

# PREVENTING AFRICA'S NEXT CRISIS:

## Acting now to ensure food security in the wake of COVID-19

While global food commodity prices dropped for a second month in a row as oil prices plummeted, in March 2020 we also started seeing early signs of what could become a continental food crisis.

The lockdowns introduced all over the world in response to COVID-19 have disrupted transport and labour supply, and impacted food distribution. While the world is not about to run out of food, our ability to deliver this food to the right places, at the right time and at the right price, is about to be tested.

Stay at home orders across Africa also mean that millions are losing out on their income, threatening them with varying levels of food insecurity as staples become unaffordable or cannot be produced locally. The African Union estimates that 20 million people will lose their livelihoods because of the pandemic. And the World Food Programme has already recorded food insecurity spikes across various African regions.

Many governments have acted faster than during the 2008 and 2001 food crises on the continent to keep essential items, such as basic foodstuffs, affordable. Unfortunately, not all companies have heeded the guidance. Several South African retailers, for instance, are in court today, accused of implementing unreasonable price hikes to exploit citizens' desperation ahead of the country's lockdown.

The challenge of food security is acute for several nations in Southern Africa that experienced severe droughts in 2019, which reduced harvest levels. The overall cereal production for Botswana, for instance, was estimated at 8,000 tonnes in 2019 – 82% below the previous five-year average. In neighbouring Zimbabwe, the loss has been even greater, with some regions of the country unable to grow any crops in the wake of zero rainfall or the devastating cyclone Ida. The World Food Programme is estimating that 45 million people across the region now face varying levels of hunger because of the drought, calling for unprecedented levels of food aid to the affected areas.

Meanwhile, in East Africa nearly 20 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity as a result of an infestation of desert locusts. The locust swarming was prompted by excess rainfall in late 2019, which also led to severe additional post-harvest losses. Efforts to protect crops have been hamstrung by a shortage of pesticide as the pandemic disrupted global supply chains.



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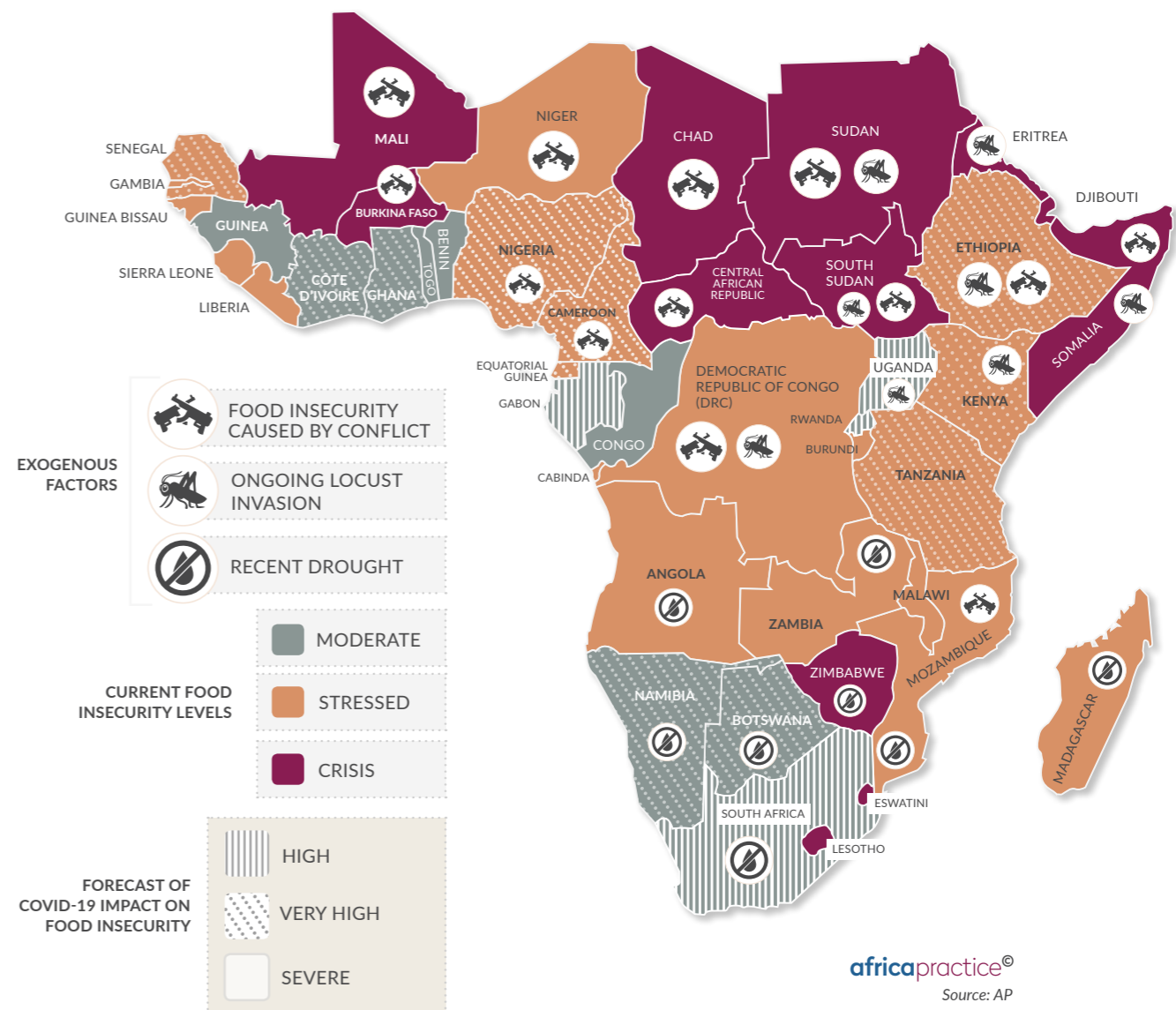
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Faced with the bleak outlook of food shortages, net-food importing countries (NFIDCs) and landlocked nations (of which there are 16 in sub-Saharan Africa), tend to stockpile. On 31 March Botswana's president, for example, announced that his country would be building up a stock of essential items, including water and grains. Only 17% of Botswana's grain demand is produced locally. And as a landlocked country, the nation is highly dependent on imports routed through South Africa and on grain imports from its Eastern neighbour Zimbabwe. While the former closed half of its ports of entry earlier in March and instituted a nation-wide lockdown for all except essential services, the latter is severely affected by the Southern African drought and is already dependent on food aid.

