Many households in Kenya experienced difficulties

between April and June 2020. This difficult peak resurfaced again in the months of April-June 2021.

The study observed that the households interviewed depended on various income sources, however, 99.5% had agriculture as their main source of livelihood. Any disturbance such as a lack of farm input and services or limited market access would therefore negatively affect these households. Between January 2020 and August 2021, 95.4% of the respondent had their livelihood sources affected by COVID-19. 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.

86% of the respondent farming community had their farming activities affected by these government restrictions. In particular access to farm inputs and services (43%) and loss of income (42%). Livestock was the most affected agricultural sector in terms of production while fruits and nuts were the most affected in terms of marketing. The most traded livestock product during January 2020 to August 2021 pandemic period was dairy (77%) and poultry (11%). Although the government of Kenya had declared agricultural products as essential to ensure movements given the COVID-19 containment measures, the stay-at-home advice and travel restrictions meant that traders had logistic difficulties. Additionally, the closure of weekly markets through which women sell their farm produce such as vegetables and small stock such as chicken left the majority of women without any source of income. This explains why livestock products, fruits and nuts had marketing challenges.

COVID-19 did not spare household non-on-farm income as 48% of the households who had their hands in the industry (handcrafts), services (hairdressing tailoring, restaurants), remittances (local and international), government subsidies, pensions and employment (wages and salaries) were affected. The outbreak of the pandemic led to travel restrictions, and reduced farmer-extension worker physical interaction and farmer training, which had the potential to reduce production and productivity at the farm level. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected access to input services, with 51% reporting they experienced challenges in accessing inputs. Organic farmers

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were less affected by challenges of access to farm inputs and services compared to conventional farmers. This is associated with their practice of recycling farm resources in the agroecological systems unlike the over-dependence on agrovet services for all farm inputs. Cessation of movement of people critical to production, trade and sales complicated access to inputs such as seed as well as extension services.

The top five most adopted organic agriculture production systems used by the organic farmers' respondents in Kenya included minimum tillage (84%), intercropping (82%), nitrogen-fixing legumes (82%), compost and green manure (79%) and crop rotation (66%) (Figure 4). The adoption of agroecological practices was able to build the resilience of the organic producers. Because organic production is based on ecological principles, which positively affects the environment by strengthening adaptation strategies. Organically produced products have therefore the capacity to stay fresh longer, protecting them against post-harvest loss and delayed market during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study observed that access to extension and advisory services faced severe disruptions since public health measures and government movement restrictions were imposed. 32% of the respondent had this challenge, particularly in general on-farm extension and training. However, the majority of the households used the radio and television as a coping strategy to the difficulties in accessing the face-to-face extension services affected by the pandemic.

Paper money was one of the conduits for the spread of the virus. As a result, 92% of the traders in Kenya adopted mobile money transfer technology, for payment of goods and services. There was a proliferation of product advertisements, especially on Facebook and the creation of marketing groups on WhatsApp as traders sort for more customers. Traders started exploring new locations to source products was adopted. To mitigate the challenges of lack of inputs, 81% of the households in Kenya opted to lower the use of farm inputs sourced externally. This explains the reduced yield experienced by conventional farmers. To cope with post-harvest loss at the household level, 63% of the household resulted in dehydration of food such as vegetables.

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

On the 24th of February 2022, Russia launched a military offensive on their neighbor, Ukraine. Considering the economic role played by the two countries as a supplier of grain and energy to the rest of the world, the war had significant implications on the value chains of these products. Disruption in value chains has resulted in price increases in; fuel and energy, wheat and fertilizer prices which are critical inputs for Kenya's manufacturing and agriculture sector. Over and above this exchange rate depreciation has also been observed and also fed to inflation causing an even slower economic recovery and reduction of poverty. In 2021 wheat importation stood at 2.1 million tons against 350 tons produced within the country. The war disrupts the supply chain for these critical products that would come with price implications, especially so since bread is the third most consumed food commodity in Kenya after maize meal and rice. Disruption in fertilizer production and exportation has already caused a spike in the price of fertilizer in Kenya. In March 2022, the price of fertilizer doubled from the long rains planting season of March-April-May 2021 from KES 2,500 to more than KES 5,000¹. The government through the Ministry of Agriculture has introduced a fertilizer subsidy program following a spike in fertilizer prices, but not all farmers benefited from this.

¹ <https://kippra.or.ke/what-does-the-ukraine-russia-war-mean-for-kenya>

Policy recommendation

Agroecological Technologies: This study observed that organic farmers adopted agroecological technologies that have the potential to enhance their resilience to both climate change and future pandemics. The Kenyan government needs to embrace a holistic approach to promoting agroecological agriculture, integrating the production system with rural economic development, as well as environmental improvement for effective resilience in current and future shocks. Promoting and investing in environmentally friendly agriculture.

Gender Empowerment: In Kenyan agricultural systems, women play a significant role, and any shock affecting the system would heavily and negatively impact many households that depend on these women. Promoting women in organic farming would be an effective policy option as it can harmonize environmental and agricultural policies, can employ more labor, reduce the use of agricultural chemicals as well as reduce poverty as well as prepare households for unforeseen shocks. Promote women in organic farming.

Extension content creation and dissemination: Collaboration with the media houses for the development of extension content to be disseminated in locations where we have lockdowns will be important. Government initiation of organic programs.

Public Private Partnerships: Interventions targeting the promotion of Agro-dealer networks, and input services providers at the village level who can supply inputs at the doorstep would be important in the long run. There is an urgent government need to promote organic agriculture while emphasizing private participation.

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. The government has also encouraged local millers to purchase wheat from local farmers. Strengthening of the social protection system to protect fragile livelihoods following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and seeking alternative export markets for Kenyan coffee and tea will build resilience among the farmers. Enhanced social security support can be guaranteed through an aggressive debt restructuring strategy that will keep debt service at constant levels within the short-term, suspension of fuel subsidy as well as reallocations into much needed social spending.

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ECOLOGICAL ORGANIC AGRICULTURE INITIATIVE

P.O. Box 30772-00100 Nairobi,

Kenya Duduville Kasarani Opp Thika road

EMAIL: Info@eoai-africa.org

WEBSITE: www.eoai-africa.org

OFFICE TEL: +254 20 8632000||+254 721 766628