



Sierra Leone: Smallholder farmers and the global food crisis

The war between Russia and Ukraine has led to unprecedented price shocks in food, energy, and fertilizer globally due to the centrality of both countries in the functionality of these markets. Like in most countries in the world, Sierra Leone is severely affected by these shocks. WFP’s Hunger Map for Sierra Leone shows that 2.2 million people are chronically hungry, and 1.6 million people are acutely hungry as of July 15, 2022. Energy prices – petrol and diesel – have more than doubled in 2022. Prices of food and non-food commodities have also increased exponentially.

Poor smallholder farmers—who already struggled to produce enough food—are facing severe impacts because **they can no longer afford inputs and related services**. Food security, especially among the rural population who depend largely on farming as a primary source of livelihood, is therefore of grave concern.

To understand the current impact of the global food crisis on smallholder farmers and their (farmers) resilience in the local context, CARE engaged participants of its Solar Harnessed Entrepreneurs project in two communities in the north of the country. The aim is to obtain first-hand information on affordability of inputs, impact of these shocks especially on women farmers and farmers’ coping mechanisms in the wake of the current global crisis.

Input prices skyrocket and farmers are planting less

Farmers are planting crops this year (2022) despite the current challenges. However, **the area under cultivation (farm sizes) decreased significantly** compared to previous years due to the double, and in some cases, triple increases in the prices of inputs like seeds and fertilizer coupled with the proportional increase in labor cost. In the face of the increases in cost of production and agro-services, project participants reduced farm sizes this year with an anticipated decrease



Some farmers in Sierra Leone are only planting **HALF** their land they can’t afford the seeds and fertilizer to plant it all.

in production levels. For instance, some participants say they have **reduced their farm sizes by half, and for some, by 25% this year compared to previous year.** This will exacerbate the already precarious food security landscape in the country.

Farmers are not the only people struggling. Day laborers are buying 30% less rice. Agro-processors who depend on fossil fuel continue to face challenges in their operations due to increased fuel prices. They are forced to increase prices for their services, which consequently led to a declining demand of their services from smallholder farmers. For instance, **the price of petrol was Le10,000 (\$0.9) before the war in Ukraine, but has increased to Le22,000 (\$2) since the war started.** This will reduce the percent of harvest that can get processed and stored—and **risks wasting a higher percent of crops this year.**

\$45 → \$100

“Some of us who use fertilizer cannot afford the quantity we need this year due to the almost triple increase in the price of fertilizer. For instance, the cost of a bag of fertilizer last year was Le 450,000 (\$45); this year it stands at Le 1,100,000 (\$100)”.

– Project participants, Robuya Community.

Women farmers cannot afford to plant or to travel to markets



\$1.80 → \$5

“Last year a basket of groundnut seeds was Le 18,000 (\$1.8) whilst this year, we bought it at Le 50,000 (\$5)”

– Project participants, Robuya Community.

The increase in prices of food, energy and agricultural inputs (especially fertilizer) has had serious implications for farmers. The majority of the farmers interviewed indicated to have **challenges acquiring adequate food for their families due to the high cost of food items.** This is expected to worsen in the next few months as farm sizes had been reduced this farming season, hence, **low production levels of food crops are inevitable.**

The high cost of fuel is **negatively impacting women farmers, raising transportation costs to and from input and output markets.** This has a potential to **reduce their profit margins as they buy inputs** at very high prices compared to previous years. Some savings group members say they are **already reducing their savings** to meet other household maintenance cost especially those associated with food and some essential non-food items.

Farmers' coping mechanisms

In response to the increasing cost of living and the upsurge in prices of agricultural inputs, farmers have adopted various strategies to help them cope with these shocks. They are finding alternate income sources, such as charcoal burning, cutting and selling of sticks, sand mining and vegetable cultivation such as green leafy vegetables, okra, corn. This is to help generate incomes to meet short-term food and non-food items. Some occasionally borrow from their VSLA group savings to address emergencies and increase their working capital in their businesses. Those whom CARE has linked with microfinance institutions have increased their loans to boost their working capital and cover the increasing cost of business operations although **repayment of such increased loans is not guaranteed.**

To cope with the increasing cost of transportation and to save money, some project participants **have cut down on their travels to market centres to purchase goods.** Rather, they select representatives from within their communities to purchase goods on their behalf, while they contribute a minimal sum towards their transportation.

“The purchasing power of the average Sierra Leonean was significantly affected due to a stagnation in incomes due to higher fuel and staple food prices. The year-on-year purchase of a kilogram of local and imported rice by unskilled labourers reduced from 2.4 and 1.8 to 1.7 and 1.3 respectively” – WFP, Market Monitor Report, April-June,



With access to solar products and energy, the cost of fuel is cushioned in some households for their daily lighting and running of appliances such as freezers used in their enterprises. With the **SHE project, farmers dependence on fossil fuel will continue to lessen** as more have access to electronic agro-processing machines that use mini-grid power and not fossil fuels. Although in the early stage of implementation, calculating the cost benefit analysis may only be anticipatory.

“I used to travel to Makeni City at least once a week to buy goods for my business when the fare was only around Le60,000 (\$6) round trip.

Now I travel once a month since the fare was increased to Le120,000 (\$12). I now ask my friend to buy goods on my behalf so that we can share the cost of transportation if I need to buy goods weekly”

- Project participant, Marampa.

Conclusion

Farmers in the project areas are hit hard by the global food crisis. The **continued increase in the prices of fuel in the global market is correspondingly affecting the cost of goods and services** in the SHE project area and by extension the country in entirety.

The implications are concerning for household food security in the short and long terms if this trend continues till the end of the year. **Crop production and yield per unit area will decline, businesses will dwindle and farmers ability to cope with these shocks will be severely affected.** The SHE project will however strive to cushion the effects by strengthening linkages of farmers (largely women) to financial services and make them less dependent on fossil fuel for their business operations.

Authors: This brief was written by Lamin Kamara of CARE Sierra Leone in July 2022.