

FOOD INSECURITY IN AFRICA: DEADLIER THAN COVID-19?

By Camilla Rocca, Head of Research
& Ines Schultes, Researcher

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation, committed to strengthening public governance and effective leadership in Africa, is monitoring the impact of the current COVID-19 crisis on the continent. In an earlier report and discussion with our Founder and Chair Mo Ibrahim, on top of the health and economic impact of this crisis on Africa, we highlighted the overlapping current and growing threat of food insecurity. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, sub-Saharan Africa was already the world's most food insecure region. Resources are being directed now towards mitigating the effects of the virus but food insecurity should not be overlooked both as a standalone emergency as well as one aggravated by COVID-19. If it is, then starvation and hunger might end up being deadlier than COVID-19, while also wiping out any progress made towards achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2063, fostering instability on the continent.

Sub-Saharan Africa: already the world's most food insecure region

Even before COVID-19 and its impact on health, the economy and other key areas for development and prosperity, sub-Saharan Africa was already the world's most food insecure region and 2020 was forecasted to be the worst year for food crises globally since 2017, when the Global Network Against Food Crises conducted its first analysis.

According to the 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, more than half of the 135 million acutely food insecure people in the world in 2019 live in Africa (73 million). Half of the 10 worst food crises in 2019 have hit Africa: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan and Northern Nigeria. In addition, 129 million people in 32 African countries were in stressed situations with regards to food security.

The worsening food security trend in Africa is also highlighted in the findings of the last Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG). The African average score for *Absence of Undernourishment* (percentage of the African population with sufficient food intake to meet dietary energy requirements continuously) has made progress in the past decade (2008-2017). However, in more recent years (2013-2017), this indicator has, concerningly, gone into decline, driven by a deterioration of almost half (23) of the continent's countries, with four countries, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, most severely hit.

Survey findings from Afrobarometer also show that at least 47% of respondents in 34 African countries in the period 2016-2018 have gone without food at least once in a year, with more than 70% in Gabon, Malawi and Niger. Meanwhile, 14% of respondents across the 34 countries reportedly suffered from frequent food shortages.

Africa remains heavily dependent on food imports despite the fact that agriculture represents the continent's main employer, contributing up to to 60.0% of African jobs and roughly one-third of the continent's GDP, according to the 2019 Ibrahim Forum Report. At the continental level, agriculture constitutes around 12.0% of imports by value and around 9.0-10.0% of exports. Eight African countries fill 90.0% of their demand with imports: Botswana, Cabo Verde, Djibouti, Gambia, Lesotho, Mauritania, Seychelles and Somalia. Increased food demand and changing consumption habits lead to rapidly rising net food imports, expected to more than triple within 10 years: from \$35.0 billion in 2015 to over \$110.0 billion by 2025. While this could be offset by increased African production, Africa shows small progress in the IIAG sub-category *Rural Sector* over the 2008-2017 decade, with even a decline in scores between 2013 and 2017, issuing warning signs.

Last but not least, as the region with the most climate-vulnerable societies, ecosystems and agrosystems, Africa is expected to be one of the hardest-hit by climate change. Global warming of two degrees Celsius will worsen drought and desertification, increasing the proportion of Africa's population at risk of undernourishment to 50.0%.

