

## What African farmers and processors have to say

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) estimates that COVID-19 pandemic risks food insecurity and nutrition of 50 million people between June and August 2020. The pandemic adds to other threats including climate change and recurrent drought as well as Fall armyworm (FAW) and locust infestations in West Africa. Agathe Diama, Head of Regional Information at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in West and Central Africa, spoke to farmers and other agricultural stakeholders in Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal about the impact that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had and their concerns regarding the 2020-2021 cropping season.



**Salamatu Garba**, Executive Director, Women Farmers Advancement Network (WOFAN), Nigeria

“About 80 to 85 per cent of smallholder farmers whom we work with are at risk of losing all their dry season investments as a result of the lockdown due to COVID-19. More worryingly, there are almost no extension services, except for the skeletal visit-and-train system. Farmers and processors are left without field demonstrations. Farmers use old, traditional and obsolete farming methods that have further slowed down production. They’re disappointed that they cannot apply the second-phase urea fertilisers and appropriate pesticides, which are quite critical. Our fear is that the farmers will be able to feed neither their families nor the nation. The food security is dependent on their performance.

“Although the shutdown approach is a global strategy to break the deadly cycle of the disease, the impact on economies is devastating. In order to mitigate the shock of the pandemic and its related effects on smallholder farmers and processors, building capacities and providing financial and marketing support for the first six months of the closedown would be essential.

“E-extension becomes very important as an innovative way of working with extension workers and farmers. Farming needs to be led by information and communications technology (ICT), and should turn into a demand-driven vocation. After the pandemic is over, the impact on the nation and the need for Nigeria to diversify from an oil-dependent country to one with an agriculture-led and technology-driven agribusiness systems will require a re-shaping and re-thinking of our agricultural models.”



**Fanta Diamoutene**, President of women farmers group in Farakala, Mali

“Most farmers like me do not have these smartphones and other virtual platforms that those in the cities are using to connect, and we do not have the knowledge to hold such virtual meetings. Therefore, we are very concerned about missing the season’s activities. We hope that partners will help us get some protection kits in the near future, pending a solution to this pandemic.”



**Stella Thomas**, Managing Director, Techni Seeds Limited, Nigeria

“At Techni Seeds we perceive COVID-19 as a setback for agricultural business. The pandemic is already affecting business because costs of haulage and inputs have doubled, with no availability of labour. So, we are trying to create an online presence for sales and increase machines to reduce human labour. It takes almost two weeks to move goods from Kano to Ibadan due to interstate issues and bad vehicles. It is a trying time for everyone, but it will pass. Let's keep safe and keep looking out for new ways in seed agribusiness.”



**Ibrahima Diouf**, President of the Groupe d'Interet Economique (GIE) Jambar, Meouane, Senegal

“In Meouane, we are well aware that this is a global phenomenon and we are trying our best to keep ourselves safe with preventive measures such as lockdown and social distancing. We also perform prayers to ask for divine grace. Due to the geographic location of our village (about 150 km from Dakar) and the scattered distribution of the houses in the village, we strongly believe we will keep safe from the pandemic.

“The GIE usually receives pre-basic seeds of millet and peanuts from ISRA, the Senegalese agricultural research institution. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Senegal in early March, we have not yet received the seeds. Also, the seeds we produced last year still need to be certified, packaged and distributed to farmers. All the processes have been stopped due to the pandemic, while the rainy season is about to start. Although the number of people tested positive has unprecedentedly increased – 100 people per day, on average, since the 1st of May – the government of Senegal has recently decided to unlock containment, allowing the seasonal workers to travel to rural areas. We are worried that this decision may favour the propagation of COVID-19 in rural areas.”



Photo: Agathe Diama / ICRISAT

**Nasser Aichatou Salifou,**  
General Manager, Ainoma  
Seed Farm, Niger

“From the start, we initiated awareness campaigns on preventive measures because we noticed that our producers were not informed enough about the pandemic. Currently, their concern is whether

they can go to the field when the rains come. In my opinion, awareness campaigns should be increased through community radios and posters / flyers to better inform farmers. There is still a lot of prejudice because producers are not informed enough about the disease, while those who have access to social media have wrong information or fake news.

