



JULY 2020

## When pandemic meets poverty Pandemonium for pastoralists in the Sahel

In the Sahel, market closures, border closures and movement restrictions to stop the spread of COVID-19 have disrupted the structurally weak pastoral sector, already made vulnerable by conflict. There are several signs of the negative impacts of COVID-19, such as difficulties in moving food and people, poor access to markets, rising food prices and loss of livelihoods. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, the pandemic adds to ongoing problems of conflict and political instability. The threat to pastoralists is to lose their herds through overgrazing, zoonotic diseases or lack of income to feed the animals. If pastoralists go bankrupt, they could be forced to sell their livestock at devastatingly low prices to large landholders or wealthy neo-pastoralists. This scenario would aggravate an already-growing trend in the region – escalating economic inequality and the consolidation of wealth among an elite. This risks fuelling inequality and deepening existing fault lines. The priority for Sahelian governments should be clear: keep food coming and people moving, and develop a post-COVID-19 strategy to tackle the vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic.

### Introduction

Since early March, Sahelian governments have marshalled mitigation and prevention measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. In doing so, they made a bad situation worse. Market closures, border closures and movement restrictions have disrupted the structurally weak pastoral sector, already made vulnerable by conflict. There are several signs of the negative impacts of COVID-19, such as difficulties in moving food and people, poor access to markets for traders and pastoralists, rising food prices and loss of livelihoods.<sup>1</sup> Despite gradual recovery, markets remain unfrequented by non-local buyers.

Pastoralism is the main economic activity in Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad basin, two clusters of conflict.<sup>2</sup> Pastoral and agricultural activities have been conducted side by side for centuries. But in the last decade, pastoralists have been confronted by numerous difficulties, notably the increasing scarcity of water and fodder, the reduction of pasture areas and the inaccessibility of corridors for transhumance. The combination of ever-larger herds of cattle, the uncontrolled growth of agricultural lands, the spread of violent extremist groups following the Malian conflict and the wide availability of weapons since the fall of

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

2 Thirty percent of total livestock in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is concentrated in Liptako-Gourma (the tri-border area between the three countries).

Ghaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011 have made the competition over agricultural and pastoral resources a major driver of conflict in the Sahel. Violence related to pastoralism has escalated in frequency and intensity, sometimes spiralling out of control and sparking mass atrocities. The erosion of pastoralism challenges regional stability and international peace and security.<sup>3</sup> Many grazing areas or livestock markets in the region have become inaccessible because of insecurity along roads.<sup>4</sup>

In Sahelian countries, pastoralists make up 10 to 40 percent of the population, for a total of 60 million pastoralists in the entire region.<sup>5</sup> Pastoralism is the main source of income in rural areas. This sector has a high percentage of vulnerable workers such as women, seasonal workers and informal workers. Pastoral work is by nature dependent on the movement of people and animals. The ability to maintain an income without face-to-face exchanges at markets is virtually impossible. The impact of COVID-19 on the pastoral value chain, and by extension livelihoods, is immediately clear. Pastoralists may be restricted from working due either to illness or to prevention and mitigation measures. Transhumant pastoralists who undertake seasonal cross-border migration are especially at risk because of border closures.

Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad – countries where the pastoral value chain was already fragile – are facing further deterioration, like supply chain disruptions and price increases, as a result of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic adds to ongoing

problems of fragility, conflict and violence.<sup>7</sup> In the medium to long term, the threat to pastoralists is to lose their herds through overgrazing, zoo-sanitary diseases or lack of income to feed the animals. This risks fuelling inequality and deepening existing fault lines. The priority for Sahelian governments should be clear: keep food coming and people moving, and develop a post-COVID-19 strategy to tackle the vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic.

