

COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa: Impacts on land, governance, and livelihoods

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods, land access and governance in rural and peri-urban selected areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. Crises are usually expected to be worse for citizens in developing countries since most of their economic activities are in the informal sector, and access to the social protection programs is often limited and exclusionary. Those vulnerable and marginalized are often those who are hit the hardest and who struggle the most to recover after crises. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Extended lockdowns have put livelihoods under stress, underlying patterns of fragile livelihoods and inequality. There are also particular vulnerabilities with regards to land access and livelihoods of vulnerable populations. Our case studies document how the pandemic has affected livelihoods through several mechanisms relating to land access, including distress sales due to economic hardships and exacerbating land conflicts due to increased pressure on land and increasing trends of urban-to-rural migration. We reflect on how households act and react when faced with shocks and how this affects not only their current access to livelihood assets but might undermine their options for the future. In addition, a range of other effects were identified in our case studies that we expect to negatively impact livelihood recovery.

1. Introduction

Although COVID-19 has been primarily treated as a health crisis, the impacts of the pandemic extend way beyond health concerns. Not just the virus itself, but the strict containment measures adopted in many countries, including lasting lockdowns of public institutions, mobility restrictions, the closing of markets and of public places, and the closing of national borders had far-reaching consequences that we are still to fully uncover. What is evident already is that impacts have been “felt unevenly, exposing differences of vulnerability across geographies and

social groups” (Leach et al., 2021). Even if the COVID hype is over, it is important to trace the effects over a longer time, on issues such as the deepening of impoverishment, social differentiation, and inequality. In this paper, our main focus is on land access and potential land loss. Our concern was that such effects might be irreversible and continue to affect livelihoods long after the pandemic is over. Building on fieldwork in a number of cases across Sub-Saharan Africa, we explore what the COVID-19 crisis did to land access of especially the more vulnerable population, and what are the processes at play.

Crises are usually expected to be worse for people in developing

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countries since most of their economic activities are in the informal sector, and access to formal social protection programs is often limited and exclusionary. The poorest segments of the population are often left to their own devices to deal with the various challenges brought by crises. Thus, the vulnerable and marginalized are often those who are hit the hardest and who struggle the most to recover after crises (Frerks et al., 2011, 108). The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Extended lockdowns put already fragile livelihoods under stress and undermined existing coping mechanisms. Crises not only reveal structural vulnerabilities but can deepen these.

Early on in the pandemic there was anecdotal evidence about the way the lockdowns acutely put livelihoods under stress, but also about return migration (urban to rural), and restrictions on civil society advocacy, which raised the alarms about potential asset loss and dispossession through for example distress sales or evictions (Wieckardt, 2022). For sub-Saharan Africa, disruption of land governance services was reported, and expected to have negative impacts by stalling judicial processes, limiting the monitoring of land sales, and disrupting dispute resolution mechanisms. Another worry was that some actors might take advantage of the situation by acquiring land at low prices, deepening patterns of growing inequality and land concentration (Wieckardt, 2022).

The literature to date still presents considerable gaps on these issues, suggesting the need for further exploration. Regarding Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), most attention has been devoted to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in urban areas and settlements (Mboua et al., 2021; Chirisa et al., 2022; Tawodzera, 2012) and on the economic effects (Ataguba, 2020) with very few studies on the impacts on land tenure systems, land access, and land governance. Some emerging literature has been looking at the impacts of COVID-19 on local food and farming systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nchanji and Lutomia, 2021; Paganini et al., 2020; Tripathi et al., 2020; Béné, 2020), yet the scholarship on the impacts of the pandemic on land access and governance and livelihoods in SSA remains scarce and discusses mostly aggregate effects. There is a need to collect empirical evidence to investigate whether these concerns have materialized or not (Wieckardt, 2022). Furthermore, a better understanding of the mechanisms through which crises such as COVID-19 impact land access and governance would tell us more about ongoing patterns of (re-)production of poverty, socio-economic differentiation, and inequality in land access.

This paper documents the impacts of COVID-19 on land access and governance in rural and peri-urban areas of SSA. The research project has been exploratory and inductive in nature and has been organized as a collaborative effort since its inception, with a research consortium consisting of five senior scholars specialised in the field of land governance, and five local research teams of land governance professionals in five SSA countries (Uganda, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia, and Mozambique). Data was collected between January and April 2022, at a time when limitations of movement were still considerable. Our focus has been on land access, governance, and poverty guided by three objectives: 1- documenting how rural and peri-urban land access patterns have shifted with the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on access and rights to land of most vulnerable groups (including land transfers or distress sales); 2- exploring patterns of mobility that might mean shifting pressures on land and impact on land access; 3- understanding the role of formal and informal land governance institutions in protecting land rights of vulnerable groups, or failing to do so.

