

## Crop Production in Ghana and COVID-19 Lockdown

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Without knocking, a novel virus entered the lives of Ghanaians – and others the world over – at the beginning of 2020. This happened just as farmers were getting ready to celebrate the end of a long and unusual hot *harmattan* season and begin their crop production planning. The Ghana Government was proactive in leveraging available scientific knowledge to develop and implement policies that have so far, knock on wood, prevented Ghana from experiencing the virus' devastating human tragedy seen elsewhere. The centerpiece of the policy was shelter-in-place or lockdown, implements in the country's two largest metropolitan cities, Accra and Kumasi.

Farmers and others in the food supply chain were excluded from the mandatory lockdown. Yet, perceived infection risks caused many agri-food supply chain actors to curtail their activities voluntarily. Unfortunately, when market women from Accra or Kumasi do not go to Techiman or Mankesim to purchase food products, farmers lose revenue. The livelihoods of the drivers, porters and all who contribute to getting food to consumers in the cities are also impacted. Those market women, as small business operators, also lose profit opportunities by staying at home.

Scientists rightly tell us that until there is a COVID-19 vaccine, it is prudent to reduce infections by enforcing social distancing. An alternative to social distancing is testing, and isolating those who test positive. Unfortunately, the level of testing required to produce the required level of safety is too expensive, grossly impractical, and utterly ineffective in a middle-income country, like Ghana. Testing negative today does not mean you will not test positive tomorrow or the day after.

Given this reality, it is imperative for people to assume they are susceptible to infection, and everyone they encounter outside their immediate household is infected. This assumption eliminates the need for government enforcement of social distancing. Social distancing become a commonsense self-preservation strategy.

The question arising in Ghanaian farmers is how they are going to undertake their crop production this year with social distancing prompted by COVID. Given that farmers are excluded from the mandatory lockdown policy, they can go about their business without any government sanction.<sup>1</sup> The challenge facing safety-conscious farmers is

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<sup>1</sup> The Ghana Government lifted the lockdown on Monday, April 19, 2020 in the two cities that were affected.



protecting those who come to help with land preparation and planting safe even as they keep themselves safe. These workers clear the land with cutlasses (or machetes). Sowing is often done by two people, one with a pole sharpened at one end making the incision in the soil, while the other puts the seed in the hole and covers it.

The recommended COVID safe distance of six feet (two meters) should be on farmers' mind if they are planning on using hired labor this planting season. Given the circumstances, it is prudent that they start the season with an assessment of the number of workers they would need given the land area they want to plant this year. They should then plan how they organize these workers to ensure social distancing.

When clearing the land, farmers may want to place workers at least six feet from each other, and instruct them to move in a single direction, maintaining the six feet minimum at all times. We suggest moving from right to left, since many people are right-handed. If there is a left-handed person in the group, it is important to ensure no one is on his right as he weeds from right to left. On large plots, it may be effective to organize the workers into small groups of two or three and assign them a portion of the plot to work in ways that maintain their six feet separation. Once they get to a point where they have less area to clear than can accommodate more than one person with six feet separation, all workers but one leave, so the last worker finishes the remaining area. The same approach may be used when seeding. Using the six feet separation rule, the person making holes starts ahead of the person seeding, and they maintain at least six feet from each other.

It is customary for Ghanaian farmers to provide at least a meal and water for their workers. Traditionally, they eat together and share drinks. However, the times are different now. To reduce infection risk, workers must each have their own water bottle, and sharing cups and other containers has become a no-no. The farmer should provide a hand washing station, with soap and water and paper napkins for workers to wash and dry their hands. Yes, it will be nice to use cloth towels, and contribute to saving the planet, but it is less practical under the circumstances. Finally, the joy of eating together from the same pot must be suspended until this COVID thing disappears, or we find an effective solution to it. Therefore, meals should be served and placed such that there is no contact between the server and the recipient. People may eat "together" – the new "together" is sitting at least six feet from each other.

We recommend using this approach throughout the season, from weeding and fertilizing, through to harvesting. All indications are that a vaccine will be available, but the experts say it should be expected for mass distribution and vaccination until somewhere in 2022. That means this virus is going to be with us for a little longer, and the best way to deal with it, in the absence of a vaccine, is social distancing.

The suggestions made above impose some costs on farmers they have not had to incur in the past. However, these costs are minimal compare to people getting sick after coming to work for you, or worse, getting sick during the time they are working for you. It this puts the business at risk, and that cannot be overlooked.



What can the government do? To minimize the risk of farmers getting infected, the government may organize for seeds and other inputs to be brought close to farmers, saving them the trip to cities where inputs are often sold, and where the risk of infection is also high. The government may also encourage extension workers to get on local radio stations to walk farmers through effective social distancing practices to support crop production this year. Depending on how the disease unfolds across the country, it may make sense for the government to start planning purchasing not only grains, but root crops, fruits, and vegetables to minimize the potential impact of the disease on farmers.

Whether COVID permanently changes consumer behavior and preferences and/or food production practices will depend on how extensive and drastic its effects are. So far, Ghana has not experienced anywhere near the catastrophe that the virus has unleashed in Europe and North America. Yet, on April 18 and 19, 755 new cases were confirmed in Ghana, even as the number of new cases were on the decline in Europe, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data. Regardless, one thing remains true: everyone, including Ghanaian farmers, should follow the safety guidelines from the WHO and other public health professionals. Hopefully, this would keep the infections at bay, and allow Ghanaian farmers to continue feeding the nation and securing the wellbeing of its rural communities.

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