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COVID-19 Impact on West African Value Chains

Countries in West Africa were quick to take strong prevention and mitigation measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. But border closure, curfew, market closure and limited internal movement already impact key value chains in the region and threaten livelihoods. It risks lowering decent working conditions and labour rights and increasing child labour and gender violence. Informal, migrant and female workers are especially at risk and are likely to take the brunt of the economic downturn. Disruptions in the food value chain also endangers food security in the region. Instability in West Africa threatens both European and Dutch economic, security and geopolitical interests. By virtue of being involved in various West African value chains, European and Dutch consumers and companies bear both leverage and responsibilities in regard to secure livelihoods, good working conditions free of gender violence and respect for labour rights in West Africa.

Introduction

In West Africa, countries have enacted a mix of social distancing and movement restrictions measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. Depending on the country, they have suspended international flights, closed borders, imposed curfews, locked down localities, limited internal movement and closed schools, markets and nonessential businesses. West Africa was quick to act and most mitigation measures were taken as early as March 2020, often before the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in countries. Thus, we can already identify some of the impacts of mitigation measures on value chains.

To date, the emerging crisis has been viewed primarily through a public health lens and only gradually are policymakers focusing attention on the emerging spillover economic and food security impacts. In West Africa, the loss of work could negatively affect the

economy and livelihoods rapidly, given that most jobs in the region are in the informal sector (80 percent on average)¹. The informal economy is by nature heavily reliant on face-to-face exchanges, and informal workers are generally more vulnerable to COVID-19. The ability to work from home and maintain an income is very rare. The impact of COVID-19 on value chains, and by extension livelihoods, is immediately clear. Those who are ill will be unable to work, and those who are not ill may be restricted from working due to prevention and mitigation measures.

There are signs of the negative impact of COVID-19 on the agricultural value chain,

1 Benjamin, N., Aly Mbaye, A. "[Les entreprises informelles de l'Afrique de l'ouest francophone](#)". Worldbank, 2012.

including difficulties in moving food from rural to urban areas, closed markets, rising food prices, loss of livelihoods and increased reliance on social safety nets.² Because agriculture represents almost half of all jobs in West Africa, we here focus predominantly on cereal, pastoral, cacao and cashew nuts value chains. Overall, countries in which the food value chain was already fragile are facing further deteriorations (supply chain disruptions and price increases) as a result of COVID-19.³ In countries like Gambia, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone, nonseasonal price increases of 10 to 20 percent have already been recorded in monthly variations for food products. In some countries, these problems add to ongoing problems of conflict and political instability. In many countries, COVID-19 will challenge structurally weak value chains.

Overall, the scope of the negative impact will depend on the duration of mitigation measures, the resilience of value chains, and the role of unions in protecting labour rights, promoting good working conditions and engaging in social dialogue to adapt mitigation measures to the reality on the ground. At the moment of writing, some countries are rolling back market closures and curfews because of popular protests and the economic toll, while others maintain them for now. The situation is very dynamic and should be closely monitored.

Current impact of COVID-19

Sub-Saharan Africa is the fastest urbanizing region in the world. Close physical contact facilitates the rapid spread of COVID-19. High population density greatly increases the frequency of contact, and urban settings are generally more vulnerable than rural areas. But while the vulnerability of urban areas to the disease is critical in the short term, the medium- to long-term impact on rural areas due to mitigation measures

and the slowdown of economic activities should not be overlooked. As such, the best lens through which to measure the impact of COVID-19 in West Africa is by sector, encompassing both urban and rural populations as part of broader value chains. In West Africa, 70 percent of the workforce are employed in three sectors: agriculture (40 percent), wholesale and retail trade (20 percent), and manufacturing (9 percent).⁴ These sectors have a high proportion of vulnerable populations such as women, unprotected workers, daily wage workers and migrant workers. Here, we take a look at the food value chain which constitutes the majority of jobs in West Africa.

Markets⁵

In terms of impact on operations, one must identify physical markets as crucial bottlenecks (see conceptual paper) for both agriculture and retail/trade, the two main sectors of employment in West Africa. In West Africa, markets are well integrated due to historical trade habits, advanced political and economic integration and improved infrastructure. Despite ongoing conflicts in Northern Nigeria, the Lake Chad region and Liptako-Gourma, commodities normally move from rural production zones to the often-urban consumption zones with no major challenges. But because of COVID-19, most countries in West Africa have closed markets in line with prohibitions on assembly of persons. Although no country closed more than 50 percent of its markets, closures were often localised and some regions closed from 60 up to 100 percent of their markets (e.g. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal, Chad). In Burkina Faso's capital, all 40 markets were closed in March, before the government eventually reopened some end-of-April after violent clashes between police and traders.⁶

2 World Food Programme (WFP). "[Update on the impact of Covid-19 on food and nutrition security in West and Central Africa](#)", 17 April 2020.