Our analysis is grounded in insights from disaster studies about (the structural causes of) vulnerability, the differential effects of crises, and crises as “critical junctures” which may deepen (entrench) or transform socio-economic and political trends. We combine these with an understanding of welfare regimes, to interrogate issues of land access, governance, and poverty. As Wisner et al. notes (2012, 4), “humans are not equally able to access the resources; nor are they equally exposed to the hazards”. Households have various capacities, resources, and assets

to “resist, cope and recover” from crises (Wisner et al., 2012, 11). Those capacities are shaped by pre-existing vulnerabilities. More specifically, our interest was in understanding differentiated vulnerabilities in relation to land tenure security and land access, and how COVID-19 has affected the abilities of rural and peri-urban dwellers to rely on land as a safety net.

At the root of observed vulnerabilities are structural factors, including exclusionary socio-political systems and institutions, socio-economic and gender-inequalities, and environmental degradation (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Scholarship on SSA has suggested that land access in settings of customary land tenure (comprising most rural land in SSA) is losing its function as a social safety net for the most vulnerable and is increasingly subject to “unequal social relationships” and “ongoing processes of exclusion, deepening of social divisions and class formation” (Peters, 2004: 304; 269). Land remains an important source of political patronage (Boone, 2014). The slow and incremental neoliberalisation of customary tenure has been transforming relations of production and land governance in SSA, leading, amongst others, to the emergence of new authorities over land matters (e.g., political elites); an extension of state powers in rural areas; the fragmentation of small farms; and the gentrification of customary lands (Chimhowu, 2019). It is against this background of deeper socio-economic transformations that are underway in SSA agrarian societies that we must seek to understand how COVID-19 impacted rural populations. The pandemic may be studied as a “critical juncture” at different scales: entrenching inequalities and power relations at societal level, and, at the level of individuals or households, redefining their life trajectories.

To understand the local impacts of crisis, the role played by socio-political systems to mitigate such impacts is also crucial, both in terms of social support (i.e., social safety net programs) and in terms of institutional safeguards (i.e. strength of the rule of law, ability to protect the rights of the most vulnerable). During COVID-19, one notable distinction between Western and SSA contexts was the role played by the state in supporting the population to face the economic hardship induced by containment measures. Containment measures and responses to the crisis have been strikingly similar across the globe: yet, while Western states have launched impressive socio-economic aid measures to support the population affected, SSA states have struggled to replicate similar social packages.

To assess how the lack of state support affected rural populations in the context of this global sanitary crisis, Gough's (2004) comparison of meta welfare regimes is helpful. All our five countries may be classified somehow within what Gough terms the informal security regime which contrasts in several respects with the welfare state regime. Regarding the institutional landscape, while Gough found a mix of market, state and family in the welfare state regime, the informal security presents a broader institutional matrix with powerful external influences (NGOs, donors, businesses, etc.). Welfare outcomes are thus mixed in the insecurity model because they are modified by informal rights and adverse incorporation (in welfare policies). In contrast, the welfare outcomes of the welfare regime are usually more consistent, due to a relatively more stable health and human investment along varying degrees of de-commodification (Gough, 2004, 30–33). This also means that populations in informal security regimes have historically had a bigger incentive to develop alternative coping strategies to compensate for uneven and reduced state support (e.g., relying on social capital for instance).

Although Gough's distinction between welfare regimes is rigid and does not capture the diversity of arrangements and combinations that exist on the ground, his theoretical discussion is relevant because, as we discuss below, COVID-19 affected social relations and resilience by disrupting socio-familial networks of non-state provision of social welfare. COVID-19 was thus especially insidious for population living in more informal security regimes by disrupting alternative coping strategies. COVID-19 impacted resilience capacities of the most vulnerable households and helps explaining why they were forced, in some cases, to

resort to extreme means to survive the COVID-19 crisis. Crises can also be transformative of power relations (Frerks et al., 2011, 113–15). In addition, access to social support and aid packages is often politicized in informal security regimes: issues with good governance, corruption, and the lack of functioning institutions means that emergency aid and welfare support are more likely to be captured by various elites and state actors (or tributary of political relations with state actors). Although actions of the state can mitigate impacts on the most vulnerable, state power may also be used by state actors for personal profit. Our analysis was attentive to such dynamics of “disaster politics” and who is able to benefit from the COVID-19 crisis, politically (Pelling and Dill, 2010) or economically (Klein, 2007).

1.1. Organization of the paper

After this introduction, the next section introduces the case studies and methodology. Sections 3–7 present the findings thematically: Livelihoods at risk: COVID-19, economic hardship, and food insecurity; Disrupted urban-to-rural support networks, “return migration”, and shifting pressures on land; The intensification of land conflict; Distress sales and “disaster capitalism”; Resilience, social protection, and adverse coping. The last section presents a discussion on those findings with concluding remarks.