### Transhumance under threat<sup>8</sup>

Pastoral activities can take many forms: sedentary, agro-pastoralism, and transhumant pastoralism (in which pastoralists and their livestock undertake seasonal migration between complementary ecological zones following a north-south axis). Transhumant pastoralism is particularly hard hit by both conflict and COVID-19, as it heavily relies on cross-border migration between coastal states and the Sahel. Transhumance is vital to the existence of pastoralists' livelihoods.

Pastoralists' northbound migration generally takes place during the dry season, from January to May, and pastoralists should be back from the coastal states to the Sahel by mid-May.<sup>9</sup> But current COVID-19 mitigation and prevention measures limit both internal and cross-border travel. As such, there has been a significant reduction in cross-border flows as well as the number of animals found in livestock markets. According to the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), thousands of transhumant pastoralists are stuck in coastal states, for example Togo and Benin. Because of this, pastoralists cannot travel back to the Sahel in time for the rainy season.

---

3 Velluro, M. ['The Erosion of Pastoralism in the Sudano-Sahel'](#). Stimson Center. May 2020.

4 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.

5 Population and Development Review. ['Pastoralism and Conflict in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel'](#). 2018. 44:4. p. 857-860.

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

---

7 Bisson, L., Schmauder, A. and Claes, J. ['The Politics of COVID-19 in the Sahel'](#). Clingendael Institute. May 2020.

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

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

In addition, internal movements are also restricted, and some pastoralists can no longer leave their home regions. The concentration of animals in border areas puts tremendous pressure on limited grazing areas and water points and leads to increased zoonotic diseases. Movement restriction also limits access to veterinary care. In Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria and Senegal, CILSS reports difficulties in feeding animals, resulting in weight loss in livestock and consequent high animal mortality.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly critical in areas where transhumant animals are highly concentrated (e.g. on the Mali-Mauritania border). Poor pasture conditions in Western Mauritania due to below-average rainfall during the 2019 season (and for the third consecutive year) is putting additional pressure on resources in Western Mali by Mauritanian herds.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger, feed expenditure for livestock is rising significantly. For example, in Mali, the cost of fodder increased by 80 percent between March and May 2020.<sup>11</sup> This situation, in addition to insecurity and looting, forces some pastoralists to sell their livestock for very low prices. The Association for the Promotion of the Livestock in the Sahel and the Savanna (APESS) reported sales of malnourished animals at extremely discounted prices in Senegal and Burkina Faso.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the immediate loss of income, some pastoralists risk losing their reproductive nucleus and the depletion of their herds. This would mean a partial collapse of the pastoral sector in the Sahel.

## The impact of market and border closures<sup>13</sup>

Livestock markets are crucial bottlenecks for the pastoral economy. In the Sahel, livestock markets are historically well integrated due to longstanding trade patterns. Commodities move from rural production zones to the (often) urban consumption zones. But with rapid population growth and urbanisation, meat and milk supply chains are being stretched thin and altered significantly, with the establishment of ad hoc environmentally unsustainable 'ranches' outside cities to meet growing demand. First conflict, and now COVID-19, are exacerbating and accelerating these challenges and disrupting traditional destocking mechanisms. Most countries in West Africa have closed markets in line with mitigation and prevention measures. Market closures were often localised and some regions in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal and Chad closed up to 100 percent of their markets.

In March, Burkina Faso closed all 40 markets in its capital Ouagadougou. Faced with multiple protests and violent clashes between traders and the police, the government eventually reopened some markets at the end of April.<sup>14</sup> In April, Guinea closed 100 percent of its livestock markets. Six areas in northern Nigeria closed between 95 and 100 percent of livestock markets. In Chad, many of its 18 regions closed livestock markets entirely. In Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania, opening hours were modified for markets still in activity. Market closures, especially near borders, limits the possibility for pastoralists to sell their animals. In most of these countries, the sale of livestock is the main source of income in rural areas. Mali and Benin stand as exceptions from this general trend and markets remained open in both countries.

10 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.

11 From 140,000 CFA per tonne to 250,000 CFA per tonne.

12 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.