3 WFP. "[West and central Africa - WFP Regional Bureau Dakar Markets Update during COVID-19 pandemic](#)" April 2020.

4 Benjamin, N., Aly Mbaye, A. "[Les entreprises informelles de l'Afrique de l'ouest francophone](#)". Worldbank, 2012. ;

5 For more data on market closure, see Food Crisis Prevention Network (RPCA). "[Note d'information et de veille Impact de la crise du COVID-19 sur la sécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest](#)". April 2020.

6 Africanews. "[Burkinabe traders demonstrate to demand reopening of markets](#)". 24 April 2020.

Table 1 COVID-19 measures in selected West African countries⁷

	Lockdown	Movement restrictions	Social distancing	Governance & Economy	Public Health
Mali 901 cases 53 deaths	No Curfew (lifted)	Yes International flight suspension, Border closure, Curfews (lifted)	Yes Limit public gatherings, Public service closure, School closure	Yes Economic measures (financial support package to the economy), Emergency administrative structures activated or established	Yes Health screening in airports and border crossings, introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, general hygiene and social distancing recommendations, Mandatory mask wearing
Niger 914 cases 55 deaths	No Partial lockdown (phase out)	Yes International flight suspension, Border closure, Curfews (phase out)	Yes Limit public gatherings, School closure (phase out), Changes in prison-related policies	Yes Economic measures (cash transfer, payment of electricity and water bills for the poorest, VTA suspended for all COVID-19 related importation), State of emergency declared	Yes Health screening in airports and border crossings, General recommendations, introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, Strengthening the public health system, Mandatory mask wearing
Guinea 2863 cases 18 deaths	No	Yes International flight suspension, Curfews, Domestic travel restrictions	Yes Limit public gatherings, Schools closure	Yes State of emergency declared, Economic measures (support of education and scientific research, Financial support for low-income households, Economic and financial plan)	Yes Health screening in airports and border crossings, Isolation and quarantine policy, Mandatory mask wearing, Awareness campaign
Senegal 2617 cases 30 deaths	No	Yes International flights suspension, Domestic travel restrictions, Visa restrictions, Border closure, Checkpoints within the country, Surveillance and monitoring	Yes Limit public gatherings, Schools closure	Yes Emergency administrative structures activated, State of emergency declared, Economic measures (Program for economic and social decline, Tax measures in support of business)	Yes Awareness campaign, Health screening in airports and border crossings, Strengthening the public health system, Mandatory mask wearing, Other public health measures
Benin 130 cases 2 deaths	No	Yes Surveillance and Monitoring, Border closure, Visa restrictions, Domestic travel restrictions (phase out)	Yes Limit public gatherings, Schools closure (phase out)	Yes Economic measures (Price control on protective masks, Launch of national manufacturing of masks), Military deployment	Yes Health screenings in airports and border crossings, Isolation and quarantine policy, Mandatory mask wearing, General recommendations, Testing policy, Other public health measures

7 Based on data from Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), 2020, COVID-19 Dashboard and ACAPS, 2020, COVID-19 - Government measures (latest data available on 20 May, 2020). Cases are confirmed cases only and the Covid-19 caseload is likely much higher than reported.

In Guinea, 100 percent of livestock markets were closed in April to respect mitigation measures. In Nigeria and Chad, various areas entirely closed livestock markets.⁸ In Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania, weekly rural markets were closed while opening hours were revised for urban markets. Only Mali and Benin deviated somewhat from this general observation, and although a curfew was imposed in Mali, markets remained open in both countries. But social distancing measures disrupts normal operations, and in Niger, Mali and Togo, between 60 percent and 80 percent of opened agricultural and pastoral markets, respectively, were not functioning properly. Containment measures have boosted clandestine activities, such as the fraudulent transport of persons and goods. This is currently observed in Senegal, where people use backdoor routes or clandestine transports to circumvent restrictions on intercity travel.⁹

Staple cereals

COVID-19 mitigation measures could disrupt agricultural production. With market closures and drop in transport supply to/from markets in many countries in the regions, farmers will not have access to buy good quality seeds, tools and agricultural inputs (e.g., pesticides, fertilizers). In the Sahel, the planting period starts in May/June for the main agricultural season, and access to such products is key. Border closures and in-country movement restrictions could also disrupt seasonal migration and agriculture production. In West Africa, most seasonal workers alternate between farming in rural areas and nonagricultural work in urban areas, often across national borders. In the Sahel, peak labour demand for nonagricultural work has ended (March) and workers should migrate back to their land for the farming season (starting mid-June). Border closure could

prevent seasonal workers from migrating home to farm. Internal movement restrictions, lockdowns and curfews might also limit access to land to cultivate. This comes at the worst possible moment as in both the Sahel and coastal states, the peak in labour for agricultural work (weeding and harvesting) starts now (respectively, mid-June and May).

