Sub-Saharan Africa's food security has turned out better than feared. But risks remain

By Wandile Sihlobo

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When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, concern immediately arose that sub-Saharan Africa faced a potential worsening in food insecurity. The concerns were due to the anticipated slowdown in economic activity, job losses accompanied by loss of income, and a ban on grain exports by major exporting countries, including India, Russia, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Sub-Saharan Africa is a net importer of food.

An avocado orchard in Tzaneen, South Africa. Food insecurity in the country went up in the wake of COVID-19. Photo by Guillem Sartorio/AFP via Getty Images

The bans, along with other pandemic-related disruptions to food supply chains, were expected to add to food security challenges in the region. The World Bank was among the first multilateral institutions to sound the alarm. The bank estimated that an additional 26 million people would fall into extreme poverty, defined as those living under US$1.90 per day, in 2020.

The slowdown in economic activity played out as expected, with sub-Saharan Africa's economy contracting by 1.9% in 2020, according to International Monetary Fund estimates. The economic slowdown resulted in job losses.

The widespread job losses in the region subsequently led to a rise in food insecurity. This was most pronounced in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, Uganda and Malawi, the countries for which data is available.

More than a year since the onset of the pandemic, a great many uncertainties about the economic future of the region linger on. However, sub-Saharan Africa's food security situation appears to have, thus far, turned out better than some of the more pessimistic expectations.

The increase in staple grain imports in various African countries, by both governments and private sector players, combined with slightly better domestic grain production conditions in some, such as Zambia, South Africa and Tanzania, to name a few, has slightly shielded the region.

Specific interventions

One positive development was that the G20 discouraged major grain-exporting countries from banning exports. Domestic evaluations of supplies by food-exporting countries also provided comfort for sufficient food supplies in the world market. As a result, India, Russia, Cambodia and Vietnam lifted the ban on exports, enabling a smooth flow of grain to the sub-Saharan Africa region.

Various governments also took action. This was primarily through increasing grain imports. The major importers have been Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria and Malawi. Some of these countries also rolled out farmer input support schemes to assist farmers ahead of the 2020/21 production season, which began in October 2020 for most countries. Only South Africa responded with direct income support to vulnerable households, but still household food insecurity rose.

Governments also supported farmers with inputs. This could pay off during the 2021 harvest. There remain concerns though that some of support might have been late in getting to some farmers because of corruption, poor farmer targeting and bureaucratic inefficiencies. This has been the experience with previous farm input subsidies programmes.

That said, another important positive development was that most of the African continent, specifically southern and eastern regions, received higher rainfall during the 2020-21 summer. This allowed for increased plantings and improved crop production conditions. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates already point to prospects of increased maize production in several southern and east Africa countries.

For example:

• Zambia's 2020/21 maize production could reach 3.4 million tonnes (up 69% on 2019/20).

• Malawi's maize harvest is estimated at 3.8 million tonnes (up 25% year-on-year).

• Mozambique's maize crop is estimated at 2.1 million tonnes (up 8% year-on-year).

• Kenya's maize harvest is forecast at 4.0 million tonnes (up 5% year-on-year).

• Tanzania's maize harvest is estimated at 6.3 million tonnes (up 8% year-on-year).

There are also prospects of large maize and wheat harvests in Zimbabwe.

These numbers suggest a good harvest, not only for grains but also for other crops and improved livestock conditions in the southern and east Africa region.

These improved agricultural conditions cannot fully compensate for job losses. Nevertheless they might cushion households from severe and long-term food insecurity that the World Bank's economists had feared the sub-Saharan Africa region would face from 2020. It is plausible that as the harvest begins from May 2021 in some African countries, rural households could be in a slightly better position than in 2020 in terms of staple grains availability.

The big question now is whether insights have been gained to make the agricultural sector more resilient in the future, and if the expected large harvest could be stored in good condition to last for longer or reach the market in good quality. A number of sub-Saharan African countries lag behind in this effort.

One idea that's been around for decades revolves around strengthening rural economies through supporting agriculture and improving infrastructure to help link farmers to markets. Had efficient roads and storage infrastructure existed in many African countries, the windfall of expected large grains harvest would find a market place, and income from sales would improve household incomes.

From a policy perspective, I would argue that as various governments begin to craft and some implement the economic recovery strategies from the Covid-19 slump, the improvement in rural infrastructure should be prioritised. Such an approach would have long term economic and food security benefits.

Challenges ahead

Nevertheless, the sub-Saharan Africa region still faces major headwinds.

If the pandemic is prolonged it's plausible that the fear of rising food insecurity could eventually be a reality, especially if the next summers are not as rainy as 2020-21.

In addition, the government-led input support to farmers for the 2021-22 planting season will be constrained by reduced fiscal space that most emerging-market governments face. And there's the lurking risk of increasing global bond yields which will make government bonds in developed countries offer more attractive returns for investors, resulting in money being sucked out of emerging and frontier markets.

Essentially, the rural areas of the sub-Saharan Africa region might experience an improvement in food availability in 2021 compared to 2020. However, this is temporary. It is at the mercy of weather conditions and government support going into 2022. Both are highly uncertain and largely not within each country's control.

Perhaps, sub-Saharan African governments might want to ensure continued farmer input support again in the 2021-22 summer crop planting period.

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