

The impact of Covid-19 on food security in Africa

By [Professor Njuguna S. Ndung'u](#)

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The Covid-19 pandemic has affected all sectors of economies globally. Here in Africa, the crisis has drastically impacted food security. Supply chains, food and nutrition security, as well as current and future production functions, have been negatively impacted by a host of factors related to the Covid-19 crisis.



Africa Food Security 11 via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Food supply and food security is a basic human need and a basic requirement for survival in difficult times. Several studies of food policies, food security and nutrition outcomes in Africa seem to show that lack of access to sufficient nutritious food leads to health problems including under-nourishment, immune deficiencies, stunting, illnesses and higher child mortality rates.

The onset of the Covid-19 crisis has exponentially increased the continent's food security problems. Food supply chain distribution networks have been severely constrained. The numerous negative impacts of the health crisis are having a compound effect on all facets of food security, including food production, safety and distribution.

Regional lockdowns, curfews, closures of markets, restrictions on border crossings and movement limitation measures (while necessary for public health and safety concerns), hamper the functioning of the agricultural sector, and Small to Medium Enterprise (SMEs) that make up the continent's supply chain backbone.

These restrictions exacerbate food insecurity and nutritional deficits issues across Africa, affecting:

- **Agriculture:** The inability to perform normal farming and agricultural processes has led to crop losses and food shortages. This affects communities.
- **Manufacturing:** The manufacturing sector across all industries, including food production, has been hit hard. The Covid-19 outbreak has led to business interruptions, which have had a domino effect on economies: business owners suffer economic difficulties, which then lead to employee cut-backs, job losses and even complete shutdowns of companies. Job losses then lead to communities suffering financial struggles impeding access to sufficient and nutritious food.
- **Distribution:** A major impediment to food security is limited distribution options. The Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted all aspects of the food supply chain, including the logistics related to food handling and distribution. Even when food supplies are available, there are barriers for it reaching consumers, most especially due to movement restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the virus.

While the Covid-19 health crisis has had an immeasurable adverse effect on food security in Africa, it is vital to remember that food scarcity was an existing issue pre-crisis. The crisis is amplifying and aggravating prevalent problems such as severe poverty, poor infrastructure, insufficient investment and resources, skills and knowledge deficiencies; and ineffectual policies related to the food and agriculture sectors in Africa. Additionally, it highlights the need to strengthen Africa's agricultural and food manufacturing industries to reduce the reliance on food imports from outside the continent.

The inability to import food due to logistic restrictions is causing further shortages as, according to The [World Economic Forum \(WEF\)](#), Africa is more dependent on externally sourced food imports than locally manufactured food.

African economies need to urgently examine solutions to help overcome the critical issue of food insecurity. This will require a collaborative approach by African governments, public and private sectors; and pooling of resources and sharing of knowledge aimed at alleviating the severe food insecurity situation.

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), has undertaken numerous research projects and addressed this issue on several fora, including recently at the Senior Policy Seminar (held earlier this year in Abuja, Nigeria) on the theme "Agriculture and Food Policies for Better Nutrition Outcomes in Africa". At the seminar, The Abuja Declaration, was adopted by senior policymakers from around Africa as an affirmation of their support of agriculture and food policies for improved nutrition outcomes in Africa.

AERC has implemented several activities focusing on Agriculture and Food Policies, most recently under the **Analysis of the Impact of Agricultural, Food and Nutrition Policies on Nutrition Outcomes in Africa (AFPON)** programme. This project seeks to contribute to the recent interest in leveraging agricultural development for improved nutrition by exploring the link between agricultural policies and nutrition outcomes in Africa.

The research linked agricultural policies to nutrition outcomes such as stunting, wasting, anaemia, child mortality, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity and malnutrition, among others. The study also attempted to understand, among other things, how gender access to productive agricultural resources, such as land, affect the nutrition of individuals and households in sub-Saharan African countries, how agricultural productivity, agricultural extension and advisory services affect nutrition outcomes; and establishing the policies and practices that would best improve food security and nutrition status.

AERC has also looked at the fragility of growth in African economies, health financing in Africa, climate change and growth in Africa, why poverty persist in Africa, the continent's lack of growth, - inequality or poor redistribution or inclusive growth policies - as well as youth unemployment.

Furthermore, the Africa rising narrative seems to be fading: Why? It is due to lack of capacity to sustain the policy environment to its conclusive end coupled with weak institutions that cannot define the appropriate incentive structures for

sustainability.