COVID-19 mitigation measures could also disrupt food distribution. In coastal states, the 2020 off-season harvests should be reaching markets and providing substantial incomes to farmers. However, market closure, limited transport options and restrictions on internal and cross-borders movement limit markets access (especially markets at borders). Important waste and loss of revenue is already being reported. Consequently, farmers' incomes are shrinking and purchasing power decreasing. The region is also highly dependent on food imports like rice. Overall, West Africa must import 9.9 million metric tons of rice to meet domestic demand – generally coming from Vietnam, China and India. Asia is heavily affected by COVID-19 and slow maritime transport due to health inspections in ports and cumbersome sanitary procedures like the disinfection of vessels is already creating hiccup in the supply chain.¹⁰ According to the World Food Program's corporate impact risk analysis exercises, West Africa is especially vulnerable to disruptions in the supply chain because of the reliance on food being imported into various landlocked countries through a few ports (Douala in Cameroon, Lomé in Togo, Cotonou in Benin, Dakar in Senegal, Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire).¹¹ In general, West African countries have an average of 3 months of stock reserve for staple cereals held at national levels, which may be insufficient if current mitigation measures and additional reactionary measures by exporting countries increase.

8 In Nigeria, six localities in the Kano states have reported between 95 and 100 percent of livestock markets have been closed, and between 60 and 100 percent of agricultural markets were closed in three localities in the Gombe state. In Chad, 29 regions entirely closed livestock markets, of which five closed more than 60 percent of their agricultural markets.

9 Le Point. "[Covid-19 : l'Afrique de l'Ouest à l'assaut de l'économie informelle](#)". 8 May 2020.

10 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development "[COVID-19 and Africa: Socio-economic implications and policy responses](#)". 7 May 2020.

11 Trade for Development. "[COVID-19 in Africa – some reflections on trade matters](#)". 9 April 2020. ; WFP. "[Economic and Market Impact analysis of COVID-19 on West and Central Africa](#)". 30 March 2020.

Livestock¹²

Pastoralism in the region heavily relies on transhumance, a system by which pastoralists and their livestock operate regular seasonal movements between complementary ecological zones following a north-south axis. It generally takes place during the dry season from January to May, and pastoralists should be heading back from the coastal states to the Sahel mid-May.¹³ Transhumance is necessary to the survival of the livestock and pastoralists' livelihoods. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates around two million cattle are moved across borders each year.

Prior to COVID-19, pastoralism was already under pressure by conflict in West Africa. It is the main economic activity in two of the world's predominant clusters of conflict, the Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad basin. Many grazing areas or livestock markets are made inaccessible by conflict.¹⁴ Market closure, border closure and movement restrictions made a bad situation worse, and have put additional pressure on pastoralists in the region, disrupting the entire pastoral value chain. Current COVID-19 mitigation measures limit both internal and cross-border transhumant pastoralism. There has been a considerable drop in cross-border flows of animals as well as the number of animals in livestock markets. The Comité Permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel (CILSS) reports some transhumant pastoralists are stuck in host countries (Togo, Benin) and cannot travel back to the Sahel.

Pastoralists are allowed to travel only short distances, but even internal movements are limited and some can no longer exit their home regions. The concentration of livestock

in certain areas is causing overgrazing and puts unprecedented pressure on the limited available resources (grazing areas, water). It also limits access to veterinary care and leads to increased zoonotic diseases. CILSS reports the situation is especially critical in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria and Senegal.¹⁵ The pressure on pastures has led to difficulties in feeding animals, resulting in weight loss, slimming of livestock and high animal mortality, especially in areas where transhumant animals are concentrated (e.g. the Mali-Mauritanian border). In the absence of enough feed for their animals, pastoralists are forced to sell their livestock for very low prices. For example, in Mali, the cost of fodder has risen from 140,000 FCFA per ton to 250,000 FCFA per ton since March 2020. In Senegal and Burkina Faso, the Association for the Promotion of the Livestock in the Sahel and the Savanna (APESS) observed fire sales of famished animals. The short-term impact is an immediate loss of income for pastoralists.¹⁶ In the medium to long term, APESS predicts the disappearance of the reproductive nucleus and thus the depletion of herds. This would mean total loss of employment for some pastoralists.

Market closure, especially near borders, limits the possibility of pastoralists to sell their animals. Where markets operate during limited hours (because of curfews), pastoralists and buyers find it difficult to travel to markets either for fear of being contaminated or because of the high cost/lack of transport due to restrictive measures. Indeed, movement restrictions have resulted in increased travel costs and difficulties related to the transport of people and animals, limiting movement between

12 For the latest data on the effects of COVID-19 on pastoralism see: Action contre la Faim. "[Pastoral Monitoring – COVID-19](#)". 21 May 2020.

