



Economic Inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa

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The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to push 23 million additional people into poverty in Africa due to job and income losses. Women in Africa remain the majority of the poor, the landless, the unemployed, those working in the informal sector, and those shouldering the burden of care. As a result, women and girls are more likely to experience the negative effects of COVID-19 related measures, such as closure of borders and markets and curfews.¹ For example in West African countries, women with small businesses, especially those selling food in markets, near offices, and in schools have seen drops in their incomes. Borders closures and market limitations have had significant impacts on informal traders, predominantly women.²

With the imposed social isolation and the heightened social and economic pressures and tensions at home, women and girls have also been affected by increases in gender based violence (GBV), whilst recourse and protection mechanisms unable to accommodate the surge in cases when they are not absent altogether.³ As a result of movement restrictions, suspension of schools and increasing numbers of sick people, the burden of care work has also significantly augmented, impacting women's mental and physical health and putting them at higher risk of infection.⁴ At the same time, rural women and girls in many parts of Africa are struggling to access health services as governments and health clinics have diverted energy and attention away from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights services.⁵ The economic shock will also have ripple effects on girls who are pulled out of schools to help out at home, or married off early to relieve the family of another mouth to feed, which in turn increases the probability of child or teenage pregnancies. There is also the risk of families resorting to negative coping strategies such as exposing women and girls to transactional sex.

Gender equality gains made in the past decades could be lost and existing gender and social inequalities exacerbated. Furthermore, women and girls and their organisations are often excluded from community-level decision-making and governance structures including around response strategies during humanitarian crises.⁶ As a result, women and girls are disproportionately affected while not being able to contribute to and benefit from response planning and implementation. Building back better will not be achieved unless attention is paid to issues affecting women and girls' well being, including GBV, their socio-economic participation, voice and decision-making power.

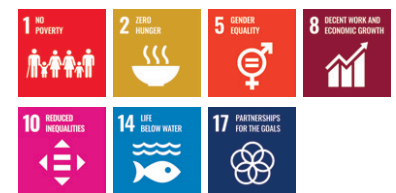
Budget

USD 1 million

Time frame

2021–2023

SDGs



Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19

- ▶ [Gendered Impacts of Covid-19 and Equitable Policy Responses in Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition](#)
- ▶ [Preserving African food value chains in the midst of the coronavirus crisis](#)
- ▶ [Enabling agricultural innovation systems to promote appropriate technologies and practices for farmers, rural youth and women during COVID-19](#)

¹ African Union, 2020. Framework Document on the Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: African Union Guidelines on Gender-Responsive Responses to COVID-19.

² CARE International, 2020. West Africa Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19.

³ CARE International, 2020. Gender Implications of COVID-19 Outbreaks in Development and Humanitarian Settings.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ CARE International, 2020. West Africa Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19.

⁶ IASC and UN Women, 2018. The IASC Gender Policy's Accountability Framework Report.



In Africa women make up about 50 percent of the agricultural labour force and are key players in food systems and central to the social reproduction of households and communities. Furthermore, about 80 percent of the midstream agricultural value chains are comprised of very small and small and medium enterprises, with women dominating in the processing, distribution and marketing of food crops in many countries. While important for food security and poverty reduction and contributing 30-40% of value added and costs in food value chains, these businesses,⁷ which are predominantly informal and small or self-employed especially for women, are often hidden from policy debate and measures, including the response to COVID-19.⁸ Yet, they are essential in the food system transformation agenda as they provide income for rural women and their families and an importance source part of off-farm rural employment, especially for youth.⁹

Boosting the resilience and empowerment of rural women who comprise the *hidden middle* of value chains is an effective strategy to promote long term recovery of households, communities and food systems. Not only has this been shown to impact positively the performance of value chains and productive capacity of small farms, but also to have the potential to generate 25% of rural employment in the midstream and downstream.¹⁰

While adversely affected, rural women have found ways to continue producing food for their families and others, kept their businesses in value chains afloat, engaging in new forms of solidarity, continued trading and organizing their savings and credit groups by adapting, differentiating and applying digital solutions. These initiatives need to be strengthened, scaled up and built into processes that create the ground for building back better towards sustainable and inclusive food systems. At the same time, there is an urgent need to address the existing gender gaps in access to productive resources, services, technology and information and to free women and girls from GBV. For this to happen, action is also needed to foster the transformation of patriarchal gender and power norms and relations that marginalize rural women and girls and to promote the recognition of the unpaid care economy with the engagement of men and boys.

The action

The programme will combine a set of interlinked interventions to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of

⁷ Reardon, T. 2015, The hidden middle: The quiet revolution in the midstream of agrifood value chains in developing countries. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, March 2015; AGRA. (2019). Africa Agriculture Status Report: The Hidden Middle: A Quiet Revolution in the Private Sector Driving Agricultural Transformation (Issue 7).

⁸ We refer to these segments as the "hidden middle". According to Reardon (2015), these middle segments (processing, logistics and wholesale) have been neglected or 'hidden' from mainstream debate of agrifood value chains in developing countries. The hidden middle is especially important for women and youth's employment in peri-urban areas and in areas just beyond the peri-urban and intermediate rural areas.