2. Research approach and methodology

This study relies on qualitative data collection. Fieldwork took place between January and April 2022 in five different Sub-Saharan African countries: Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Namibia and Mozambique. It relies on a multiple case-study approach. Case studies allows in-depth investigations of phenomena in a real-life context (Yin, 2009), and is particularly suited to differentiating experiences at the micro-level, tracing transformative processes and their impacts, and discovering unexpected impacts. Our selection of countries was not a structured comparison and served an exploratory, not an explanatory approach. We aimed to capture a diversity of situations across SSA. Selection of cases was also guided by considerations of research capacity and access. We worked with trusted researchers who could access regions with which they were already familiar despite limitations due to COVID. Each of our cases targets localities that were highly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and where land tenure was under pressure due to a variety of factors (demographic change, urbanisation, land-based investment). The settings allow for exploring specific kind of relations and impacts (see Table 1).

We used qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis, involving both key informant interviews (KIIs), semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) as well as document/literature reviews. Through a “systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings” (Teherani et al., 2015, p. 669), qualitative methods allow exploring a phenomenon and its outcomes as experienced by the study participants. Themes identified in advance of fieldwork included the following: 1- how respondents experienced the COVID-19 outbreak; 2- how they were affected by the pandemic, in particular their access and use of land, their livelihood and social networks; 3-how they responded/coped with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures. Our research design was flexible to allow for picking up on emerging topics of interest during the fieldwork. Each research team did their own selection of interviewees and developed their own interview guides, appropriate to the situation. In every country, data collection was designed to gather the views of the different social groups (i.e., men, women, youth, agricultural labourers, landless peasants, COVID-19 response teams, local leadership) to be as much as representative as possible and to allow triangulation of the findings. Due to the diversity of settings and the exploratory nature of the research, we did not follow a standardised protocol. Every case study relied on either qualitative interviews or FGDs or both, with a combination of other

Table 1 Case-studies.

Country	Focus / specificities	Researchers and report title	Location	Methods
Uganda	Peri-urban sector	Junior Alves Sebbanja and Judith Atukunda Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on access to land by local people in peri-urban areas in Uganda: A case of Kikori and Namusera villages, Wakiso district	1- Kikokiro village, Wakiso town 2- Namusera village, Nansana Ward	6 FGDs (38 participants) 4 KIIs
Kenya	Rural sector, high pressure on land, in the vicinity of farmland investments	James Wangu and Fridah Githuku Unpacking land and socio-economic effects of Covid-19 pandemic in rural Kenya	1- Kilifi, Coastal region 2- Murang'a, Kenyan highlands	12 FGDs (92 participants) Two KIIs
Namibia	Rural sector, impacts of informal urban trading	Romie Vonkie Nghtevelekwa COVID-19, rural livelihoods and land governance in Namibia	1- Omuthiya, Oshikoto 2- Outapi, Omusati Region	56 semi-structured interviews
DRC	Rural sector, informal cross-border trade, agricultural migrants	Emery Mudinga, Lionel Bisimwa, Christian Cubak COVID-19 and access to land in the cross-border region of Kamanyola in South Kivu (DRC)	Kamanyola, South Kivu province	4 FGDs (20 participants) 23 semi-structured interviews
Mozambique	Rural sector, internally displaced migrants, in the vicinity of a large-scale mining project	James Wangu, Júlio Bichehe and Emilinah Namaganda The impact of Covid-19 on land access and use, and rural livelihoods in Rural Mozambique	1- Balama, Cabo Delgado province 2- Montepuez, Cabo Delgado province	6 FGDs (36 participants)

sources, including document analysis, country reports, press releases, official documentation, etc. (see details in Table 1).

Each research team prepared a report based on the data collected, in which they highlighted the main issues relating to land and livelihood impacts of COVID-19. The current paper builds on these reports² (see also Table 1), organising the findings thematically. We have put emphasis mostly on issues related to the themes of land and livelihood impacts. However, as reflected in the case study reports, the interviews also dwelled on people’s experiences with the pandemic more generally, showing a considerable need for interviewees to share what they had

² These reports are scheduled to be published on LANDac website (<https://landgovernance.org/publications-archive/>). The Kenya report has already been published: Wangu, James, and Fridah Githuku. 2022. Unpacking the Land and Socio-Economic Effects of the COVID–19 Pandemic in Rural Kenya. *Social Sciences* 11: 452. [https:// doi.org/10.3390/socsci11100452](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11100452)

been through. We also noted that our research teams were quite struck by these accounts and covered them in the case study reports. For the present journal and its readership, we have chosen not to go into this too deeply, whilst still purveying the overall sense of unprecedented impact.

