Trade and food safety standards
African free trade and food safety

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The issue

COVID-19 is severely affecting trade in sub-Saharan Africa, causing demand shocks, a crash in commodity prices, widespread supply-chain disruptions, currency depreciations and a sharp drop in tourism, foreign direct investments and remittances. For the first time in 25 years, sub-Saharan Africa is set to see negative growth, amid declining government revenues and rising unemployment. Moreover, lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus are leading to delays at ports and critical hubs for agricultural imports and exports. This has grave implications for food security and reversed improvements in food safety and nutrition.

Regional integration, including through greater trade in goods and services, is one of the key aspirations of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063. The launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is expected to significantly accelerate growth and sustainable development, doubling intra-African trade by 2022 and tripling trade in agricultural goods by 2023. It aligns with the recent AU decision to establish the Africa Food Safety Agency to ensure the coordination of food safety at the continental level.

Although there is strong political will at the highest level, implementation hurdles remain and add costs to crossing borders in Africa. For example, domestic transportation costs are high (partly due to infrastructural and connectivity constraints, such as poor roads and gaps in rail and shipping networks), accounting for 50–60 percent of marketing costs in the region. Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures specific to agricultural trade have become relatively more important than tariffs. SPS measures are critical to protecting public, animal and plant health and SPS agreements ensure the highest international standards. Weak capacity to comply with SPS requirements can result in a country's exclusion from key markets. At the same time, poorly applied procedures, including inadequate capacity to implement the SPS regulatory framework, can increase the cost of trade. Estimates show that domestic food prices in sub-Saharan Africa are 13 percent higher on average due to SPS measures. Promoting intra-regional trade will require a lowering of such barriers to trade, which often push traders towards informal channels in a bid to avoid compliance with SPS measures, defeating their intended purpose.

Food safety and quality are essential to trade, food security, public health and economic development. Increasing the supply of safe and nutritious food reduces the impact of food-borne diseases, which cause many illnesses and deaths each year and have detrimental economic consequences in both developing and developed countries. Effective food safety control is crucial to trade facilitation and the successful implementation of AfCFTA.

The need to act has never been more urgent. To mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on food security and trade, we must strengthen national SPS capacity,

Budget

USD 15 million

Time frame

2021–2023

SDGs

2 ZERO HUNGER	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	5 GENDER EQUALITY	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH
9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19

▶ Agri-food markets and trade policy in the time of COVID-19

▶ Ample supplies to help shield food markets from the COVID-19 crisis

▶ COVID-19: Channels of transmission to food and agriculture

▶ Preserving African food value chains in the midst of the coronavirus crisis

upgrade infrastructural connectivity and address other non-tariff barriers to market access, including new regional markets.

The action

1 **Assessment of national food control systems** – The programme will conduct assessments in selected countries and regional economic communities (RECs) and trading blocs – such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the West African Monetary and Economic Union (UEMOA/WAEMU), the Central African Economic and Monetary Community and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – using the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO) Food Control System Assessment Tool. These will include the development of a COVID-19 impact assessment and strategies for reinforcement. The programme will help develop an evidence-based analysis of the performance of national food control systems to build a consensus-based vision for national food control, identify priority areas of improvement and coordinate the planning of activities to reach expected outcomes. Important areas for strong food control systems include regulatory framework and implementation strategies, inspection functions, interaction with national and international stakeholders, and scientific and laboratory capacity to support data collection, surveillance and monitoring activities. This will complement information collected through market information systems (reliable, up-to-date data at country and regional level) and support traceability mechanisms for agricultural products.

2 **Capacity development for RECs** – The programme will assist both RECs – such as COMESA, ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) – and individual countries on food safety risk analysis, especially in technical areas related to SPS measures. International standard-setting bodies' process for developing standards, guidelines and codes of practice is science-driven, so this action will provide the requisite skills in risk assessment, risk management and risk communication to support the development of national, regional and international food standards, as well as strategies to harmonize food controls, including SPS measures.

3 **Assistance in developing and implementing regional and national frameworks for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) in agricultural commodities and services** – The programme will address key issues, including food standards and the impact of the COVID-19, in alignment with the AfCFTA Agreement and the continental BIAT framework jointly developed by the African Union Commission (AUC)

and FAO. This will include engaging stakeholders at national and regional level, including the private sector, in a broad consultation on the barriers to trade in the major agricultural commodities, to promote harmonization policies.

Expected results

1 **Evidence**

- **Evidence-based decision-making is improved** through a strong market information system and food control systems assessment, combined with food safety risk and COVID-19 impact assessment.

2 **Policy**

- **Structure and functioning of the international standard-setting bodies** – such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) – is broadly understood and participation in the process of developing food standards is improved at country and regional level.
- **A process to harmonize food standards, including COVID-19-related protocols on food handling, is established** within and between RECs and at regional level for major traded food commodities.
- **Regulatory cooperation on food safety issues is promoted,** contributing to responding to COVID-19 impact on food trade, leading to reduction in trade costs and enhanced regional and international agricultural and food trade.
- **Trade facilitation measures are implemented to improve the movement of traded food commodities across borders** and intra-African trade overall is increased in value and volume terms.

3 **Capacity**

- **Capacities are built for food safety risk assessment and management,** including the adoption of good practices in food import control, domestic food facility inspection and appropriate COVID-19 protocols.

4 **Leveraging investments**

- **Greater private-sector engagement is assured,** along with the participation of the private sector in developing, setting and implementing harmonized food safety standards, thereby increasing Africa's private-sector capacity to deliver accreditation, conformity assessment, certification, laboratory and other related food safety services and COVID-19 measures.

Partnerships

AU, COMESA, the East African Community, ECCAS, the Southern African Development Community, the ECOWAS, UEMOA/WAEMU, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the International Food Policy Research Institute, international standard-setting bodies (such as Codex Alimentarius, OIE and Intenational Plant Protection Convention), the World Trade Organization and the African Grain Council

Programme links

This programme ties in with the following projects and initiatives led by FAO and its partners:
FAO support to the COMESA trade facilitation programme (GCP/INT/387/COM); support for BIAT in agricultural commodities and services to advance the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement (TCP/RAF/3708).

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Country focus

Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, South Africa, COMESA and ECOWAS

COMESA Member States: Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe

ECOWAS Member States: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo

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