

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON FARMING COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN UGANDA

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Background

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic leading to catastrophic loss of human life and harms to livelihoods across the world, the Government of Uganda (GOU) announced a strict national lockdown effective 1 April 2020ⁱ in order to reduce virus transmission, wider spread, and related consequences. The agricultural sector is particularly affected and faces unprecedented challenges that threaten food security and nutrition at the household, community, and countryⁱ levels. It is against this background that the Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) released official guidelinesⁱⁱ on 28 March 2020 to assist with managing the situation. Farming communities were encouraged to take advantage of the current rains, plant and manage crops accordingly, and look after livestock and fisheries so as to ensure their food security, nutrition security, and income during and after the pandemic. In order to capture some emerging impacts of the epidemic, the Uganda Landcare Network (ULN), in partnership with the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT), conducted some quick interviewsⁱⁱⁱ by phone and in person between 27 and 29 April 2020. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, comprising randomly selected farmers and extension agents (10 men, 9 women) from farming communities in nine districts of Northern Uganda within the IFAD-funded project on scaling-up Sustainable Land Management (SLM).

Farmer-level impacts

Farming generally continues unrestricted as the government guidelines advise against abandoning cultivation, and instead recommend that farmers take advantage of the long rains to begin planting. Despite the appearance of abundant family labour due to school closures and other closures freeing up time for farming, the lockdown and related COVID-19 restrictions have had the following impacts:

- **Group labour is constrained** due to rules on social distancing;
- **Hiring labour is difficult** because of low farm-level incomes and farmers' low purchasing power;
- **The cost of inputs (seeds, fertilizers, farm tools, etc.) has skyrocketed** due to increased transport costs and lack of access to stockists who are mostly located in towns far away from farms;
- As a result of closures, **many farmers have lost their most important buyer** – schools – for key crops including maize, beans, rice, bananas, sweet potatoes, and horticultural crops such as tomatoes, onions, and greens;
- Restrictions on social gatherings such as weddings, meetings, hotels, bars and restaurants mean the **loss of other major markets for farm produce**;
- Finally, there are **no market surveys that inform small farmers and enable them to bargain better prices**. Consequently, **farmgate prices remain very low and middlemen are taking**

ⁱThe lockdown policy includes closing of all borders to incoming and outgoing traffic by road, water, and air. A strict ban is in place against all people-to-people movement, with the exception of farming communities, certain passholders (e.g. medical staff, security), sick and pregnant women, etc. There has been a shutdown of public and private training institutions. A ban is in effect on all private transport movement except motorcycles, bicycles, and vehicles carrying food. All non-food shops have been closed and a night curfew put in place from 7:00 pm to 6:00 am. The lockdown originally went into effect 1 April 2020 for 14 days. It was renewed for another 21 days on 15 April 2020, ending on 5 May 2020. However, on 4 May 2020, with the exception of a few relaxed restrictions on transport and other essential service providers (e.g. legal, insurance, mechanics, hardware, and wholesale outlets), the lockdown was extended for an additional 14 days until 19 May 2020. This adds up to **49 days in lockdown** so far.

advantage of farmers by buying low and selling produce at higher-than-usual prices to markets inflated by pandemic fears.

“A kilo of beans bought for 3,000–3,500 UGX during the COVID-19 restrictions at farm level is now sold for 4,000–5,000 UGX or more in the markets – depending on the distance, quality, and transport costs – with yellow variety beans sold at 6,000 UGX in Kitgum town”.

-Ocan Bosco, extension agent in Kitgum District

Another emerging challenge is that of **accumulated agricultural produce with a low shelf life**, demanding innovative post-harvest practices and new processing opportunities. At the same time, there are reports of **many mouths to feed in villages due to heavy urban to rural migration**, driven especially by families’ worries about their ability to meet their needs in urban settings during lockdown as well as fear of lockdown-related crime. Many poor rural families currently need food rations, however these rations are restricted to urban poor. Loss of farm-level income will lead to **reduced savings and loss of investment in efforts to improve and innovate smallholder farming, marketing, and processing**, with long-term implications of increased poverty.



Okello, a farmer in Nwoya District, stuck with produce he cannot sell due to low prices offered by middlemen.

“We used to save on a weekly/monthly basis and keep this money for lending or in case of emergencies like death, buying inputs, etc. Farmers could borrow at low interest depending on the problem. This is not happening because people have no money and are not working. This will affect our farmers more in terms of food production and security even when the restrictions are lifted”.

-Mr and Mrs Orem, farmers in Pader District

“Farmers’ sources of income have been greatly affected. Village markets are not operating since social gathering was banned. Village savings (village sacco) have been closed – this was the source of cash/borrowing for small businesses”.