13 For more data on market closures, 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.

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

Despite gradual recovery, markets remain unfrequented by non-local buyers and social distancing measures disrupt normal operations. In Niger, Mali and Togo, up to 80 percent of livestock markets are not functioning normally. Where markets still operate, pastoralists and buyers find it difficult to travel to/from markets because of insecurity and looting on roads, fear of being contaminated or the high cost/lack of transport due to restrictive measures. High travel costs have resulted in increased difficulties related to the transport of people and livestock between regions and/or countries.<sup>15</sup>

Markets are deserted by traders and foreign buyers. In April, APSS reported the temporary interruption of exports of livestock from Chad to Nigeria. The loss in export taxes could gravely weaken the Chadian economy as it constitutes a major source of income for the country.<sup>16</sup> Local economies are hard hit. In Burkina Faso, prices for small ruminants have fallen by about 16 percent in the Soum and Seno provinces; compared to the five-year average, the drop in prices is 29 percent in Seno and 20 percent in Soum. The DJibo market in the Soum, the biggest market in the sub-region, remains particularly difficult to access due to the occupation of access roads by jihadi groups. The entire economy is dependent on the sale of livestock, which has been paralysed by conflict and now the pandemic. The supply of animals has fallen by one-third and pastoralists are selling their animals for half the price to meet household costs. Down the line, butchers and restaurants are also losing money due to higher prices for meat in markets, with costs being passed on to consumers. The Early Alert System against Hunger (Réseau des systèmes d'alerte précoce contre la famine) reports the DJibo

market is not functional because, on the one hand, traders are not coming, and on the other, households do not have the cash to buy meat.<sup>17</sup>

Mitigation measures have also boosted illegal activities, such as the clandestine transport of people and goods. This is the case in Senegal, where people use backdoor routes or fraudulent transports to avoid travel limitations.<sup>18</sup> This creates an environment conducive to cattle rustling and the development of organised criminality by non-state armed groups, which exacerbates conflict between pastoralists and farmers. Since the beginning of the crisis there has also been a rise in police harassment, informal tax levies and bribes at borders and checkpoints for traders and pastoralists, that are passed on in prices to consumers.

While herding is almost exclusively reserved to men, women are also affected by the pandemic. COVID-19 is having a negative impact on the production and transformation of milk, a sector largely dominated by female workers. Movement restrictions and the high cost of transport limits milk delivery from smallholder farms to local collection and transformation units. In turn, these units can process and deliver less milk to markets and consumption areas. APSS witnesses “difficulties in getting milk products to urban centres [...] producers in rural areas are unable to transport their production to urban areas, which leads to large financial losses.”<sup>19</sup> Demand has also dropped because of market, restaurant and bar closures in urban areas. As a result, pastoralists are losing significant quantities of milk. This has left many transformation unit

15 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.

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.

17 Sahelien. [‘Burkina Faso: ces villages du nord sous embargo djihadiste’](#). 8 June 2020.

18 Le Point. [‘Covid-19 : l’Afrique de l’Ouest à l’assaut de l’économie informelle’](#). 8 May 2020.

19 Commod Africa. [‘Suite au Covid-19, le dumping du lait européen sera une catastrophe pour l’Afrique de l’Ouest’](#). 11 June 2020.

workers unemployed in Chad and Benin. Mali, Niger and Mauritania produce 76 percent of local milk consumed in the whole of West Africa.

The crisis could worsen if European large dairy corporations dump their milk powder surpluses in Sahelian markets.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in response to falling milk prices, the European Union has started subsidising the storage of milk surpluses. Consequently, European industrialists have accumulated large quantities of milk during the COVID-19 crisis, and are ready to offload them in foreign markets. The Sahel is especially at risk with low taxes on imported goods, currently at 5 percent for European dairy products. Local NGOs and pastoral networks fear that if European milk is destocked in the Sahel at exceptionally low prices, it will further disrupt the already fragile Sahelian dairy sector and its predominantly female workforce.

