

COVID-19 worsens food access amid macroeconomic crisis and already high assistance needs

The spread of COVID-19 in Sudan, and efforts to contain the outbreak, have limited trade, economic activity, and population movements since March 2020. More than 4 million people in Sudan already faced Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity due to an ongoing macroeconomic crisis and persistent civil insecurity, and the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak are driving humanitarian assistance needs even higher. Improvements in macroeconomic conditions, effective COVID-19 response, and urgent humanitarian assistance are needed to reduce the large number of people likely facing deteriorating livelihoods, food consumption gaps, and an increased risk of acute malnutrition.

Sudan has recorded more than 11,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases between March 14 and July 31, 2020, with approximately 70 percent of all confirmed cases reported in Khartoum and 10 percent in Gezira. Data suggest the daily number of new cases has declined in recent weeks from peaks reported in May and June (Figure 1). However, in July, Sudan’s positive test rate for COVID-19 remained notably higher than the WHO-recommended five percent, suggesting the number of actual cases may be significantly higher than officially reported figures.

Since March, the government has attempted to control COVID-19’s spread through curfews, closures of airports and border points, and restrictions on population movements within Sudan. During this time, most economic activities continued amid weak public compliance with containment measures. In addition, in recent weeks, public spaces such as religious centers and businesses have started to reopen. Still, restrictions on public transportation within cities and between states remain in place, and restrictions on movement and trade in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are limiting key exports from Sudan.

COVID-19 is having direct and indirect impacts on household food security in Sudan. A small share of households face direct impacts, including extreme losses in income and productive capacity within the household, as well as higher medical costs, resulting from household members becoming ill and/or dying from COVID-19. On a larger scale, containment measures are having powerful indirect impacts, such as limiting many poor households’ physical access to areas where they typically earn income from labor. For example, the closure of gold mining sites and limitations on transport between cities have reduced income from migratory labor and remittances. Until recently, the curfew and partial closure of bridges in Khartoum have also limited people from reaching parts of the city where construction labor and petty trade are common. Moreover, the cancelation of the Hajj and closure of borders is reportedly also leading to sharp declines in income from livestock and fish exports to Saudi Arabia.

For these reasons, poor households that depend on labor in Khartoum and other urban areas, such as Port Sudan, are likely to be among those whose food security is most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. In the longer term, restrictions on cross-border movements of migrant agricultural laborers from Ethiopia and South Sudan raise concerns that limited labor supply

Figure 1. Stringency of COVID-19 containment measures in Sudan (green)¹ and seven-day average of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Sudan (blue)²



¹ The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) includes a “stringency index” based on 17 indicators of government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures and travel restrictions. For more information, see [here](#).

² Delays in reporting daily numbers of new cases may lead to a depiction of greater variation in the average than really exists.

Source: University of Oxford, World Health Organization data

could significantly constrain crop production in the semi-mechanized rainfed sector in eastern Sudan, which could contribute to further increases in staple food prices and impacts on food security more broadly. Overall, agricultural production is expected to be near to slightly below average, as somewhat reduced labor supply alongside flooding, desert locusts, and difficulties accessing inputs limit producers' ability to take advantage of very high cereal and cash crop prices.

More than 4 million people in Sudan are expected to receive humanitarian assistance over the coming months, largely in the form of monthly in-kind assistance for long-term internally displaced people and households affected by seasonal shocks and the macroeconomic crisis. Planning is also underway to provide one-time assistance to more than 2.2 million people affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. However, given the scale of needs due to the macroeconomic crisis and increases in food insecurity due to COVID-19, needs are likely to significantly outstrip currently anticipated assistance programming.

More than 7 million people in Sudan are facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity, more than 50 percent above levels estimated in recent years. Even prior to COVID-19, humanitarian assistance needs were high due to the macroeconomic crisis that continues to drive staple food prices five to six times the five-year average, while increases in labor wages and livestock prices fail to keep pace. Moreover, displacement due to persistent civil insecurity continues to limit income-earning opportunities in areas of western and southern Sudan. Alongside COVID-19 impacts, the number of people requiring assistance is likely to peak between June and September, as food access reaches its lowest levels during the lean season. Even as food access begins to improve with harvests in agricultural areas starting in October, assistance needs will likely remain much higher than normal through early 2021. Improvements in macroeconomic conditions, effective COVID-19 containment, and urgent humanitarian assistance are needed to reduce the large number of people facing deteriorating livelihoods, food consumption gaps, and an increased risk of acute malnutrition.