13 The Food Crisis Prevention Network. "[Pastoral situation in the context of COVID-19](#)".

14 In Burkina Faso, for example, and particularly in the Northern and Sahel regions, virtually all livestock markets have ceased to function on a regular basis, especially in the Soum Province, once a major livestock hub.

15 Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). "[Bulletin mensuel d'information sur le pastoralisme et la transhumance au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest- N°07 avril-mai 2020](#)". May 2020; CILSS. "[Du Pastoralisme et de la Transhumance au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest](#)". April 2020.

16 Association Pour la Promotion De L'Elevage au Sahel et en Savane "[Note d'analyse des premiers impacts de la pandémie du COVID 19 sur les Exploitations Familiales](#)". 21 April 2020.

regions or countries.¹⁷ As a result, foreign traders and buyers are largely absent from livestock markets. APSS has noted the suspension of exports of live cattle from Chad to Nigeria, which constitutes a major loss of income for Chadians. In the long term, this could have grave consequences on the country's economy, as livestock export taxes are one of the main sources of income.¹⁸

COVID-19 is also having a negative impact on the production, transformation and distribution of milk. Because of movement restrictions and the increased costs of transport, family-run farms can deliver less milk to local milk collection and processing units; these units can collect, transform and deliver less milk to markets; and demand has dropped with market closures as well as the closure of dairy bars because of curfews. As a result, some transformation units have closed. Significant quantities of milk are being lost because they cannot be processed and/or brought to market. This threatens the livelihoods of those involved in the milk value chain and has left many transformation units workers unemployed (Chad, Benin, Cameroon). The milk value chain is dominated by women and young people, especially the transformation of milk (as opposed to herding, dominated by men).

Because both meat and milk are processed domestically, and herders cannot deliver to processing facilities, butchers and restaurants are also losing money down the line. This knock-on effect is exemplified with increased prices of meat in markets, with costs being passed on to the consumers.

Cacao

In the case of cacao, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana produce more than 60 percent of the global supply of cocoa. As of April 2020, cacao imports in Côte d'Ivoire were down 1.7 percent from the same period last season, at around 1,645 thousand metric tons. Cacao production is already facing structural constraints that are expected to worsen with COVID-19, likely leading to a decline in exports. This comes at the worst moment as land preparation and planting require an intensive workforce from April to June. Current restrictions on public gathering and internal movement may reduce farmers' participation in mutual aid activities, lead to reduced planting surface and declining production. Expected decreased demand from America, Europe and to some extent China will also affect the commercialisation of cacao in June-July and December 2020 and significantly reduce the revenues of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Prices in April were down to USD\$2235 per metric ton, USD\$425 less than early March, and USD\$90 less than the same period in 2019.¹⁹

Cashew

West Africa (principally Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Guinea-Bissau) is the largest regional producer of cashew nuts in the world, and Côte d'Ivoire is the world's single largest exporter. It represents an important industry for countries like Benin and Guinea-Bissau.²⁰ Officially, more than 80 percent of the population in Guinea-Bissau depends directly on the cultivation of cashews for their subsistence. In Benin, cashew farmers are facing multiple challenges trying to adapt to COVID-19. Cashew is the second-most valuable export from Benin, with annual production reaching nearly 140,000 tons. Foreign buyers purchase 80 percent of the country's raw cashew nuts, while the other 20 percent is processed locally.²¹ In the last few months, the government has closed

17 The Regional Security and Nutrition Working Group (West Africa). "[Note de Plaidoyer sur les impacts immédiats de la crise du COVID-19 sur la sécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle dans les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Sahel](#)". April 2020.

18 Association Pour la Promotion De L'Elevage au Sahel et en Savane "[Note d'analyse des premiers impacts de la pandémie du COVID 19 sur les Exploitations Familiales](#)". 21 April 2020.

19 World Food Programme. "[Update on the impact of Covid-19 on food and nutrition security in West and Central Africa](#)", 17 April 2020.

20 Africa Cashew Alliance. "[CASHEWS - highlights of the cashew industry](#)". June 2011.

21 Techno Serve. "[COVID-19 and the Cashew Industry in Benin](#)". 6 May 2020.

borders and restricted movement, making it difficult for smallholder cashew farmers to continue to earn a living and support their families. The travel and health requirements (see table 1) have put a major damper on economic activity. Markets are closed, sales are down, and people are not able to generate enough income to cover their basic needs. Prior to COVID-19, local cashew processors transformed only 20 percent of all raw cashew nuts grown in Benin. Foreign buyers, especially from Asia, purchased the rest. The cashew-buying season was launched in late March, and generally lasts till mid-June in West Africa. This disruption comes at the worst time for farmers trying to sell their product. Travel restrictions are disrupting the commercialisation of cashew nuts because thousands of middleman collectors have no access to farms, and foreign buyers cannot travel to Benin. As a result, and despite the government setting a farm-gate floor price of about \$0.55/kg, prices have dropped as low as \$0.17/kg due to farmers being desperate to find buyers. This has had a negative impact on farmers, who per average produce one or two tons of cashews per year. For now, raw cashew nut prices seem to have rebounded, and farm-gate prices are holding at around \$0.67/kg.²²