## Prospects for post-COVID-19 recovery

Measures taken to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in West Africa have had dramatic unintended consequences. Market closures in particular have put enormous pressure on already-vulnerable traders and pastoralists: “COVID-19 is not the only crisis, and probably not the biggest crisis [in the Sahel]. But poorly designed and unadapted mitigation measures will make a bad situation worse.”<sup>21</sup> In Burkina Faso, blanket market closure led to violent clashes between traders and security forces. In Senegal, movement restrictions pushed people towards using backdoor routes or clandestine transports. In the wider Sahel region, mitigation measures threaten the entire pastoral economy.

Subsistence farmers and pastoralists represent more than 80 percent of the rural population in the Sahel. Rural households are among the most vulnerable populations, as they spend on average 80 percent of their income on food. As such, if pastoralists go bankrupt (as is projected by various local organisations), they could be forced to sell their assets at devastatingly low prices to large landholders or wealthy neo-pastoralists that have the capital to weather the risks of these price fluctuations. This scenario would aggravate an already-growing trend in the region – escalating economic inequality and the consolidation of wealth among an elite and narrowing few.

The first priority for Sahelian governments is immediately clear: they should keep food coming and essential workers moving. They should focus on traditional urban retail food markets, which account for around 80 to 90 percent of all food sales in the Sahel. One prospect for post-COVID-19 recovery would be to ensure that pastoral products (e.g. live cattle, meat, milk), services (e.g. veterinary services) and workers (e.g. transhumant pastoralists) are identified as essential and therefore qualify for exemption, and be provided with the corresponding safety and security. Governments could create appropriate identification measures and lift certain movement restrictions, such as allowing access to normally restricted markets, limiting the number of people allowed on food trucks, and allowing the free movement of transport workers.<sup>22</sup>

This will only be meaningful if governments manage to make markets COVID-19 compliant, including informal markets. Rapid emergency investments to keep domestic markets functioning can work. These measures would enable urban markets to continue operations in compliance with COVID-19 health measures. Their development would require working in strong coordination with the private sector involved in the supply chain, building trust

20 Le Monde. [‘L’Afrique de l’Ouest et le Sahel tentent d’éviter une crise laitière venue d’Europe’](#). 30 June 2020.

21 Bisson, L., Schmauder, A. and Claes, J. [‘The Politics of COVID-19 in the Sahel’](#). Clingendael Institute. May 2020.

22 For further information see: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, African Union. [‘Measures for supporting domestic markets during the COVID-19 outbreak in Africa’](#). 12 April 2020.

with market operators and raising their awareness on good practices and sanitary guidelines, training product-handling market actors in health and safety. Any lack of trust between government officials and livestock market managers would complicate efforts if they are not sensitive to that dynamic. In Abidjan, some markets continued to function through cooperation between health authorities, food, market and commerce officials, and through introduction of some of these guidelines (table 1).

**Table 1 Best practices to make markets COVID-19 compliant<sup>23</sup>**

Best practices to make markets COVID-19 compliant	
Social distancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restricting market access points and establishing entry or limiting the number of persons at any one time</li> <li>• marking market floors to maintain social distancing</li> <li>• longer market hours to extend trading times</li> <li>• organising traders in shifts or teams to minimize risks</li> </ul>
Strict sanitary measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conducting temperature readings and health checks of all workers and drivers</li> <li>• establishing strict protocol for ill workers</li> <li>• mandating compulsory masks, hand washing and sanitation stations</li> </ul>
Diversifying trading areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• temporarily relocating markets to larger or outdoor spaces</li> <li>• opening secondary markets on the outskirts of cities to avoid over-crowding in the main urban markets</li> <li>• permitting sales in front of homes</li> <li>• supporting the development of e-commerce</li> </ul>