3. Livelihoods at risk: COVID-19, economic hardship, and food insecurity

In all our case studies, COVID-19 itself coupled with containment measures induced economic hardships. As in many parts of the world, there was the closure of non-essential businesses and high price volatility translating into higher costs of living. Immediate effects documented in our cases were the loss of employment and a reduction of the buying power of the poor, directly impacting access to food and other basic needs. In Uganda, for instance our researchers found that according to the Uganda's Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), 76 % of surveyed businesses (presumably including those in land investments) had reduced the size of the workforce due to COVID-19 by May 2020. In our case studies in Mozambique, there was a massive loss of employment due to the ceasing or the drastic reduction of activities at the mining plants. Many workers were laid off without previous notice or had their working hours significantly reduced. Although some of them were reemployed by another company that had subcontracted their services from their previous employer, workers had then to accept lower salaries and worse working conditions.

In all countries studied local markets were shut down during the lockdowns. Most of the local markets are part of the informal sector and were not considered essential services. In our case studies in Kenya, Namibia, Mozambique and DRC, it was reported that rural dwellers were struggling to sell their products. Many producers also experienced losses because their agricultural, and especially horticultural products, went to waste. In Namibia, our respondents indicated that they witnessed a decline in the demand of products they sell. Migrants en route to far urban areas such as Windhoek (the Capital City of Namibia) were key customers at the open markets in the towns of Omuthiya and Outapi. With limited movements, these transactions were curtailed.

As subsistence production is increasingly commodified in most rural areas, albeit informally, we found that market closure negatively affected people's revenues, thereby confirming the findings of other studies (for DRC, [Mbzibain and Mohsen Mohamed, 2021](#); for Nigeria, [Esiobu, 2020](#); for South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, [Paganini et al., 2020](#)). Market closure led to a reduction of circulation of money in rural localities in all five countries. This effect on revenues was particularly pervasive for informal workers, and most notably for informal traders and women because they are the main players in the commercialisation of products derived from subsistence production. This conclusion that women's capacity to make a living has been particularly affected is in line with previous research findings ([De Paz et al., 2020](#); [Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020](#)).

With regards to the impacts of the pandemic on food security, findings are mixed. Our study confirms [Nchanji and Lutomia's \(2021\)](#) observation that such impacts are contingent on the specificities of the lockdown measures, but also shows that they depend on rural dwellers' main source of food provision. When households have land to produce food crop, closure of markets seems to increase the quality and the diversity of home consumption (reported in Kenya): as food cannot be sold, it is consumed. However, households relying on the market for their food supply, food security diminished because products were unavailable or unaccessible (reported in Namibia, mostly in urban areas). This is in line with observations from [Paganini et al. \(2020, 21\)](#) who affirm that "food systems relying on localized agroecological production may be less impacted by the pandemic than food systems relying on external inputs and distant markets".

COVID-19 also affected agricultural production, in several ways. First, it created (temporarily) labour shortages because containment

measures limited the mobility of migrant workers.³ This is in line with [Markandya et al. \(2021\)](#)'s assumption that COVID-19 might impact supply chains: restricting the migration of farm workers reduces farming production. For our DRC case, this labour effect was particularly salient because the local agricultural production depends on cross-border agricultural labour. Not only were Rwandans and Burundians labour migrants unable to access their workplace in the DRC while borders were closed, but mandatory COVID-19 testing continued limiting their mobility even after the lockdowns. As reported by our informants, PCR tests cost about \$US 5 in the DRC and Rwanda and are valid for fourteen days, which is a substantial cost for laborers who earn only about US\$1,5 a day.

Importantly, the timing of restrictions in relation to farm activities matters ([Tripathi et al., 2020](#)). As [Tom \(2021\)](#) also remarks, if shortage of farm labour occurs during peak periods of agricultural activities (planting, harvesting), impacts are likely to be worse. According to our results in DRC, the limited availability of labour during peak seasons when demand was highest led to doubling the man/day cost, from \$US1, 5/day before the pandemic to \$US3/day during and after. The reduced availability and rising costs of agricultural labour led to a decrease in farming activities, diminishing agricultural production to the point that -in both Kenya and DRC-, it was reported that parcels of land were even left fallow. Those findings align with the conclusions of the FAO that also report that COVID-19 has severely diminished agricultural activities ([FAO, 2020](#)).

Furthermore, for some of the migrant farm workers, who were tenants on DRC agricultural land, the crisis also limited their ability to earn a living in the future because due to their absence they were not able to renew their land rent contracts. Rental land rights are not evidenced by any written document in Kamanyola, DRC, making those migrants' farming land rights very precarious especially in times of crises. Our research shows that migrant farmers with collective rental agreements were better off than the ones having individual rental agreements. Forms of collective tenancy between migrants and locals were found where they shared expenses and production. This practice has been beneficial for migrants during the border closure period because locals in DRC continued working in the fields and sent their Rwandan partners their share of the harvest. The collective fields were also the most spared from crop theft because the Congolese peasants ensured the surveillance for the benefit of the group.