Effect on livelihoods and labour rights

COVID-19 directly impacts on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 8 (sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work) as well as SDG 5 (gender equality and empowering women and girls). COVID-19 risks wiping out progress made on a range of SDG targets, and aggravates existing negative coping strategies (e.g., child marriages, sex work and child labour to deal with poverty).

Vulnerable livelihoods

In urban settings, the most vulnerable populations to COVID-19 mitigation measures are the low income informal workers. They are engaged in low-skill labour with no job security, depend on food markets to eat and live hand-to-mouth with little ability to store and save food or money. They also have little access to diversified nutritious diets or health care and live in crowded, unsanitary conditions. Many of them may also have comorbidities such as tuberculosis.

In rural settings, subsistence farmers and pastoralists are the most vulnerable populations. They represent more than 80 percent of the rural population. Movement restrictions largely affect the movement of farmers and pastoralists living in localities close to large urban centres, who often come to urban markets to sell part of their crops and return to the village with manufactured goods. The movement restrictions and the closure of rural markets thus affect traditional mechanisms of destocking of local agricultural products and livestock by farmers and pastoralists. Since the beginning of the crisis, there has also been a rise in police harassment, informal tax levies and bribes at borders and checkpoints that are passed on in prices to consumers. In countries that had a below-average agricultural season, rural households engaged in subsistence agriculture might become increasingly dependent on buying their food from markets – all while some markets are closed. For example, Mauritania, Gambia, Senegal, Cabo Verde and Sierra Leone (and somewhat Niger and Côte d'Ivoire) had below-average cereal production compared to the five-year average. As stocks in these countries are running low earlier than usual, they will rely on food markets for food. They are already experiencing early rising prices of dry cereals as stocks decline. But even in countries like Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali that had been recording prices below the five-year average prior to the pandemic, trends are rising. It is important to note that this situation is further compounded by the usual increase in demand and speculation by traders during Ramadan (April-May 2020), and the lean season in coastal states which lasts from

²² Techno Serve. “COVID-19 and the Cashew Industry in Benin”. 6 May 2020.

May to July. Predictions say these price rises may exceed 25% in June 2020. This means high food prices and a reduction of the purchasing capacity of the most vulnerable households. In addition, some traders are taking advantage of this opportunity to raise the price of imported rice. In Senegal, rice price per 50 kg bag has increased from 21,500 XOF to 25,000 XOF (more than 16%).²³ In West Africa, households already spend 80 percent of their income on food. If farmers go bankrupt, they could be forced to sell their land to large landholders, producing a major increase in inequality.

Furthermore, border closure and movement restrictions in the region have not only impacted the flow of goods, but have also hampered the ability of informal workers to engage in seasonal cross-border labour migration.²⁴ This affects both value chains which are dependent on seasonal labour (predominantly cereal, livestock, cacao, fishing and mining) and undermines the livelihoods of workers and the families dependent on their remittances. As a result of COVID-19, many migrants are returning to their countries or villages of origin, constituting additional burdens for families for which they were previously the main resource providers. The expected reduction of remittances – both from interregional migrants and migrants working in Europe – is therefore likely to weaken an already weak economy, in which remittances usually account for up to 10% of gross national product, as well as put additional strain on the livelihood of both urban and rural households.²⁵

Impact on women and youth

Women and youth will be especially impacted by COVID-19. In Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, child labour is likely increasing

due to COVID-19. These two West African countries together produce about 60 percent of the world's cocoa and child labour has been a longstanding problem in the sector, despite pledges from chocolate companies. Estimates say around 1.2 million child labourers are working in cocoa production in Côte d'Ivoire, and 900,000 in Ghana.²⁶ Fairtrade Africa said it has received reports of possible cases in Côte d'Ivoire's eastern and western regions in recent weeks and flagged them to the government.²⁷ As the pandemic continues, there will be increased economic pressures on farming families, and ongoing school closures mean children are more likely to accompany their parents to their farms and be exposed to hazardous activities. Previous studies have shown a 10 percent drop in farmers' incomes is usually followed by a 5 percent increase in child labour.²⁸ Child labour also tends to increase when children are on term breaks from school, as teachers are often the first to spot and report it. Between school and shelter closures, the absence of international investigators on the ground and the ongoing cocoa harvest season, the lack of control and oversight makes children even more vulnerable than before.

