



**IMPACT OF THE  
COVID-19 ON  
SMALL-SCALE  
FARMING,  
FOOD SECURITY  
AND SOVEREIGNTY  
IN THE EAC**

**NO FARMER, NO FOOD**

# INTRODUCTION

This document presents results from the on-line conference on the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and sovereignty. The document presents results from the discussions and measures that should be taken by East African Community (EAC) member states to protect small-scale farming and ensure that small-scale farmers and citizens of EAC are food secure and sovereign. The conference strongly acknowledged the contribution of small scale farmers towards feeding the population during the time of COVID-19.

## BACKGROUND

The people of East Africa are largely small scale farmers with a significant role in food production and the agriculture sector, which is a priority policy objective of the East African Community (EAC). Before the impact of the desert locust on the sector could be assessed, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. With the ever increasing number of cases of COVID-19 in the region, the entire East African regional governments have tightened borders, quarantines, restricted gatherings yet small scale farmers operate in groups. Currently, there is a lot of fear among small-scale farmers and most of them are staying away from their gardens in this planting season. With a further focus on women, more than 65% of food produced in the region is by rural small scale women farmers while men are more involved in labour off the farm. Women small scale farmers are also often responsible for the care of children, the sick and elderly. This means they might have increased exposure to COVID-19 with knock-on implications for food production, food preparation and child nutrition.

More still, the EAC has a youthful population, but most youths are in urban areas because they are less interested in agriculture. This has left further burden for women and the older farming population that could be more vulnerable to COVID-19. Fortunately, many EAC governments have shared crucial preventative measures through media that would contribute to the slowing down of the spread and impact.

On that note, ESAFF Uganda together with other ESAFF members, friends and partners in EAC found it needed to have small-scale farmer leaders in the region and key strategic partners discuss the possible impact of the COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and sovereignty as well as develop actionable strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on food security and sovereignty in the region.

### Date, Time and Participants

The Zoom Conference was hosted on Wednesday 8th April 2020 and it started at 2:30 PM EAT for one hour and fifteen minutes. The 53 participants who attended were from 16 countries including all East African countries. The participants included small-scale farmers, farmer organisations, national organisations, regional, continental and international organisations, private and public research organisations, private sector, media, students and citizens (this includes those was registered as consultants and independent).

## Speakers and Panelists

Mr. Baliraine Hakim, the ESAFF Chairperson and also the PCFS Africa Representative to the Global Executive Committee gave the opening statement for the conference.

*The first panelists included;*

Ms. Masudio Margaret from Uganda, the Publicity Secretary of ESAFF Uganda and passionate for gender equality and women rights.

Mr. Augustin Mpawenimana from Burundi, the Coordinator of ESAFF Burundi.

*The second included;*

Dr. Bethule Nyamambi, the Project Director at TrustAfrica Foundation

Mr. Alvin Munyasia, the Food Security and Climate Justice Advisor at Oxfam Pan Africa

Ms. Agnes Kirabo, the Executive Director at Food Rights Alliance.

After the discussions, Mr. Joe Mzinga the Coordinator ESAFF shared conclusive remarks and emphasized the next steps.

## IMPACT ON SMALL-SCALE FARMING

The heads of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a joint statement on 31 March calling on governments to minimise the impact of COVID-19 related border restrictions on trade in food.

The conference acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique situation for small-scale farmers and governments in the EAC. The EAC had already been struggling with the locusts before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. Despite the fact that small-scale farmers have so far proven to be resilient through this situation, there is a lot of insufficient information about COVID-19. There is a lot of fear and uncertainty, small-scale farmers aren't well prepared for the likely impact of COVID-19. Many small-scale farmers are staying at home and this poses a danger on work on the farms given the fact that this is a planting season.

COVID-19 has had a relative impact on the free movement of people, goods and services in the region because small-scale farmers who were carrying out cross-border trade can't transport their goods because small-scale don't have the investment capital needed at this time like the large scale business owners. The EAC common market protocol ensure free movement of people, goods and services within the EAC boundaries. Despite the fact that there has been free movement of people and goods as one of the protocols, for now it is no more.

