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BRIEFING NOTE



IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON LOCAL-SCALE FOOD PRODUCTION IN SOUTH AFRICA –  
INSIGHTS FROM THE FREESTATE PROVINCE





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## ABOUT THE AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD-SYSTEM RESILIENCE: INCREASING CAPACITY AND ADVISING POLICY (AFRICAP) PROGRAMME

The Agricultural and Food-system Resilience: Increasing Capacity and Advising Policy (AFRICAP) programme is a four-year research programme focused on improving evidence-based policy making to develop sustainable, productive, agricultural systems, resilient to climate change. The programme is being implemented in Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and the UK led by the University of Leeds, in partnership with the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), a pan-African multi-stakeholder policy network. The programme is funded by the UK Government from the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which aims to support research that addresses critical problems in developing countries across the world. It is administered by the UK's Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) - UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

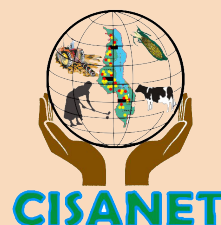
## IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS:



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# KEY MESSAGES

1. COVID-19 impacted local-scale food production affecting the availability, affordability and accessibility of food.
2. Interruption in agricultural activities due to reduced access to labour and inputs affected the quality and quantity of produce, slowed operations, and increased the cost of production. Profit losses and reduced income of food producers will potentially affect the long-term enterprise sustainability, future agriculture activities and food production.
3. Decline in income due to lockdown regulations forced informal farm workers and households to cut-down on food expenses by shifting to cheaper lower-quality food.
4. Increase in negative coping strategies, such as selling productive assets and reducing food expenses, which also coincided with a rise in negative behavior like farm thefts and other crimes.
5. It is important for government to invest in understanding, planning, and transitioning to more resilient food production systems by focusing on: social protection and equality, agroecological diversification, increasing capacity and alternative workforce, ensuring food stability and trade, and developing early warning systems.





# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Food insecurity, aggravated by stresses and shocks such as social conflicts, economic crises, climate change and disease outbreaks is a serious challenge throughout sub-Saharan Africa 1. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is expected to accentuate the food crises across Africa through disruptive impacts on food production and distribution systems, severely compromising food security and wellbeing, – particularly for the vulnerable are most marginalised 2. While there is emerging information on interactions between COVID-19 and global food value chains, there is a dearth of evidence on how the Global Pandemic is impacting and, more importantly, altering on-farm systems and farmer adaptation.

Impact of shocks on food systems often create spill over ‘downstream’ or ‘upstream’ effects through the responses it triggers by different actors. Responses by local actors, such as farmers and extension services, to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 could trigger subsequent responses by other actors e.g., buyers and suppliers. The interconnections and dependency between actors could create a “ripple effect” with feedback loops and unpredictable and unintended consequences. It is therefore important to document the responses and adaptation strategies of farmers to understand what it might mean for other interacting local actors in response to COVID-19. Finally, understanding on-farm impacts and adaptation is critical for (i) providing effective support to farmers, (ii) comparing with the effects of past shocks, (iii) planning adaptation for future shocks.



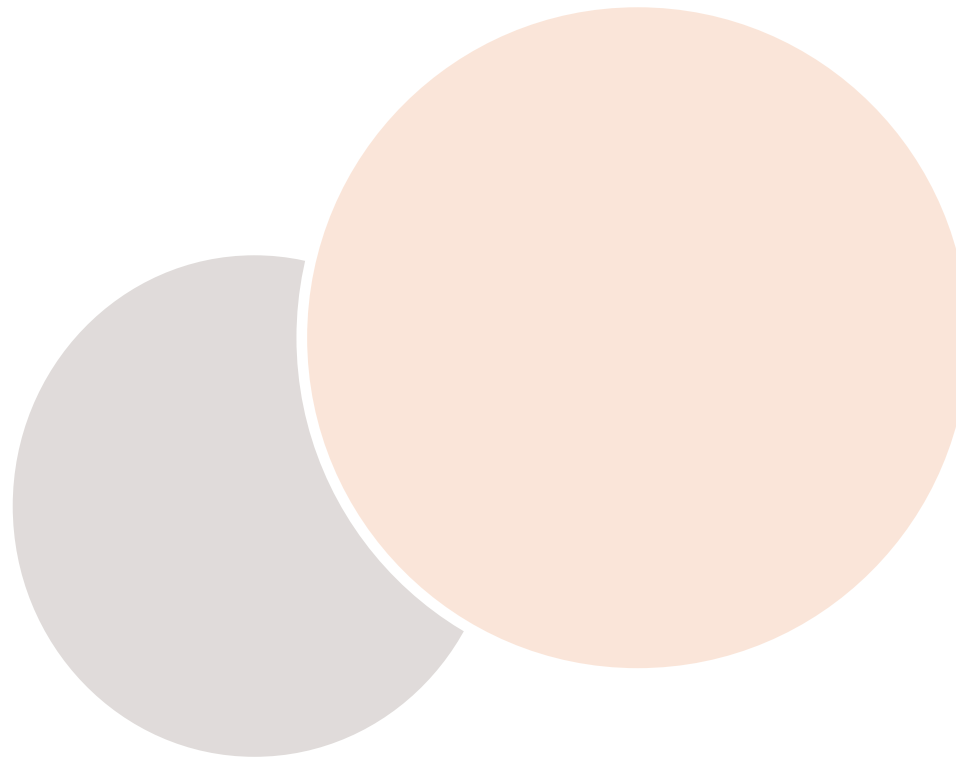
# DESCRIPTION OF INTERVENTION

Drawing on 25 structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including farmers, agricultural extension officers and local and regional authorities, we identify and explore the impacts of the ongoing pandemic on local-scale on-farm production and adaptation measures by farmers in Thabo Mofutsanyane district of Freestate province in South Africa. Farming in the region comprises three different production models: (i) small-scale farmers (SF) mainly occupying small-sized farms (1-10 ha) at higher altitudes, (ii) medium size emerging farmers (EF) who received farming lands (50-200 ha) through the land reform program and who practice a mix of livestock and crop farming, and (iii) large-scale (200-1000 ha) commercial farmers (CF) who predominantly grow commodities like maize, soya, wheat, apples, and potatoes for national and international markets.