-Lawrence Ogwal, Ngetta Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute

Nonetheless, a **few farmers are developing some coping mechanisms** including short-term bulk pooling of produce and collectively organizing to access better marketing opportunities, increase their bargaining power, and purchase inputs at reasonable prices.



Farmers pooling their rice production for marketing, Amuru District

Extension delivery

Government guidelines are clear on ensuring farmers' access to extension services. However, **most extension agents cannot afford current increased transport costs**. As a result, delivery of extension services has been undermined and very few farmers are being reached. Additionally, extension agents usually organize and advise farmers in groups, but such group gatherings are presently prohibited.

"Even if you have transport and can mobilize the farmers, [they] don't come because they believe and must abide by the policy measures [of social distancing] forbidding gatherings of more than five people. Farmers fear [getting] infected or being charged with attempted murder as per the President's warning".

-Aballa Ketty, Extension agent, Amuru District

"Extension workers have not appeared since announcement of COVID-19 restrictions and [we] have also not called them because [we] have not had serious issues except black ants called "ngini" in the local language"

-Mr and Mrs Ongai, farmers in Nwoya District

"Farmers said [the lockdown] has restricted their movements and staying at home is a must after their farm work. Most of them said they are working hard in their individual farms putting into practice the knowledge and skills they got from extension last year.

-Lawrence Ogwal, Ngetta Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute

At the same time, some **innovations have been reported including increased use of short message services (SMS), interactive voice response (IVR), radio, TV, online marketing, and social media** to access extension services as well as efforts to divide farmer groups into acceptable sizes in line with government guidelines.

“Use of phones during COVID-19 restrictions is linking us farmers to extension workers to access information on markets, diseases, and pests – like banana wilt and how manage it – and other farming-related challenges and opportunities “

-Ojoadi Charles, farmer in Adjumani District



Extension agent using mobile phone in extension, Kitgum District

Reports from distressed farming communities indicate that, before the lockdown, radio and TV stations were broadcasting useful extension-service messages to farmers, but now such airtime is given to Ministry of Health-approved messages on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“Farmers hear information talking about measures to control COVID-19 on the radio at the time when they would [normally] get information on prices, buyers, and where to sell at good prices”.

-Orem John Bosco, farmer in Pader District

Lessons for the future

Important areas for learning include:

1. **Capacity strengthening in digitization of agriculture** including e-extension innovations, collective action in farming, marketing, and the rest of the value chain. In Uganda this presents a great opportunity to:
 - a. increase the use of the SLM database digitally
 - b. strengthen the SLM curriculum with digital modules
2. **Capitalizing on demonstrations** to scale to wider areas integrating e-learning opportunities
3. Calling attention to official Government of Uganda statements **emphasizing nutrition from SLM technologies**, particularly agroforestry, and high-value crops for scale-up.

For more information on the general COVID-19 situation in the country, please consult the Uganda Ministry of Health website: <https://www.health.go.ug/causes-category/press-releases/>

The observations, analysis, and opinions expressed in this short report are solely those of the authors. The main contributor and contact person, Joy M.B. Tukahirwa, PhD, is Vice Chairperson of the Uganda Landcare Network (ULN).

ⁱ In a recent webinar on the impacts of COVID-19 in Uganda (29 April 2020), Prof. Susan Kavuma, Lecturer in the Department of Policy and Development Economics, School of Economics, Makerere University, outlined the following **possible impacts at the country level**: increased poverty with 2.5 million people, especially women, falling into poverty traps due to collapsing prices; loss of jobs; loss of income at the farm level; reduced revenue and income flow; households consuming less; increased transaction costs; greater income inequalities; reduced exports by as much as 80–90%; societal distress and deprived livelihoods. Suggestions of **possible remedies** included: government grants and loans to small-and-medium-sized businesses; reducing interest rates on loans; providing more rations to vulnerable communities and families; cutting expenditures on nonessential activities; and utilizing digital-economy tools, e-commerce, and digital educational materials.

ⁱⁱ **Nutrition-related COVID-19 Advisory to Farmers and the General Public**

Kampala, 28 March 2020. In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Hon. Vincent Bamulangaki Ssempijja, the Minister for Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, addressed the public from the Uganda Media Centre. Below is an excerpt of his official statement:

1.1 Fellow Ugandans, farmers and the general public, as you are aware, the entire World including our Country is battling the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) that has claimed many lives and also caused a lot of anxiety among the population.

1.2 We in the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) join H.E The President of the Republic of Uganda and our colleagues in other sectors especially the Ministry of Health (MoH) in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3 Following the Presidential Directives and the Ministry of Health guidelines on COVID-19 pandemic, we wish to advise the farming communities and the general public on the Agricultural and Nutrition activities that should be undertaken during the period of the Directives.