Women and girls are also experiencing unique challenges. They are facing increased risk of gender-based violence because they are staying at home with their partners more often and are isolated from their usual support networks. Women and girls are often responsible for the majority of household duties (e.g. cooking, collecting water, cleaning). These tasks have only become more difficult and dangerous as governments have issued strict restrictions on movement and markets are closed. Widespread school closures have also contributed to an increase in women's childcare responsibilities.

23 World Food Programme. "[Update on the impact of Covid-19 on food and nutrition security in West and Central Africa](#)", 17 April 2020.

24 Italian Institute for International Political Studies. "[Covid-19 Is Paralyzing One of West Africa's Main Resources: Migrants](#)", 9 April 2020.

25 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. "[The Double Punishment of Migrant Workers in West Africa in Times of COVID-19](#)". 14 May 2020.

26 Voice of America. "[Cash Transfer Program Aims to Combat Child Labor in Ghana](#)". 10 May 2020.

27 Thomson Reuters Foundation. "[West African Countries on Alert for Child Labor Spike Due to Coronavirus](#)". 30 April 2020.

28 International Cocoa Initiative. "[The effects of income changes on child labour - A review of evidence from smallholder agriculture](#)" April 2020.

Labour rights

In West Africa, mitigation measures have led to a drastic decline in economic activities. This has led companies to reduce their workforces, and as a result, thousands of employees have been placed on technical or partial unemployment. In Niger for example, nearly 70% of people have been placed on technical unemployment. Sensitive sectors such as education and transport have not escaped the dramatic effects of COVID-19 on the economy. At the level of Niger's employers, it is claimed that overall, 50% of private sector employees have temporarily stopped working. But employers did not always take measures in line with the country's labour code. In this regard, several employees claim that they have not received any compensation provided for by the regulations in force.²⁹

Some protection measures have been put in place or announced in West Africa, but these are very few. The most comprehensive effort is from Senegal, where the president issued an ordinance to prohibit layoffs and guarantee income to workers laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic (70 percent of the wages of employees laid off during this period). The new decree prohibits the use of dismissal other than that motivated by gross misconduct (termination for cause).³⁰ The measure obliges employers to seek with staff representatives and unions alternative solutions such as reducing working hours, shift work, anticipating paid holidays, redeployment of staff and part-time work. In the case of short-time work, the pay cannot be lower than the guaranteed minimum 70 percent wage of the employee net salary of the last three months of activity. To help companies comply with these measures, the state announced tax reductions and exemptions for companies. While labour unions celebrated the measures, employers denounced them as out of touch, and said

they would lead most small- to medium-size businesses to cease all activities in the absence of cash flow. Similar measures are in the pipeline in Côte d'Ivoire, where the government announced four support funds would be set up to support workers whose contracts were terminated or suspended as a result of COVID-19, especially in the agricultural sector.³¹ In Nigeria, commercial banks are now banned from laying off staff. This measure comes after Access Bank, the country's leading bank, launched a series of layoffs against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis. The bank had already begun to reduce salaries or enact layoffs in order to reduce its operating costs, and 70 percent of its 30,000 employees could have been affected. The express approval of the Central Bank of Nigeria is required in the event that it becomes absolutely necessary to lay off staff. According to analysts, this trend of layoffs that the Central Bank of Nigeria has just interrupted was dangerous as it could have been quickly exported across the countries of the region (Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia).³²

Such support measures only apply to formal workers, however, and thus don't help most of the population. Without corresponding support measures for informal workers, this could lead to a further push towards the informal economy, as companies become afraid to hire people on a formal contract, thus worsening employment conditions. As such, several countries have announced general support packages which are likely to benefit workers in the informal economy. For example, Burkina Faso announced a 394 CFA emergency plan which includes the creation of a solidarity fund for informal traders of fruits and vegetables, as well as the acquisition of agricultural output and animal fodder to support pastoralists.³³

29 Niamey et les 2 Jours "Explosion du chômage au Niger : Des milliers d'emplois perdus à cause du coronavirus" 19 May 2020.

30 Agence Afrique. "Le Sénégal interdit tout licenciement sauf pour faute grave". 13 April 2020.

31 Afrique Sud 7. "Covid-19: Chômage technique, licenciement, les bonnes nouvelles de Ouattara". 22 May 2020.

32 La Afrique Tribune. "Covid-19 : les banques interdites de tout licenciement au Nigeria". 5 May 2020.

33 Sidwaya. "COVID 19: Le président du Faso annonce 394 milliards pour accompagner les populations vulnérables et relancer l'économie" 2 April 2020.

Similar support packages, including food distribution and conditional cash transfers, have been introduced in Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria.³⁴ However, there is widespread concern that the packages risk being distributed to government supporters or circles close to it, rather than reaching vulnerable pastoralists, traders and farmers.