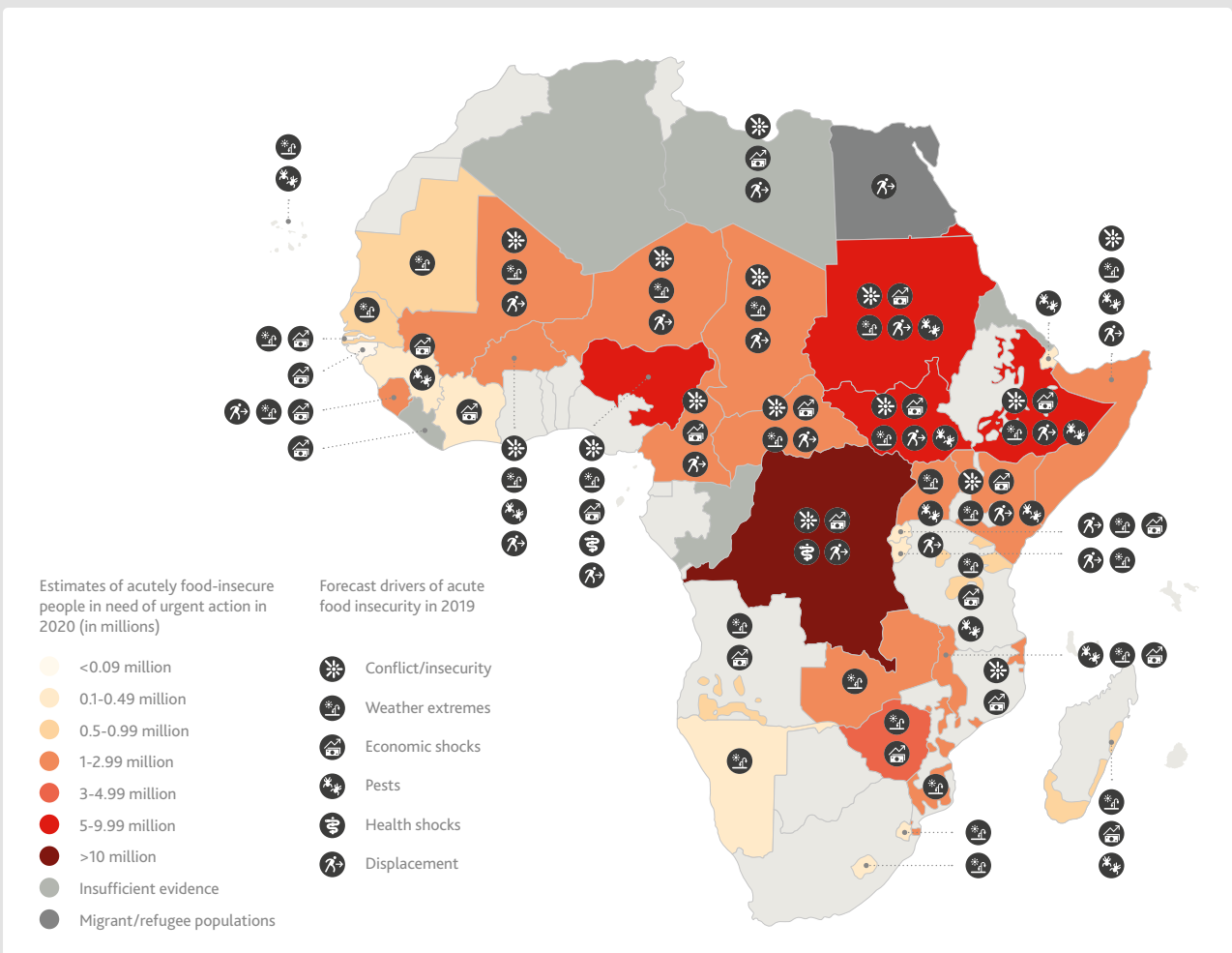
Now hit by the worst locust upsurge in 25 years

The locust is the most dangerous migratory pest in the world and according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Horn of Africa is now facing the worst desert locust crisis in 25 years. The current upsurge is the worst in over 25 years in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, in 60 years in Uganda and 70 years in Kenya. Based on the current and projected analyses by the FAO Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC/CH), about 12 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia,

who are already facing Phase 3: Crises (out of 5) or worse levels of food insecurity, are located in areas currently affected by severe locust infestations. Food insecure people in Uganda and South Sudan are also under threat, bringing the total number at risk to nearly 20 million.

The current locust invasion, which appeared in June 2019, is expected to turn into a regional plague with severe consequences for livelihoods as well as the threat of domestic unrest, conflict and displacement. The FAO is warning that the locust invasion in Africa is expected to increase and extend to more areas. New swarms are expected to form in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia during May and June. The swarms are expected to move further north in both Somalia and Ethiopia and so might also reach Sudan and Eritrea. Some swarms could continue to Chad and Niger in June if they arrive in Sudan before the summer rains.

Africa: Estimates of acutely food-insecure people & forecast drivers of acute food insecurity (2020)



The multiplier effect of COVID-19

African governments have been praised for responding quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic with the adoption of public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Even before COVID-19 deaths or cases were reported, South Africa declared a nationwide lockdown, Uganda suspended public gatherings and Nigeria introduced screenings for passengers at international airports.

While confirmed known cases of COVID-19 in Africa appear to remain comparatively low, at around 51,000 as of 7 May, the pandemic is expected to affect the life of many Africans beyond health aspects. The economic toll of COVID-19 is expected to be immense and the impact of the pandemic on the continent's already fragile food security context could result in hunger and starvation ending up to be deadlier than the virus.

Across West Africa during the lean season (the period between harvests from June to August) already more than 21 million people will struggle to feed themselves according to the World Food Programme (WFP). Due to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, in the next six months an additional 20 million people could struggle to feed themselves, doubling the number of food-insecure to 34-43 million in this region alone.

In its April 2020 Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) report on food security and agriculture, the FAO outlines that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have severe repercussions for vulnerable rural and urban populations. Households could be affected by a decline in their purchasing power, while at the same time facing surging prices for some food items, unavailability of products due to supply chain disruptions and containment policies limiting access to markets.