“As for the pandemic, we are feeling the effects on marketing of our produce, and this could have an impact on our turnover. We have put some kits at our administration office and at our production site. However, our financial means do not allow us to reach producers or distributors with the kits. Although, right now, the marketing of food products is not too impacted by the pandemic, our worry is that the isolation of the city of Niamey prevents us from setting up inputs shops at our points of sales.

“Also, the training sessions that we generally offer our producers, agro dealers and technicians are being affected in particular because of the social distancing restrictions. We must continue to collaborate in order to adapt our solutions for meetings and training with farmers while respecting preventive measures. And, finally, we need our donors’ support to help raise more awareness about the pandemic.”



Photo: Agathe Diama / ICRISAT

**Coulibaly Maimouna Sidibe,**  
CEO of Faso Kaba Seed  
Company, Mali

“COVID-19 has slowed down our activities and reduced our revenues enormously this year. With no flights, we have missed many orders of inputs, including seeds, sprayers, pesticides, etc. that we import from overseas, and

due to restrictions in transport, it’s difficult to go into the field to buy inputs.

“We’ve had to cancel our annual meetings with farmers as they do not have the means to hold virtual meetings and make online purchases. The process of certification and provision of seeds to be distributed to producers of certified seeds will be delayed this year. This will lead to a lack of availability of seed for the production of certified seeds by individual farmers, associations and cooperatives.

“While normally our seed shops are equipped at this time of the year, we are still in the process of collecting samples. We ask our donors to please facilitate access to basic inputs even at subsidised prices. We need support for paying salaries to our staff. We will also need more preventive kits for the farmers’ field demonstrations and trainings this year. Virtual meetings have become essential, and our farmers need to be there.”



Photo: Agathe Diama / ICRISAT

**Yalaly Traore,** member of ULPC  
(Local Union of Cereal Producers),  
Dioila, Mali

“Farmers do not have the same perceptions about the pandemic. While some believe it does exist, others think it is a government policy to make money. However, they all agree on one thing: this pandemic is affecting us, because all activities – planning, meetings, training – have slowed down.

“There has been an increase in the prices of agricultural inputs – fertilisers and herbicides – and a shortage of certain products on the market. Due to the closing of the borders, members of our cooperatives have not been able to sell their stocks, while these cooperatives have taken out loans to build up their stocks.”



Photo: Agathe Diama / ICRISAT

**Abdul Razak,**  
Director General, Heritage  
Seeds Company, Ghana

“We cannot go to market to sell our seeds and it is difficult to reach our farmers. Also, because of social distancing, we cannot engage many workers for weeding and/or applying fertilisers, etc. If this continues, we may have to decrease our acreage in production.

“Planning for the future is very difficult because we don’t know what will happen the next moment. We had clients coming from Accra city in the previous years but not this time, because of the lockdown in Accra. Everything else can wait, but production cannot. We need enough seed in the system. Even if there is only one man on Earth, he will still have to eat. Seed is food security. We need to maintain that.”



Photo: Agathe Diama / ICRISAT

**Bougouna Sogoba,** Director  
General, Malian Awakening  
Association for Sustainable  
Development (AMEDD), Mali

“This pandemic is a major health and economic crisis that can have a negative impact on the rural economy,

create a lack in manpower for cropping season activities and also cause difficulty in getting services to inputs by the private sector and extension services. The donor countries of most NGOs and foundations are being strongly impacted, and this could have repercussions on financing.

“For our NGO, the main challenge has been to carry out our activities while putting in place preventive measures against contamination. We hope that, in Mali, the cropping season and the production will not be much affected. However, this pandemic is also an opportunity to explore new ideas such as the use of digital solutions. We must use this crisis as an opportunity to refresh our approaches and technologies.”