Concomitantly, the pandemic created a shortage of supply of and a rise in the price of inputs (see also [Ebata et al., 2020](#); [Markandya et al., 2021](#); [Esiobu, 2020](#)), thereby pushing up production costs. Reduced agricultural production is therefore also linked to dropping rural revenues: due to the crisis, many farmers have been struggling to raise enough cash to farm all their land. In Kenya, for instance, informants indicated that they have been barely able to till their entire landholding, citing a lack of financial capacity to invest in the land. The pandemic reduced production capacity because households were forced to use their savings and capital to meet basic needs, cutting short on inputs and investments. Exceptionally, however, some farmers benefited from the situation. For example, one farmer in CASE indicated that because of low harvests or lack thereof in other communities, he was able to obtain large margins from selling his maize production. These findings are similar to the observations made by [Tripathi et al. \(2020\)](#) in their review of the impacts of COVID-19 on farmland systems in Tanzania and South Africa.

4. Disrupted urban-to-rural support networks, "return migration", and shifting pressures on land

The pandemic disrupted family support networks. COVID-19 has

³ A migrant worker here is defined as a worker who migrated temporarily to an area in order to work an area of land that they rent.

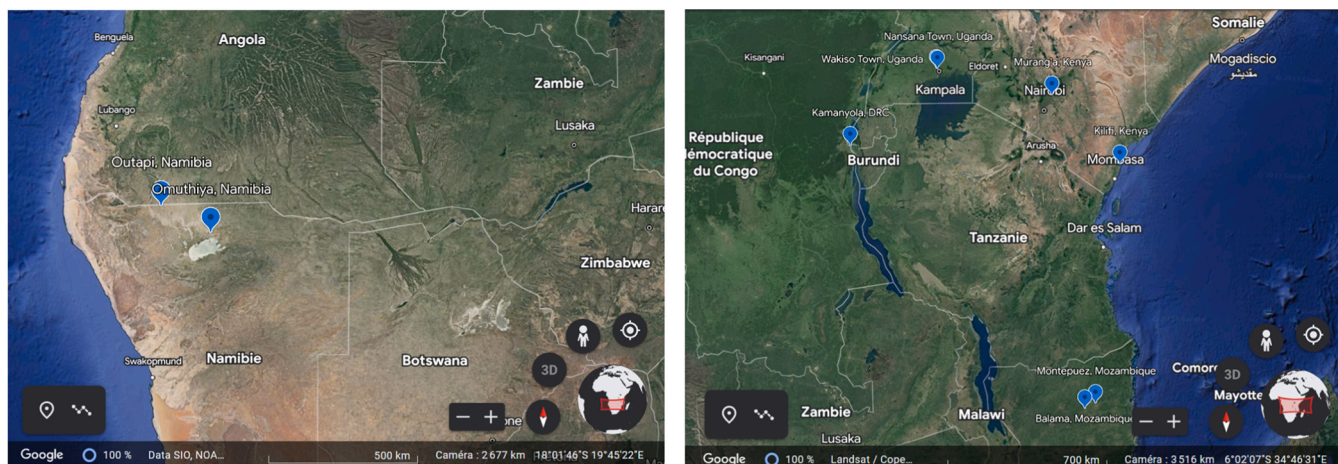


Fig. 1. Mapping case-studies (source Google Earth).

taken its death tolls everywhere and in Namibia, for example, many respondents indicated that losing in-kind remittances from family members who died from COVID-19 was increasing their economic distress. Moreover, worldwide economic hardships most likely also reduced international remittances although the issue deserves further research. As regards national remittances, our findings indicate that the pandemic has changed support dynamics: where before city dwellers had generally been the ones providing for their rural familial network, now, rural dwellers were expected to support family members located in cities, financially, or in-kind. Urban relatives tended to be harder hit by losing their sources of income in the informal sector and by rising food prices.

An important effect of the pandemic has been an increase of urban-to-rural migration. Striking images of a hasty move out of the city came from India, for example, but it remains unclear how big, and how, persistent such trends of “return migration” have been. While COVID-19 induced internal migration from cities to rural areas has been documented for Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Spain, and Australia (see González-Leonardo et al., 2022: 332), this is still lacking for COVID-19 induced spatial mobility patterns in sub-Saharan Africa and our paper is one of the first to do so (Wieckardt, 2022). In contrast with the cases in the global North, which cite reasons related to increased social distance with neighbors, quality of life, access to gardens and yards, and the fact that closure of retail stores and activities in cities reduce their attractiveness (González-Leonardo et al., 2022), our data shows that this “return to the rural” in SSA has been caused mostly by a need to ensure economic survival. Our case studies in Kenya, Uganda, Namibia and Mozambique, confirmed that urban dwellers, predominantly the casual and informal workers who lost their jobs in the cities, chose to move back to rural areas. In Namibia, it was reported that residents of urban areas, particularly those in precarious jobs and the youths, flocked back to rural areas when the lockdown was announced, aiming at crossing COVID-19 zone borders before regulations limiting movement would come into effect.