The observation across African countries is an exacerbation of the already acute lack of food security, primarily due to extreme poverty, resulting from institutional and policy failure. Indeed, there are many potential reasons why supposedly well-crafted policies often fail to be adopted, and even when they are adopted, why they fail to achieve their desired objectives.

It has been noted that policymakers often place excessive emphasis on “best practices,” at the expense of other factors such as commitment, coordination and cooperation, which are deemed plausible determinants of a successful policy. Also, the preponderance of power asymmetry (the unequal distribution of power) in the political arena contributes to policy failure as it facilitates resource diversion - through mechanisms such as clientelism - away from contributing to policy success.

Successful policy implementation can, however, be achieved by bringing about change in the incentives, preferences and beliefs of key players such as elites, citizens and international actors, as well as by creating space for contestability and participation. This may be achieved, as well, by reaching beyond institutional forms to address institutional functions - over and above capacity building - to alleviate power asymmetry, and beyond the rule of law to address the role of law.

To succeed in overcoming African food security challenges, research and implementation need to be employed with regard to factors such as:

- Agricultural, farm input and farming credit policies
- Agricultural and food manufacture education systems
- Food and nutrition policies
- Government financial aid policies related to agriculture and nutrition
- Local support and advisory services for the agriculture and food industries
- Food and socio-economic aid to communities during and after the Covid-19 crisis

For a robust and impactful change, the following need to form part of the policy matrix when it comes to Africa’s food, agriculture, and nutrition goals:

- **Supply Chain Protection:** Emphasis on protecting supply chains from any form of disruptions in the short term. This is especially so with countries going through lockdown, and the need for facilitated border crossing through a coordinated approach of testing and social distancing measures being employed.
- **Protection of Private Investment:** Outright measures to protect private investment – they will be crucial for now and the future recovery process.
- **African Market Development:** Outright measures to protect and develop markets - they will be needed in the medium term for speedy economic recovery.
- **Fiscal Space Building Efforts:** African economies should re-negotiate external debt serving to postponement for least a year. This will preserve liquidity/expenditure and support a build-up of fiscal space that will assist most economies in Africa to ride over the current shocks.
- **Food Reserves:** A key way in which African economies can build resilience to mitigate and manage shocks is to create buffers - with one vital safeguard being strategic food reserves.

As previously emphasised to policymakers in discussions on this subject, Africa’s short-term crisis relates to food self-sufficiency, and the current heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture is a precarious practice. Food reserves will be required as a buffer to support adjustment in times of drought and subsequent famines that put pressure on fiscal reserves, as well as for other crisis situations.

• **Digital Technology and Innovation:** The use of digital technology and the digital space to move enterprise activities forward. So far, in most countries, the deployment and use of digital technology in the financial services, government e-services and online learning has supported most socio-economic activities. This is still a 4th Industrial Revolution narrative, but it has become useful and applicable in the current pandemic.

Thus far, it has been used by governments on targeted social protection programs. In successful countries, we have seen a range of services driven by a financial services revolution, enabling governments to implement e-governance strategies to better provide a range of services and opportunities to beneficiaries of public programs, business, taxpayers and investors, as well as dynamising the private sector.

At the same time, even as it contributes to strengthening state capacity, the digital revolution makes new demands on the state in order to consolidate current and future successes: some of which include improving in-country and cross-continental connectivity, ensuring a fully interoperable electronic payment platform and implementing measures to strengthen consumer protection. Finally, the focus for the future is on a transition to a fully digital identification (e-ID) system across all African economies. This way, economies' future economic and institutional recovery from the pandemic and other negative outcomes will be driven by the 4th Industrial Revolution - with firmly entrenched roots.

As stated by Albert Zeufack, [World Bank](#) Chief Economist for Africa: "In addition to containment measures, we have seen that in responding to Covid-19, countries are opting for a combination of emergency fiscal and monetary policy actions - with many central banks in the region taking important actions such as cutting interest rates and providing extraordinary liquidity assistance.

"However, it is important to ensure that fiscal policy builds in space for social protection interventions, especially targeting workers in the informal sector, and sows the seed for the future resilience of our economies."

Long term and sustainable remedies include capacity building at institutional, regional, country and continental levels. Such capacity building includes research and training that drives credible and reliable evidence-based economic policymaking related to food, agriculture and nutrition in Africa. Such capacity will build and strengthen institutions for policy sustainability – be it fiscal or monetary policy, food security or market developments. All have one important dimension to success and sustainability, namely: Capacity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Njuguna S. Ndung'u is a Kenyan economist, university professor and economic researcher. He is the former Governor of the Central Bank of Kenya, a position he occupied for two consecutive four-year terms, from March 2007 until March 2015.

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