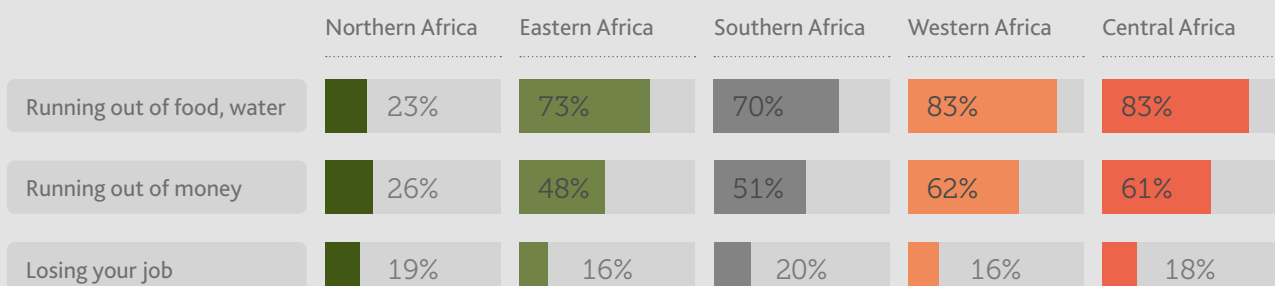
Food consumption accounts for the largest share of household spending for low-income households in many countries – for example, over 60.0% in rural areas in Mozambique. These impacts will significantly affect the lives and livelihoods of already vulnerable citizens. Isolation measures will take a toll on the important proportion of Africa's urban population which relies solely on informal sector work and has no access to social protection schemes.

While public health and social measures (PHSMs) appear necessary to reduce transmission of COVID-19, there is a fine – and difficult – balance to strike between mitigating the negative economic impact of PHSMs on livelihoods and ensuring the effectiveness of distancing measures. The Partnership for Evidence-Based Response to COVID-19 (PERC), a consortium of global public health organisations and private sector firms, conducted surveys across 28 cities in 20 African Union member states and found that respondents were most strongly opposed to shutting down markets in relation to COVID-19 regulations.

On average, respondents estimated that they would run out of money in 12 days and food in 10 days if public health and safety measures were implemented. In Kenya and Nigeria, people have violated lockdown orders in order to get hold of food. In all regions but North Africa, 70.0% or more named running out of water or food as a barrier to staying at home for 14 days. The report recommends that where restrictions are jeopardising food security, governments should adapt measures to keep markets accessible and consider direct transfers of food.

In African countries, barriers to stay-at-home orders are high

Percentage that would face barriers to a 14-day stay-at-home order



Source: PERC

Mobility restrictions and the closure of borders will impact delivery times and reduce the availability of even the most basic food items. Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists will likely suffer from disruption of livestock migration routes, including across the fragile Sahel region. Food crisis countries that rely heavily on food imports to cover consumption requirements, such as DRC and Sudan, both already weakened by ongoing or post-crisis situations, will experience rising food prices if their currencies depreciate further relative to the US dollar.

In countries where crop and livestock production are affected by the desert locust outbreak, mobility will hinder locust control operations with dramatic consequences for crop production. For example, in Kenya COVID-19-related measures have affected the fight against the locus infestation as pesticide deliveries are held up on closed borders.

A shared matter of concern

As the most food insecure region in the world, achieving food security for Africa's citizens remains a key objective for the continent's leaders. While resources are currently being directed towards mitigating the effects of COVID-19, food insecurity should not be overlooked both as a standalone emergency as well as one aggravated by COVID-19. Otherwise, hunger and starvation might end up being

deadlier than COVID-19, while also wiping out any progress made towards achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2063, thereby fostering greater instability on the continent.

All this is also likely to raise the likelihood of social tensions and conflict, as well as increasing the appeal of criminal and illegal networks, including terrorist groups, more than ever appearing as the only actors able to offer jobs and revenue. Given the high impact on insecurity and instability, these potential outcomes must also be a matter of immediate concern for Africa's partners.

Food security in Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030:

Within the African Union's Agenda 2063, Goal 3 within Aspiration 1 is dedicated to 'Healthy & well-nourished citizens'. The First Ten Year Implementation Plan (FTYIP) of Agenda 2063 aspires to halve malnutrition in Africa by 2023. There are also direct links between food security and agriculture as Goal 5 of Agenda 2063 includes two targets focussed on ending hunger and child undernutrition.

SDG2 is dedicated to 'Zero hunger' and 12 of the 17 SDGs are related to nutrition.