Although urban-to-rural return migration points to the resilience that such translocal family networks afford, and have been an interesting coping strategy for urban dwellers to face the immediate hardships of the crisis, this strategy may come at a cost for rural communities. Earlier, we hypothesized that return migration might lead to shifting pressures on land and that the influx of urban relatives with advantages in terms of knowledge and acquisition power, might “squeeze out the poorest segments of the population and shift people’s bargaining power both within local land markets and within households” (Wieckardt et al., 2020). Some of our findings point in that direction, though tentatively. In Mozambique, massive flows of COVID-19 induced urban-to-rural migration put heightened pressure on land in the

two districts we studied. It is worth noting here that land access was already under high pressure due to the presence of large-scale mining concessions, and by the welcoming of many internally displaced persons since the beginning of the conflict in the northeast of Cabo Delgado province. In Murang’a county, Kenya, it was reported that relatives returning from urban regions in a context of already existing competition over limited land sizes led to new land conflicts. Moreover, this migration trend might not be only temporary. For instance, our data indicates that Kenyan urban dwellers tended to stay after containment restrictions were lifted.

5. The intensification of land conflict

We have found some evidence that local land conflicts have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This is not specific to Africa, as Petrescu-Mag et al. (2021) document how the COVID-19 pandemic has been a driver for xenophobia in land transactions in Romania, which even led to some violent incidents. In Kenya, our research found that due to economic hardship, some farmers of Kilifi County rented their land to Somali pastoralists due to COVID-19 situation. However, the absence of physical boundaries to demarcate land led pastoralist to trespass into farming land that was not part of the renting agreement, sometimes destroying crops. Such incidences were reported to fuel conflicts and violence in the community. In Dida, Kenya, for example, respondents indicated that a Somali pastoralist was hurt with a machete for grazing on farmers’ land without permission.

Furthermore, because of the closing of land offices and of local law courts during the lockdowns, most of those land conflicts went unresolved. Again in Kilifi, it was reported that all arrests had stopped because the jails were full. Some respondents even argued that the situation created an incentive for individuals to engage in illegal activities because they knew there would be no consequence. Lastly, rural local communities have witnessed an increase in crop theft and in land encroachment. In the DRC, for example, it was suggested that some households, in particular military families, those of displaced persons, and those of landless peasants, started stealing crops from other people’s fields because they were unable to find financial means to feed themselves (see also Tripathi et al., 2020). In Mozambique, local conflicts have started to emerge due to the increased pressure caused by the various crises the locals are facing and due to limited land and water resources available in both districts.

Local grievances in Mozambique were further fueled by the fact that most of the support of government and international agencies in relation to the COVID-19 crisis was directed only to the internally displaced people, something that many of our respondents resented. In the words of one of our informants: “when these programs support the displaced

communities and the host communities do not receive this help, they get into fights, and the host communities that once used to share their resources such as land for agriculture among other resources mark their territory as a way to defend themselves” (FGD participant, Wangu, Bicheche and Namaganda 2022).

6. Distress sales and “disaster capitalism”

One of our key interests in this study was to know whether the pandemic led to so-called “distress sales” and whether this would feed into growing inequalities in land access. In Uganda and Kenya, an increase in distress land sales was witnessed. Distress land sales here refer to when households are selling off their land—which is also their means of subsistence—to afford basic needs such as food, rent, water, and electricity. Most of the people who resorted to distress land sales were low-income earners, who lost their jobs during the pandemic and did not have any other asset than their land to survive the crisis. In addition, both in Kenya and Uganda, rural land prices have plummeted due to the pandemic. Many people then sold their land below its market value due to the emergency of their situation. In our Ugandan case study, for example, such distress land sales represented about 95 % of all land transactions during the pandemic. In both case studies, the buyers have mostly been wealthier and were already large landowners, land brokers, city tycoons and government officials, or rural residents whose sources of income were not so much affected by the pandemic. They sought to take advantage of the situation by speculating on rural land. This indicates that crises may be accelerating rural differentiation processes by reinforcing existing inequalities as some can turn the situation to their advantage.

