Stronger local food value chains can leave eastern and southern Africa more resilient post COVID-19

COVID-19 has seized the drylands of Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA), home to some of the world’s most vulnerable people. Mitigation efforts by governments in the region are starting to have significant adverse impacts on local food value chains. Lockdowns are in place in Zimbabwe, Uganda and partially in Kenya. In Zimbabwe, where civil society protests have been historically suppressed, vendors in urban areas have been ordered to shutdown to stop the spread of the virus; in Harare, ‘illegal’ vending stalls were even demolished. Contrastingly in Malawi, and in a first for Africa during the pandemic, thousands took to streets in urban centers of Blantyre and Mzuzu to protest the lockdown, which was later struck down by a court apprehending the fallout from it.

The suspension of lockdown in Malawi reflects concerns about the impact of COVID-19 mitigation measures on food security in ESA, which is already grappling with droughts, locust outbreaks, economic instability and diseases like malaria. The pandemic and its mitigation measures have impacted all stages of the value chains.

COVID-19 and downstream impacts in ESA’s food value chains

Governments in ESA are focused on setting up national plans for COVID-19 and have not coordinated a regional response, like in Europe, which will have significant ramifications for food security and livelihoods. Important trade relations between African countries have to be kept alive to ensure food security of those that rely on food imports. As fears rise over importing COVID-19 cases, many countries have restricted movement across borders (South Africa began fencing its border with Zimbabwe) and limited informal cross-border trade of food and remittances. For instance, in the case of Malawi, the land border with Zambia is currently closed, likely bringing informal cross-border trade of maize grain to a halt with significant implications for traders’ livelihoods and food security. In other ESA countries such as Uganda and Kenya, significant delays in border crossing for cargo trucks have been reported, which have important ripple effects on food value chains downstream.

Trade disruptions and national COVID-19 mitigation measures are also expected to disrupt local food value chains in the short to medium term through transport, logistics, processing and sales bottlenecks in (peri-) urban areas. Small food outlets such as food stalls and restaurants have been closed in (peri-) urban areas, significantly impacting vendors who desperately depend on daily income. Other vulnerable people living in high-density neighborhoods commute daily to provide services and labor to the cities. (Partial) lockdowns restricting such commute in (peri-) urban areas often signify a total loss of income for casual labor, vendors, minibus drivers and others reliant on daily wages (for instance, in Zimbabwe, where 90% of income generated is from the informal sector and already more than 77% of the urban population is unable to meet their food needs). The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that food shortages are affecting about 7.7 million people in the country. As food shortages dramatically increase from frequent droughts and economic mismanagement, reflected in an inflation rate of 676.39%, people are compelled to defy the lockdown to buy food from local markets. Read More..