Additionally, informal workers are also exposed to being infected by the virus, owing to squalid living conditions, inadequate workplace health and safety protection.³⁵ This poses a significant risk for informal workers who generally lack access to adequate health services and sick pay. Domestic workers in particular, face a higher level of exposure do the contagion. In light of this, several countries have introduced measures to avoid infection, including obligatory wearing of face masks and provision of handwashing facilities; however, even with these measures, significant risk remains, particularly for urban informal workers.

The welfare of migrant workers – most often also informal workers – is extremely worrying, as they are caught in the cross-fire of this current global health crisis. Thousands of vulnerable labour migrants have become stranded in their different countries of work.³⁶ Some are likely to fall victim to hardship, exploitation and extortion as they try to travel back to their homes and families.

Perspectives for post-COVID-19 recovery

Disruptions in value chains in West Africa could lead to increased inequality and major financial vulnerability in the future. If farmers and pastoralists go broke and lose or sell their assets (herds or lands), this will create longlasting and irremediable poverty for households, thus creating a much larger group of dissatisfied people. As such, beyond the health impact in mainly urban settings, the effects of mitigation measures could ripple down to rural regions.

In a region prone to political violence and home to two clusters of conflict – Liptako-Gourma and Lake Chad Basin – the disruptions could lead to much more dramatic long-term security and rule of law trajectories. Governments with authoritarian proclivities are also exploiting COVID-19 to settle political disputes. Data shows an increase of COVID-19-related violence against civilians by state forces.³⁷ Multiple governments (e.g., Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin) have used COVID-19 to alter the role of the opposition and manipulate upcoming elections. With multiple elections in 2020, this comes at a crucial time for political stability and democracy. In Nigeria, more people died from excessive policing than from COVID-19 during the month of April. For example, in early April, four traders died at a market after a brutal police crackdown. COVID-19-related incidents make up nearly 20% of all political violence and protests in Nigeria and have led to 32 reported fatalities. Police brutality is also rampant in Togo, Benin and Liberia, where video clips circulate on social media of security forces targeting civilians. In Sierra Leone, opposition protests have been banned under the pretext of a health response. As protests erupt throughout the region against stringent mitigation measures, governments are forced to do tradeoffs between economy, health and political stability.

34 Africa Portal. "[COVID-19: A race against time to avert disaster in West Africa](#)". 22 April 2020.

35 ILO, "[COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy. Immediate responses and policy challenges](#)". May 2020.

36 African Union. "[Statement of the African Union \(AU\) Labour Migration Advisory Committee \(LMAC\) on the novel Coronavirus Disease COVID-19 and the condition of African Migrant Workers](#)". 14 April 2020.

37 de Bruijne, K., Bisson, L. "[States, not Jihadis, Exploiting Corona Crisis in West Africa](#)". Clingendael Spectator, 27 May 2020.

Role for local unions³⁸

In a democracy like Senegal, unions have been instrumental in government measures protecting workers from layoffs and salary suspension. It is important for unions to start social dialogue with employers and the government on topics such as avoidance of layoffs and wages. So far, there has been no major sign that the state is using the pandemic to push antiworker legislation in West Africa. Rather, the focus has been to secure political gains. However, as the situation unfolds, unions should stay alert, especially since social protests have been limited by social distancing measures.

As described above, mitigation measures have had dramatic unintended consequences. Market closure especially has put enormous pressure on already vulnerable traders, farmers and pastoralists. COVID-19 is not the only crisis, and probably not the biggest crisis, in West Africa. But poorly designed and unadapted mitigation measures will make a bad situation worse.³⁹ As seen in Burkina Faso, market closure has led to significant and violent protest, forcing the government to scale back on the restrictive measures. Unions' main role should be in identifying deficiencies and shortcomings in top-down initiatives that are not adapted to the reality on the ground, and engaging in social dialogue with both government and employers to develop more attuned responses. Unions could contribute to concrete actions by the government on occupational safety and health, and draw attention to the overall needs of workers.

The first priority for West African governments will be to keep food coming and essential workers moving. Traditional urban retail food markets represent around 80 to 90 percent of all food sales in West Africa. One perspective for recovery is to ensure that agricultural products, services

and workers are identified as essential and qualify for exemption, providing them with the corresponding safety and security.⁴⁰

But this will be meaningful only if governments manage to make markets Corona-proof, including informal markets. Rapid emergency investments to keep domestic markets functioning can work, as they reduce the burden on social protection budgets. These measures would enable urban markets to continue operations in compliance with COVID-19 health measures.⁴¹ Their development would require working in strong coordination with the private sector involved in the supply chain, awareness raising of market operators on good practices and sanitary guidelines, training in health safety and product handling market actors. Some markets such as those in Abidjan continue to function, following cooperation between health authorities, food, market and commerce officials and

38 For more examples on the role of unions in Sub-Saharan Africa see: The International Trade Union Confederation. "[African responses to the covid-19 health crisis: the role of unions](#)". 17 April 2020.