Small-scale farmers are facing high cost of agricultural inputs especially seeds, hoes, drugs among others. This is due to lockdown and restrictions that have been implemented in most of the EAC states where vehicle movement are restricted and most shops closed hence affecting easy access by small-scale farmers. In most of the farming communities in the region, small-scale farmers use communal labour approaches in farms and with the restrictions against gatherings, labour force has reduced on the farms hence small-scale farmers are reducing on the sizes of the gardens covered and selecting crops that don't require a lot of labour. Previously with communal labour, small-scale farmers were accessing loans from their

farmer groups to hire labour on their farms but since the small-scale farmers' saving groups are not functional due to fear, they can't access loans to hire labour. It was noted that the presence of the COVID-19 in the region has also paralyzed extension services because most extension workers fear risking their lives to go for work in the communities.

The conference discussed that in-case the situation escalates, small-scale farmers especially women will be more vulnerable because they take care of the sick, elderly and most importantly provide the labour in the farms hence when they are concentrated at home carrying out these roles, they will not be able to provide labour in the farms. Women are also fearing to go out to the gardens because of fear to be attacked by thieves and idle people around their communities as some have resorted to stealing the food from gardens. Futhermore, without protective equipment for small-scale farmers, many small-scale farmers will opt to stay at home to be safe rather than go into the farms. It was also highlighted that despite the locusts and COVID-19, the range lands in the region have not received even distribution of rain that is affecting small scale farmers in the region.

## **IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY**

It is estimated that small-scale farmers in EAC account for over 85% of the food produced in the region. The conference predicted that if this pandemic isn't managed well, the region might face a recurrent food crisis, given that the pandemic surfaced during the planting season. The Current disruption in the agriculture production which will lead to failure to maintain small-scale farmers' groups and farm work will trigger malnutrition and stunting in the region in some of the households.

Small-scale farmers informed the conference that even if they take their produce to their near-by market, buyers aren't available because of the restrictions on movement of people. This leads to the exploitation of small-scale farmers by "middlemen" who take the best produce from farmers' gardens at very low prices and will likely make food producers more at risk of food insecurity. The conference also observed that food prices in the markets sky-rocketed hence most citizens will buy less nutritious food. This will affect their ability to have a balanced diet which is very essential in the fight against COVID-19 which attacks people with low immunity. The many vulnerable households who can't access food because of the restrictions may end-up struggling with malnutrition or at worst dying of hunger.

During the conference, it was realized that some businessmen in the region are hoarding agriculture produce and inputs to influence the increase in prices at a later stage. The lack of access to food for a particular group of people in the region will definitely contribute to escalating inequality in the region.

The conference also discussed the likely impact of the current restrictions and lockdowns in the region on land tenure security and other productive resources. There is fear that some people in the population might use this opportunity to grab land and other productive resources from small-scale farmers since most of the farmers are staying home and don't have access to information. Also, they are not able to access land registration offices because they are limited

in movement and most offices are closed or restricted in operation during this time.

The restrictions that were imposed by some governments in the region have also limited seed sharing among small-scale farmers which is core in attaining seed security and sovereignty of small-scale farmers in particular communities. Fears were registered of some private sector actors using this situation to hijack the seed sector hence dismantling the farmer managed seed systems.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on the deliberation, the conference calls upon EAC member states to:**

Continue standing in solidarity with small-scale farmers in the EAC. This includes standing for their rights to protective resources and against exploitation but especially the rights of women who are most at risk. Small-scale farmers should further be rewarded for their continued commitment towards producing food for citizens of EAC.

Support the promotion of agroecological agriculture in the EAC which is known for providing nutritious foods and being resilient through such situations.