COVID-19 has directly affected farm-scale agricultural activities and food systems by causing labour shortages and restricting access to agricultural equipment and inputs, and economic and food losses associated with loss of income, and disruption of domestic for SF and EF) and international markets (for CF). Interruption in agricultural activities affected the quality and quantity of produce, slowed operations, delayed harvest, and increased the cost of production. The economic losses resulted in reduced income of food producers which may potentially affect long-term enterprise sustainability, especially for SF and CF farmers.

With reduced income and increased food costs, small-scale and poor farmers found it difficult to cope. In some of the SF and EF systems, farmers used family labour and reduced the cost and uncertainties associated with labour shortage. In doing so, they showed that small farms might be more resilient than large farms, which are more dependent on external labour. In EF and some CF production systems, where agriculture is reliant on mechanisation and shared machinery, the transport restrictions and social distancing measures disrupted the availability of agriculture equipment and other inputs. The reduction in sales might have cascading effects as it will reduce cash flow for retailers and wholesalers leading to a potential liquidity crunch and inability to maintain the stocks of essential agriculture inputs.

Some of the farmers, mainly SF and EF, engaged in negative coping strategies by selling productive assets, or by reducing education and food expenses. This also coincided with an increase in incidents of negative behaviour, such as engaging in farm thefts and other crimes. In some cases, farmers exhibited more positive coping strategies, such as shifting to other suppliers, finding alternatives to labour shortage by engaging family and friends, encouraging localised consumption, and focussing on local markets when international buyers or dealers are unable to come on site.





Food and economy loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Delay in harvesting, losses of perishable produce</li> <li>- vegetables and fruits, economic losses due to selling at low prices or self-consumption, closure of informal markets and increased unemployment</li> </ul>
Market and income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inability to sell the produce</li> <li>- Additional investment for storage infrastructure</li> <li>- Localised demands for maize and beans due to food parcel drive</li> <li>- Price and demand for apples in the export market crashed</li> <li>- Loss of income led to poor demand of fresh products like fruits and vegetables</li> </ul>
Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reduced density of workers impacted harvest and post-harvest activities, slowed-down operations, increased costs and affected the market price of the goods.</li> </ul>
Social impact and inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Smallholders felt that commercial farmers benefitted more. “Small farmers like me would not be able to sell that much because only the commercial farmers will benefit.”</li> <li>- Increase in instances of farm crimes</li> </ul>
Farm inputs and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to agricultural equipment and spare parts (e.g. tractors, cutting blades for grinders), chemical inputs, and medical supplies to livestock affected.</li> <li>- Low labour availability with knock-on effects</li> <li>- Economic losses and lack of agriculture inputs will affect future agriculture activities</li> </ul>
Food and nutrition security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing food shortage and costs affected access to food for many poor households in rural areas</li> <li>- Government distributed food parcels to the food-insecure communities, which partially improved food security</li> </ul>
Compounding shocks and stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Droughts affecting irrigation of arable and pasture lands.</li> <li>- Crop damage and loss due to climate and pests is not covered by insurance companies causing severe economic losses</li> </ul>



# POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The agri-food industry is among the few sectors that has been sheltered by the national and provincial governments by excluding agricultural activities from the purview of COVID-19 lockdowns and mobility restrictions and allowing work with some social distancing directives. Despite such protection, COVID-19 has had adverse impacts on local-scale food production.

The Government in South Africa - Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) - deployed intervention measures to reduce the negative impacts of COVID-19. DALRRD provided monetary assistance (USD 83 million) to small-scale farmers under Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) programme and also through the Land Bank (USD 69 000). The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) provided food parcels and vouchers to the vulnerable and food-insecure communities.

To safeguard the agriculture sector from similar shocks in future it is important to invest in understanding, planning, and transitioning to a more resilient food production system. COVID-19 has parallels and potential interactions with other stressors, such as drought and pest outbreaks <sup>3</sup>. Therefore, adaptation strategies addressing the COVID-19 crisis should also account for long-term climate risks and associated ecological impacts <sup>4</sup>.

Based on the impacts and adaptations reported by the farmers in this study, policy interventions should focus on the following:

- Social protection and equality: providing temporary relief and social protection to vulnerable and financially distressed informal workers, farmers and other food system stakeholders. Addressing inequalities in access to land and food.
- Diversification: supporting diversified agroecological farming systems and reducing dependence on industrial high-risk monoculture systems.
- Capacity and alternative workforce: enhancing storage facilities, extension services, job assurance for farm workers, and engaging an alternative workforce in farming by recruiting workers laid-off in other sectors.
- Food stability and logistical bottlenecks: ensuring stability of food supply by reducing logistical bottlenecks, such as transport of food products and access to inputs, and avoiding trade restrictions.
- Information and early warning: provisioning of timely market information, advisories, early warning and forecast of shocks and risks to farmers i.e. developing agriculture market and shock information systems.

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# BRIEFING NOTE

Designed by: Daniel Rambau

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Email:** [contact@africap.info](mailto:contact@africap.info)

**Website:** <https://africap.info/T>



@gcrfafricap



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