1.4 The COVID-19 Pandemic has unfortunately coincided with the beginning of the first cropping season of the Year 2020 and this is likely to affect Agricultural activities, particularly food production.

1.5 In spite of this pandemic, Agricultural activities need to continue but with strict adherence to the Directives and the Ministry of Health guidelines.

1.6 The purpose of this message is to appeal to the farming communities and the general public to take advantage of the current rains to plant and manage crops, look after livestock and fisheries to ensure food, nutrition security and income during and after the pandemic.

2.0. Messages to Farmers and the General Public

2.1 While observing the Presidential Directives and Ministry of Health guidelines especially on mass gatherings, farmers should prepare their gardens and plant crops in order not to miss this season.

2.2 Farmers and the general public are encouraged to produce and consume a balanced diet derived from Crops, Animals and Fisheries' Resources.

2.3 In order to boost people's immunity to fight against diseases, COVID-19 Inclusive, farmers are encouraged to grow a variety of food crops to diversify their diets.

2.4 Farmers and the general public are encouraged to grow and consume Horticultural fruit crops such as; Citrus (Oranges, Lemons, Lime, Tangerine, Grapes); Mangoes; Pineapples; Passion fruits; Water Melon and Guavas, that are rich in Vitamins and Minerals (Phyto nutrients) and which play a big role in boosting body immunity.

2.5 Similarly, Vegetable crops including; Carrots, Tomatoes, Onions, Cabbages, Green Pepper, leafy vegetables (Amaranthus/Ddodo, Buga, Nakati, African Night Shade/Ensuugga/ Enswiga, Ggobe, Jobbiyo/Akeyo, Malakwang, Bboo/Eboo) should be eaten in combination because they are also rich in Vitamins and Minerals.

2.6 Farmers and the general public are further encouraged to grow and consume Bio-fortified nutrient dense crops such as the Vitamin A Rich Orange Flesh Sweet Potatoes (NASPOT 8, NASPOT 12, NASPOT 13; Iron/Zinc Rich Beans (NARO Bean 1, NARO Bean 2, NARO Bean 3, NARO Bean 4C and NARO Bean 5C).

2.7 Seed/Planting materials for the recommended crops can be obtained from National Agricultural Research Organizations (NARO), Registered seed Companies and Certified Nursery Operators.

2.8 To obtain maximum benefits from consuming nutritious foods, there is need to observe the following Hygienic practices in handling, preparing and processing the meals:

- i. Use clean and safe water.
- ii. Wash hands with soap.
- iii. Avoid placing the food stuffs on bare ground and dirty surfaces
- iv. Use clean stores and Utensils.

3.0 Appeal

3.1 I wish to appeal to the general public to comply with **H.E The President's Directives and to strictly adhere to the Ministry of Health**

Guidelines on COVID-19 pandemic

3.2 I also Appeal to **Agricultural Extension Officers** to continuously provide guidance to the farming communities.

3.3 I encourage farmers to continue with Agricultural production and to always seek the necessary advice from technical Officers.

3.4 For further information, the Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries will always remain open for the necessary technical support.

ⁱⁱⁱ List of farmers (7 men; 7 women) and extension agents (3 men; 2 women) interviewed

No	Name	Category	Farming enterprise	District
1	Mr and Mrs Ojoardi	Farmer	Bananas and compost	Adjumani
2	Mr and Mrs Daniel Banya	Farmer	Maize and compost	Kitgum
3	Mr and Mrs William Ongaba	Farmer	Compost and manure	Nwoya
4	Mr and Mrs B. Olwoch	Farmer	Agroforestry and beans	Agago
5	Mr and Mrs Ongai	Farmer	Agroforestry and coffee	Nwoya
6	Mrs Hellen Abloom	Farmer	Mulch and watermelon	Gulu
7	Mr and Mrs Orem John Bosco	Farmer	Agroforestry and soya bean	Pader
8	Mr Vincent Valentine	Farmer	Conservation basins and beans	Pader

No	Name	Designation	District
9	Mr Ocan Bosco	Extension: District Local Government	Kitgum
10	Ms Hope Okello	Extension: District Local Government	Omoro
11	Ms Ketty Aballo	Extension: Project for the Restoration of Livelihoods in the Northern Region (<i>PRELNOR</i>)	Amuru
12	Mr Geoffrey Kidega	Extension: Project for the Restoration of Livelihoods in the Northern Region (<i>PRELNOR</i>)	Agago
13	Mr Lawrence Ogwal	Technician: National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO), Ngetta Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute	9 Districts