Improve access to information by use of local structures at lower levels; government and other stakeholders should create extensive awareness of small-scale farmers on COVID-19 spreading, hygiene promotion and contact tracing using community radios and online softwares (digital platforms) like WhatsApp. This would empower small-scale farmers and also address fake news which is causing fear among the farming population in the region and paralyzing activities.

Address exploitation of small-scale farmers during this situation, the need to develop an online market solution for small-scale farmers was proposed that would link small-scale farmers directly to the final consumers hence small-scale farmers fetching better prices for their produce.

Provide small scale farmers with resources like hygiene kits, cleaning of infrastructure, etc. as measures to prevent COVID-19 contamination including a series of health measures to reduce the risk. In addition to this, social protection provision for the small scale farmers in the EAC needs to be prioritized.

Ensure that the development of policies in EAC emphasizes the development of the agriculture sector in accordance with the Malabo Declaration of 2014. Policies like the National Agriculture Investment Policy (NAIP) in each of the countries should reflect the commitments in the Malabo Declaration especially the need to invest more than 10% of the national budget to the agriculture budget. This is because COVID-19 pandemic has justified the importance of the agriculture sector in security and sovereignty of a nation.

Establish and strengthen the EAC Food Reserve Fund to be used during emergencies and disasters.

# NEXT STEP

**Some quick next steps were also proposed including;**

Organising a similar conference for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region coordinated by ESAFF. The conference will discuss the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale farmers in the region and further discuss food security and sovereignty in the SADC region.

Partners to support the development of an online campaign on COVID-19 and agriculture for the Eastern and Southern Africa. This campaign would highlight small-scale farmers issues and engage policy makers at national and regional levels.

ESAFF Uganda and partners to develop small-scale farmers' friendly information and communication materials on COVID-19 and distribute them to the small-scale farmers in the EAC region.

Link small-scale farmers who have reported to be stranded with perishable produce in their villages to potential transporters and buyers.

# CONCLUSION

The efforts by governments, partners and private sector towards combating COVID-19 in the region was highly recognized and appreciated. Up-to-date, many governments and organisations have initiated studies around the impact of COVID-19 on food security. As results from such studies are being waited upon, engagement like these will continue to provide relevant information for development of policies and programs to mitigate the COVID-19 impact on food security and sovereignty in the region. ESAFF greatly appreciates all the participants and partners that made this conference a reality. ESAFF is also greatly indebted to the panelists and discussants who shared their views and knowledge during the conference. The conference presented a unique opportunity for different stakeholders to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and sovereignty at a time when nations have locked themselves up.

# MEDIA

For more information and media enquiries please contact [coordinator@esaffuganda.org](mailto:coordinator@esaffuganda.org)

Podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/esaff-uganda/impact-of-the-covid-19-on-small-scale-farming-food-security-and-sovereignty-in-the-eac>

Communique for the online conference: <https://bit.ly/2Vg36Ux>

### **ABOUT ESAFF**

The Eastern and Southern Africa small-scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF) is a network of grassroots small scale farmers' organizations working in 16 countries of Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region including South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, Lesotho, DR Congo, Madagascar, Seychelles and Mozambique. The movement which started in 2002 during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg – South Africa is a small scale farmer initiated, farmer led and farmer owned.

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### **ABOUT ESAFF UGANDA**

Eastern and Southern Africa Small-scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) Uganda exists to create a platform to bring together small scale farmers into a farmer-led advocacy movement to influence policies and practices at local and national level and contribute through ESAFF to policies and practices at regional, continental and global levels. ESAFF Uganda is a small scale farmer-led advocacy movement formed to facilitate processes through which small scale farmers' development concerns can be solicited, articulated and ultimately addressed through policies and programs. ESAFF Uganda focuses on advancing economic empowerment, agroecology and food sovereignty. ESAFF Uganda is currently having a membership of 1359 farmer groups with 48210 individual small-scale farmers of which 64 per cent are women in 54 districts (under the administration of 30 historical districts' forums).


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Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers' Forum

# ESAFF - UGANDA

*"Small Scale Farmers Speaking For Themselves"*

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