39 Bisson, L., Schmauder, A., Claes, J. "[The politics of COVID-19 in the Sahel](#)". Clingendael Institute, May 2020.

40 They could develop appropriate identification measures (e-passes, stickers) and agree to exemptions to certain movement measures (e.g., priority lanes, driving at night, access to retail markets and normally restricted residential areas for direct sales, indications of persons allowed on food trucks, free movement of transport workers).

41 Lessons learned from other countries include marking trading floors to maintain physical spacing; extending trading times; organizing workers in shifts to minimize risks; issuing e-passes to market traders, workers and transporters; controlling truck deliveries and vehicle traffic; using drones and GPS-enabled delivery vans for real-time monitoring and traffic congestion; conducting temperature readings and health checks of all workers and drivers; establishing strict protocol for ill workers; restricting access through one entrance with health controls or limiting the number of people at a given time; temporarily relocating to larger spaces; enforcing strict sanitary measures for market workers such as mandating compulsory masks, hand washing and sanitisation stations and daily market disinfectant sprays; activating smaller markets on the outskirts of cities to avoid overcrowding of larger urban markets; allowing sales in front of homes; and supporting the development of e-commerce operations through one-stop online web sites. ; See more: Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, African Union. "[Measures for supporting domestic markets during the COVID-19 outbreak in Africa](#)". 12 April 2020.

having enacted some of these guidelines. Trade unions are here instrumental in working with their members and engaging in social dialogue to ensure compliance as well as design and implement additional measures tailored to local contexts.

COVID-19 also highlights the role of unions around nonwage matters. Indeed, they have a role in working with both governments and employers to deal with the health impact of COVID-19 and mitigation measures. They need to be involved in a responsible resumption of operations, where possible (e.g., set up special funds to provide face masks and hand sanitiser to those in need). Because of their status and operational capabilities, unions can deliver credible information to employees on personal hygiene and the importance of sick leave. They can share valuable advice and best practice guidance on how to travel to and from work. Logistical cooperation with employers can even be achieved on that front.

Considering most workers in West Africa are informal workers, unions will have to develop an approach that includes the interests of nonunionized informal workers to avoid further fragmentation and inequalities in the COVID-19 response. The pandemic is also an opportunity for unions to ensure gender- and youth-inclusive responses. In order to reach informal workers, indirect measures such as reducing water and electricity bills and introducing subsidies on mobile calls and internet access can be important in order to reduce operating costs. Furthermore, the International Labour Organization highlights the importance of measures which identify and reach out to informal enterprises to enable direct cash transfers. For informal enterprises, such payments, if combined with an “entry level” registration system and awareness-raising activities, could potentially facilitate a future transition to formality. To prevent child labour and a gender “double burden” of sorts, reopening schools as is being done in Benin is a very practical first measure.⁴²

Risks and responsibilities for the Netherlands

West Africa is the EU's largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa, and the Netherlands is tied to the region through a number of value chains. For example, the Netherlands is the largest importer of cacao in the world.⁴³ The Netherlands benefits from free and open trade, political stability, respect for security and the rule of law. Disruption in value chains in West Africa threatens European economic, security and geopolitical interests. COVID-19 may worsen fault lines which Jihadi groups have become accustomed to exploit in West Africa; reduced livelihoods could increase migratory pressures and allow actors like China, Russia and Turkey to further expand into the region. Disruptions in West Africa will also affect the resilience of wider value chains of which the Netherlands is a part, and have direct consequences on growth potential and ethical sourcing considerations. As such, concerns for secure livelihoods, good working conditions free of gender violence and respect for labour rights cannot be seen as issues separate from the Netherlands. This is all the more important as global aid budgets will be reduced along with gross domestic products. This highlights the importance of how the Netherlands will manage its own economic footprint. By virtue of being involved in the cocoa value chain, the Netherlands bears both leverage and responsibilities in regard to child labour and labour rights being upheld. As such, Dutch companies could step up to create awareness and monitor any exploitation within the value chain caused by COVID-19 measures. Civil society organisations will be key in underlining the importance for companies to respect their engagements. Overall, the crisis highlights the importance of decent work and human rights in value chains, as well as inclusive development. This crisis should not go to waste and be used as an opportunity to highlight the vulnerability of informal and migrant workers and the direct role Dutch consumers and companies can play in positive change.






42 Deutsche Welle. “Covid-19 : réouverture des écoles en Afrique, l'exception béninoise”. 11 May 2020.

43 Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “The Dutch market potential for cocoa”. 30 January 2020.

About the Clingendael Institute

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