While some may consider President Mokgweetsi Masisi's decision to stockpile prudent, it did spark criticism from other African leaders such as Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, arguing against any type of stockpiling and in favour of regional trade in food.

What we are seeing today in terms of stockpiling of essential grains and disruptions to global supply chains mirrors the early stages of the 2007 food crisis, triggered by the global financial crisis. Small scale farmers from Africa and Asia were the ones who suffered the most during this crisis. As prices for cash crops plummeted and global food prices rose sharply, farmers simply could not afford food any longer (as they relied on income from their cash crops to purchase staples). In 2014, when Ebola spread across West Africa, prices for essential crops such as rice and cassava rose by 150% in the most affected countries.



In other cases, farmers opt to use their grains as food rather than keeping them for the next ploughing season. And they use the last of their income to feed the family, leaving no money to purchase essential agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers. Its easy to see how food crises at the smallholder level can become a vicious cycle with long-lasting repercussions for harvest levels.



To avoid the emergence of a food crisis in Africa, the continent's leaders must abstain from zero-sum nationalism and be ready to take action in three essential areas:

- 1] Continental and regional coordination to ensure enough reserves and stable access at national levels.**  
Regional trade must continue to flow, and countries must refrain from all types of export bans and quotas. Transparency with regards to food reserve levels and production should be upheld.
- 2] Invest in measures to ensure the survival of hard-hit cash crop industries, such as the horticulture sector.**  
Investment in warehouse infrastructure and warehouse receipt systems for storage aimed at reducing post-harvest losses. E-voucher solutions for agricultural inputs.
- 3] Address household food security by pursuing creative solutions such as digital food stamps, universal income and direct cash transfers.**  
Innovations and creative solutions, such as food parcels, to cater for people's stay-at-home needs.

The African Continental Free Trade Area was conceived to advance trade integration on the continent. Its secretariat was launched with great fanfare in 2019.

More than ever, we need strong commitments from African leaders to maintain open and tariff-free trade corridors.

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