⁹ AGRA. (2019). Africa Agriculture Status Report: The Hidden Middle: A Quiet Revolution in the Private Sector Driving Agricultural Transformation (Issue 7).

¹⁰ Ibid.

COVID-19 on rural women and girls, contributing to the reduction of gender inequalities in agriculture, promoting their empowerment and freedom from violence, and gender transformative policies and strategies in agriculture and rural sectors. The programme will also focus on building the resilience of women agri-entrepreneurs who dominate the *hidden middle* of the value chain, paving the way for accelerated socio-economic empowerment of women and resilient and inclusive societies. As a result of the action, women-led innovations in response to COVID-19, socially responsible entrepreneurship¹¹ and innovative business models will be promoted. The action will involve four interconnected actions:

- 1 Supporting high quality gender analysis using an intersectionality lens and sex and age disaggregated data. As the situation is rapidly changing, programmes need to be continuously informed and updated by rapid vulnerability assessments that include gender analysis of women and men's (of different ages, abilities, and geographical locations) changing roles, responsibilities, vulnerabilities, capacities, and access to resources and services, as a result of the pandemic and its containment measures.
- 2 Fostering a nexus approach to resilience-adaptation-differentiation, the action will support rural women's businesses linking rural producers with peri-urban and urban centers especially for perishable produce and increase their income-generating capacity and economic resilience by supporting: (i) resilience (social, financial, physical) through holistic approaches such as Dimitra clubs, Agro-pastoral and Farmers Field Schools, Caisse de Resilience and Safe Access to Fuel and Energy Approach; (ii) adaptability of midstream value chain female actors by better access to productive resources, services and markets, information, mechanisation (possibly labour saving), digital services and technology; (iii) and actors in the midstream to benefit from opportunities created through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This includes supporting women-led producer organizations, cooperatives, to share knowledge on AfCFTA and participate in decision making processes.
- 3 ICT-based support through web platforms and mobile applications for trainings, services and sharing of critical information to women and men smallholder farmers in isolated rural areas (use of agri-TV or Accessagriculture learning systems for extension in local languages), while addressing existing gender gaps in access to technology and information. This includes building women's digital and financial literacy to engage in e-financial transactions without having to travel outside of their communities.

¹¹ Social responsibility is in this context considered as providing decent employment and engaging with social disadvantaged groups through for example creation of employment for girl-mothers, women victims of GBV.



- 4 Raise awareness and build the capacity of affected populations and local partners on how to identify, respond to, and address existing and expected protection risks including from sexual exploitation and abuse and GBV, and guide them through adequate, accessible and safe reporting and referral mechanisms.
- 5 Raise awareness of different stakeholders at different levels on the importance of transforming patriarchal socio-cultural norms that reproduce the marginalization of rural women and girls and promote gender-transformative policies and strategies in the agricultural sector.
- 6 The programme will draw from the experiences and lessons learned from other health outbreaks and pandemics (including Ebola outbreaks and the HIV pandemic), which demonstrate that robust needs assessment and gender analysis are crucial for designing gender-responsive programmes. These help to identify inequalities, gaps and capacities and the specific impacts of the crisis on women and girls. To the extent possible data collected throughout the response will be disaggregated by sex, age, locality and disability (where relevant), to produce the evidence base for monitoring gender-related impacts.

Expected results

- 1 Policies and programmes are gender-responsive and based on sound gender analysis that take into consideration the needs, vulnerabilities and roles of different women and men.
- 2 Rural and peri urban women's resilience to shocks, adaptation and differentiation capacity is increased, and their income generating capacity enhanced.
- 3 Rural women's improved access to digital services and information and gender-responsive digitalization are promoted.
- 4 Gender transformative processes are fostered to overcome gender constraints, social norms, stigmatization and awareness is raised on reliable mechanisms to identify and address GBV and protection risks.

Programme links

This programme is part of FAO's comprehensive COVID-19 response and contributes to FAO's Hand-in-Hand initiative. The programme is in line with the AU Gender Strategy and adheres to OECD recommendation on strengthening continental trade. It will synergise with the regional TCP 'Sex Disaggregated Data in Agriculture to make second generation NAIPs and RAIPs gender responsive' and link

to the Regional Initiative on Small Scale Family Farming. Further the programme will liaise with Regional Initiative on Building Resilience in Africa's Drylands and the Resilience Team for Eastern Africa and West Africa and Country Programming Framework priorities, plans and investments. The programme is in line with the FAO's Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 and FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme.

Partnerships

The programme will reach out to regional and sub-regional producer organizations (e.g. Farmers Organizations and Agricultural Producers of West Africa, Pan African Farmer Forum, etc.), diaspora associations, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, South-South Cooperation partnerships. African Union, Regional Economic Communities, women machineries will be key partners. The programme will work with governments, International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Bank, UN Women, International Labour Organization and other United Nations agencies, rural and agricultural credit associations, GROW Africa, Continental Hubs for enterprise support and innovation and digitalization (Afric INOV, TradeHub).

Country focus

Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, Togo and Zimbabwe

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