Moreover, lockdowns led to the temporary closure of land offices, which reduced the checks and balances on land transactions and exposed the most vulnerable households to more significant risks by removing existing institutional protection systems, albeit only temporarily. In Uganda, formal transactions that required titling of land were halted following the presidential directive and nobody was expected to sell or buy land during that period when there were partial or full lockdowns. Although land markets were officially closed, people circumvented the directive and found alternative ways to sell their land, mostly through phone calls. Our findings show that there were many transactions of small pieces of land that did not require titling but would rather be concluded by written or oral agreements among interested groups, families, and individuals. This lack of official monitoring of land sales during the crisis implied potential risks for both land buyers and sellers. For example, it was reported that some buyers were fooled and bought “pieces of air”. However, monitoring is foremost crucial in protecting the most vulnerable. In Uganda, the most common pattern witnessed was vulnerable households selling their land at a meager price. In Kenya, it was also reported that a salt company colluded with land officials to get title deeds for free for community-owned land during the lockdown. Since the land offices where community members could complain were closed, the company and those officials could have easily got away with it. Luckily, in this case, a local land rights organization working on land issues informed and mobilized the community against this illegal land acquisition which led the community to challenge the company. Kenya’s comparison of the two counties shows however that the monitoring role played by local authorities may vary. For instance, in Murang’a, those seeking to sell their land had first to get approval from the local chief provided they have right justification, which limited the distress land sales as compared to the Kilifi case.

7. Resilience, social protection, and adverse coping

As everywhere in the world, the effects of the pandemic were mixed: while most rural and peri-urban households have been struggling, some have found innovative solutions to cope, and others had to revert to extreme means to survive. In the five countries, many respondents coped

by developing alternative livelihood strategies, for instance accepting temporary jobs on constructing sites, moving business into homes, starting new businesses, e.g., production of face masks, starting new service businesses such as cooking, laundry, etc. It is worth noting though that some of those alternative options were conducted in violation of lockdown measures and as such, were undertaken at great personal risk (i.e., of being fined or detained). In the DRC, some Burundians chose to illegally cross the border to access their fields, for which they had to bribe the security services. In Uganda, the police raided some houses that were used for illegally conducting economic activities during the lockdown.

We found that some households coped with the crisis by using technology to circumvent containment measures. For example, in Namibia, some farmers started to use WhatsApp to market their products and E-wallet to make money transactions. Traditional authorities have used radio to communicate and to convey online meetings for urgent matters. This echoes Tripathi et al.’s (2020, 12) conclusion that “digital solutions will play an increasingly important role in transforming agricultural ecosystems and value chains and strengthening food supply systems”. Yet, our findings also indicate that the most vulnerable people were forced to go through extreme measures to cope with the pandemic, undermining future livelihood opportunities.

Where livelihoods come under pressure, social protection programmes can provide a safety net for those in need. In all our cases, there are some examples of state and non-state relief that was provided to the rural and peri-urban communities. The government in Uganda, for instance, provided food aid (posho and beans) to vulnerable people in Kampala City slums as well as the outskirts of the city. Special foods like milk and sugar were given to most vulnerable people such as pregnant women and elderly. Additionally, through the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), a COVID-19 relief package given to vetted local citizens across Uganda of approximately UGX 100,000 (US\$ 26,77) per household.

However, as explained before, welfare support is more limited and unevenly distributed in an insecurity welfare regime and it means that while it is true that some benefited from social protection measures, many were also left out. For instance, in Namibia, the state guarantees all residents over the age of 60 years old a monthly unconditional grant of N\$ 1300 (US\$ 86). Our findings show that this pension grant became a safety net during the pandemic, particularly in rural areas. Yet, there are still many households that did not receive any state help. For those who rely mostly on remittances and intra-family financial transfers from urban areas (both of which drastically diminished during the pandemic), COVID-19 limited their alternatives to cope. As one research participant states: “I lost neighbors who used to help me. I have lost extended family members who I used to turn to when I had needs. They have all died from COVID-19. COVID-19 is a heavy blow to me.” (FGD participant, Nghitevelekwa 2022). Although remittance flows seem to have bounced back in most SSA countries (World Bank, 2021), more research is needed to understand the impact of the temporary interruption of these flows where these were critical to rural safety nets.

In Kenya, social support in rural communities of the two counties studied, derived from a mix of sources, including donations from local government, private sector actors, and philanthropic communities. There were variations between counties, and between communities. For Kilifi county, for example, in one community, the elderly were provided with food items (such maize and beans) and direct weekly cash transfers of Ksh. 2000 (US\$ 17) for almost the entire period. In another county, a private cement company based locally, Mombasa cement, provided food donations in addition to the government monetary donations during the strict containment period (of about six months). However, in Murang’a county, respondents indicated there was a little help, weekly cash donations of Ksh. 1000 (US\$ 8,55) lasted only for three weeks and promises of monthly food donations did not materialize. In comparison to Kilifi County, social support was limited in Murang’a county. In most communities, government cash transfers were lower (Ksh. 1000/ US\$

8,55) and lasted for either less than a month or only up to three months. The government also distributed food, but many respondents claimed that it had gone bad before its distribution.

In both counties, a common complaint voiced by FGDs participants was that aid was unfairly distributed, and did not reach the most in need, alluding to the corrupt behaviour of the people charged with the distribution of aid relief. In one community, for instance, respondents reported that the names of individuals listed to receive the relief was ignored in the final distributing. Our case studies do not include direct mentions of patronage politics, yet our analysis aligns with other studies that have documented the importance of political relations in coping, and how they are reflective of already existing rural differentiation dynamics (Simula et al., 2021; Tom, 2021).