Although many countries have designed support packages, most of them apply only to formal workers and thus do not help most of the rural population. Only a handful of countries have announced support packages that are likely to benefit workers in the informal economy. For example, Burkina Faso announced a CFA394 million emergency

23 For further information see: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, African Union. [‘Measures for supporting domestic markets during the COVID-19 outbreak in Africa’](#). 12 April 2020.

plan that includes the creation of a solidarity fund for the acquisition of animal fodder to support pastoralists.<sup>24</sup> In Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria, similar support packages, including food distribution and conditional cash transfers, have been introduced.<sup>25</sup> This will require strong oversight, otherwise financial support packages risk being hoarded by the powerful few, rather than reaching vulnerable pastoralists and traders.

The extent of negative impacts of COVID-19 will be contingent on the duration of mitigation and prevention measures, the resilience of value chains, and the role of policymakers in adapting the post-COVID-19 recovery to local pastoral realities on the ground. At the moment of writing, West African states are currently developing a plan to gradually reopen borders and roll back on mitigation measures.<sup>26</sup> Policymakers should continue to closely monitor this rapidly evolving situation.

## Recommendations for the international development community

COVID-19 is severely undermining longstanding programming efforts in the Sahel. If the international development community fails to mitigate border and market closures, it risks wiping out years of progress made on a range of development targets, and aggravating existing negative coping strategies such as child labour, early marriage, and sex work to deal with economic deprivation. Disruptions in the pastoral sector in the Sahel could lead to greater inequalities and major financial vulnerability in the future. If pastoralists go bankrupt and lose or sell their herds, this will generate severe and long-lasting poverty for pastoral households. As such, beyond the

24 Sidwaya. [‘COVID 19: Le président du Faso annonce 394 milliards pour accompagner les populations vulnérables et relancer l’économie’](#). 2 April 2020.

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

26 Reuters. [‘West African ministers propose phased re-opening of borders’](#). 17 June 2020.

immediate health impact of the pandemic, the effects of mitigation measures could have unforeseen long-term consequences on the Sahelian economy.

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 consequences. A higher concentration of pastoralists and their animals in border areas increases competition for resources, and could fuel the dangerous spiral of inter- and intra-communal conflict, especially with farmers.<sup>27</sup> Jihadi groups have become experts in exploiting tribal divisions, clan-based fault lines and pastoral grievances against farmers and against the government for its lack of support.

The erosion of pastoralism in the Sahel is not a new phenomenon, but the pandemic is exacerbating and accelerating already-worrying trends, such as the loss of livelihoods for smallholder herders

and the concentration of livestock in the hands of a few wealthy neo-pastoralists. As global aid budgets are being scaled down, along with gross domestic products in donor countries, policymakers should pay special attention to this key economic sector. First, countries with large livestock herds, for example the Netherlands, should share expertise and provide support to strengthen existing frameworks for cross-border cooperation and early warning mechanisms with one goal in mind: keep food coming and people moving. West African government ministers have proposed re-opening borders between their countries in the second half of July.<sup>28</sup> This effort should be fully supported. Second, policymakers should understand that COVID-19 is not alone responsible for supply chain disruptions in the pastoral industry in the Sahel. They must develop post-COVID-19 strategies that incorporate a full understanding of the context, causes and consequences of the erosion of pastoralism and its relationship to violence and conflict.<sup>29</sup>

---

27 Velturo, M. [‘The Erosion of Pastoralism in the Sudano-Sahel’](#). Stimson Center. May 2020.

---

28 Reuters. [‘West African ministers propose phased re-opening of borders’](#). 17 June 2020.

29 Clingendael’s Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is preparing a broader report on the relationship between pastoralism and conflict for September 2020.

### **About the Clingendael Institute**

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
[cru@clingendael.org](mailto:cru@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 clingendael\_institute  
 Newsletter

### **About the author**

**Loïc Bisson** is a Junior Researcher at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. His research interests include organised crime, conflict and local governance in the Sahel region.