8. Concluding remarks

This study both confirmed and nuanced many of the initial worries on the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, poverty, and land access in SSA. Our findings show that the pandemic led to economic hardship and the undermining of livelihood strategies, induced urban-to-rural migration, exacerbated local land conflicts, and led to distress land sales, but these impacts have been differentiated not only between case studies but also within localities. The impacts of the COVID 19 crisis on land access reveal pre-existing vulnerabilities and trends of socio-economic differentiation and commodification of rural livelihoods.

In line with our initial concerns, we found some evidence that land conflicts have intensified, but this seemed mostly the case in areas where land access was already under acute pressure due to other factors and where access to social support and/or emergency aid was politicized and uneven. Distress land sales – an ultimate measure to cope with the crisis – were more likely to occur in contexts where legal protection and state support were limited. Social protection does make a difference. In Namibia, a universal welfare measure such as the old age pension grant, albeit limited and uneven in terms of access and coverage, played a crucial safety net role during the pandemic for many rural households. Although COVID-19 induced economic hardship especially on informal traders and farmers, few participants in Namibia reported having to resort to extreme means such as selling their land to survive.

As our Kenyan examples demonstrate, local institutions may protect the poor from resorting to extreme means, but then this is very much dependent on local authorities' ethics and agency. In most cases, the closing of land offices and of other key institutions led to a governance gap that created an incentive to some individuals seeking to benefit from the crisis and its effects on land prices. It is also worth noting that government actors were also disproportionately represented in the people seeking to benefit from the crisis. We found instance of "disaster capitalism" around land where government officials and elites have sought to take advantage of the crisis by using their public position and political powers to benefit privately at the expense of the poor.

One key problem highlighted by our study is that this limited emergency social support was uneven and did not necessarily reach the most vulnerable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps, if aid has been channeled more efficiently to the most vulnerable households, distress land sales would have not occurred in such a significant proportion in Kenya and Uganda. In one case, in Mozambique, uneven distribution of aid fueled resentment towards internally displaced people, with a potential for triggering new (land) conflicts.

We also drew attention to how this pandemic disrupted social relations and support mechanisms: in addition to adding pressure on land resources and potentially creating new land conflictual dynamics, this new trend of urban-to-rural migration is likely to have restructuring impacts of rural social and familial relations, but it is too early to assess its consequences on the longer term. Nonetheless, it shows how rural urban relations are interwoven and how the rural/agricultural sector remains the safety net of urban dwellers.

The ability to innovate using technology helped many households to

cope during the crisis. Yet, although technology is increasingly accessible in rural areas of SSA, access and use are contingent as well on levels of education and households' pre-crisis resources. Many of our respondents indicated that remittances are a coping mechanism they rely on when faced with shocks and stressors, highlighting how national and international remittances are potentially important economic resources for rural households. Further research is needed to better understand the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the interruption and in some cases re-direction of national and international remittance flows.

It is evident that SSA rural communities will continue to experience many of the adverse socio-economic consequences of the pandemic in the medium and long run. For instance, the surge in teen pregnancies, the harvest losses, the arrival of urban fellows, the sale of land, and the emergence of new land conflicts are likely to be issues that may outlast the health crisis. However, for the rural households who resorted to extreme means to survive the pandemic, the effect on their future well-being is much more immediate and dramatic. Indeed, those who sold their land resources will be in the future particularly more exposed to economic shocks and stress because they no longer have such critical fallback livelihood resources. The pandemic has led to a lasting reduction of their resilience capacities to future crises. This is even more important in view that immediately after COVID-19, the war in Ukraine started with its global effect on price of essential supplies such as oil, wheat, and fuel. This raises the question of how long SSA vulnerable households will be able to cope faced with this wave of successive crises, given that their resilience capacities are further and further undermined.

Lastly, our data raises the question of the adequacy of lockdown measures undertaken in SSA countries. Given the low hospitalization and mortality rate, the relatively lower rate of the virus spreading, and the limited social protection programs, it is legitimate to ask whether containment measures should have been more tailored to the realities of rural households in SSA. Perhaps, the measures to contain COVID-19 have even been more damageable to the population than COVID-19 itself. This should be kept in mind for future SSA policy responses to global crises and shocks.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Joanny Bélair: Methodology, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Gemma van der Harr:** Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Chantal Wieckardt:** Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **James Wangu:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Fridah Githuku:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Judith Atukunda:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Junior Alves Sebbanja:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Emery Mudinga:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Romie Nghitevelekw:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Emilina Namaganda:** Investigation, Formal analysis.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. LANDac played a role in the initial design of the study.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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