Impact of the Covid-19 crisis on pastoral communities

Greater vulnerability amid multiple crises
Background

RBM’s system for monitoring the impact of Covid-19 on pastoral communities

1. Public measures to combat coronavirus have severely disrupted livestock mobility

2. Despite previous tensions, conditions have improved for livestock feed and water

3. Livestock markets remained open, but travel restrictions hindered activity

4. Little attention was paid to the pastoral sector in the support plans adopted by public authorities

5. Despite effective awareness campaigns, a downturn in compliance with Covid safety measures has been observed in livestock-farming communities

6. Insecurity is still the main obstacle to transhumance

7. Interruption of herd mobility has had a number of consequences and created multiple risks

Recommendations
The RBM monitoring system

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached the Sahel and West Africa, those areas were already facing a number of recurring crises, such as: intensification of adverse weather conditions, escalation of conflicts linked to access to natural resources, social and political instability, and the spread of terrorism.

The challenges created by those crises were aggravated by the sudden escalation of risks brought on by the onset of coronavirus, which spread across all sixteen West African countries in just one month.

Most countries in the region introduced strategies to try to contain the pandemic. Although justified by the health situation, public measures imposing partial or total lock-downs, travel restrictions and market closures have had a major socioeconomic impact on livestock farming and living conditions in pastoral and agropastoral communities.

The pandemic has also created greater health risks for livestock-farming families, given the lack of infrastructure for drinking water, precarious living conditions at displacement camps, and the absence of health services in pastoral areas.

Now, more than one year after coronavirus first appeared in West Africa, it is essential to understand and measure how the crisis has affected pastoral communities.

This illustrated report presents seven key ideas to help shed light on how the Covid-19 crisis has affected pastoral communities.

While the report does point out that measures in response to Covid-19 have affected the living conditions of livestock farmers (who have had to adapt their resilience strategies), it is not always easy to identify which impacts are due to the coronavirus pandemic and which are due to other factors (insecurity, climate change, other decisions by public authorities, etc.). According to information gathered from livestock farmers, insecurity is still the main obstacle to pastoral mobility.

This report is based on data and analyses collected by RBM between May 2020 and February 2021 through its system for monitoring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pastoral and agropastoral households (see next page).
The system for monitoring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pastoral and agropastoral households was created by RBM and ACF, with support from other partners (OIM, Care, GIZ). It builds on existing mechanisms, such as information monitoring, conflict alerts and prevention, and the mapping of transhumance movements. The system also has 351 relays, who use the public analysis platform to report information every week.

The dashboard is accessible via the following address:  

https://cutt.ly/NROuzzY

The monitoring system provides information on:

- The state of fodder resources, availability of livestock feed and any tensions at water points
- The movement of livestock, herd concentration levels, and areas where farmers and livestock are stranded
- The operation of livestock markets, sales and changes in animal and grain prices
- Livestock weight
- External support for the pastoral sector
- Level of compliance with Covid safety measures in livestock-farmer communities, and the impact of awareness

The system covers an area comprising pastoral sub-regions in nine West African countries where organisations belonging to RBM operate (see map below).

Map 1 - Area covered by the RBM system for monitoring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pastoral and agropastoral households

Source: RBM, 2020
Public measures to combat coronavirus have severely disrupted livestock mobility

To stop the spread of Covid-19, policy decision-makers in various West African countries adopted public measures imposing lock-downs, travel restrictions, market closures, etc. One of the main consequences of those measures was that they reduced livestock movement.

The impact varied by country, depending on how strictly the measures were enforced. Countries fell into one of three groups:

- Coastal countries, where measures were enforced strictly (Togo) or relatively strictly (Ivory Coast);
- Sahel countries, where measures were enforced less strictly (e.g. Niger and Burkina Faso);
- Countries where measures were not mandatory (e.g. Mauritania).

The map below shows reduced livestock movement by country and areas where transhumant herders were stranded in November and December 2020.

Many transhumant herders found themselves stranded in border regions, unable to continue on to their final destination or turn back. This put significant pressure on local pastoral resources. In February 2021, 12,378 farmers and 441,650 animals were stranded in border regions as a result of Covid-19.
Localised short-term shortages of feed inputs were observed starting in May 2020. Covid-19 and travel restrictions affected the production of livestock feed and its transport to markets. Good winter rainfall, however, helped avoid the most pessimistic scenarios throughout the region, with a few exceptions (Togo, Ivory Coast, Niger and Chad).

In general, livestock weights have been deemed acceptable. In some countries, reduced livestock mobility caused the animals’ general condition to deteriorate. The situation is particularly worrying in Nigeria, where the condition of livestock was reported as “critical” by 50% of relays and “mediocre” by the other 50% in January/February 2021.

Tensions were observed at water points for pastoral use starting in May 2020, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Those tensions gradually eased between July and December 2020, with the arrival of the rainy season. Almost all livestock farmers have access to water points in the area where they live. But those water points do not supply enough water for all the livestock in the locality.

Abundant rainfall during the rainy season in 2020 led to strong regeneration of pastures and made available large quantities of surface-water resources. But frequent brush fires observed in several areas from the start of the dry season are threatening the availability of livestock-feed resources in the lead-up to the next pastoral lean season.
Livestock markets remained open virtually without interruption. In most of the coastal countries, markets that had to close under the health measures reopened in July 2020. But travel restrictions weighed on market activity (fewer buyers and sellers). The drop in animal sales greatly affected livestock farmers, particularly when livestock-farming families needed cash to buy necessary goods (food, livestock feed, veterinary inputs, etc.). Many other ancillary business activities carried out at livestock markets (sale of livestock feed and ropes, food services) were also interrupted. Stakeholders in the livestock trade have developed strategies and tactics in order to adapt.

The increase in animal sales in the lead-up to major holidays and relatively high prices for goats throughout the year played a key role in the resilience of livestock-farming families. For livestock farmers, selling goats is the first line of defence against drifting into precarity. The market price of sheep, on the other hand, was lower than for goats in several countries (Chad, Niger, Senegal, Ivory Coast) outside the main religious holiday periods. Thanks to a drop in cereal prices, livestock farmers in several Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger) enjoyed favourable terms of trade for livestock/cereals.

Testimonials

“The Matéri market is not closed, but it has not been very buoyant during the past year because of the closed borders. [...] Work can only be done by fraud.”

(Statements by an individual in charge of the management committee of the Matéri market in Benin)

“Our livestock market was not closed, despite the problems posed by the health crisis. But there was a sharp drop in the number of buyers and sellers, and an increase in livestock prices. [...] In these circumstances, people have been coming up with creative strategies such as transporting animals to market on foot, walking through the brush in order to avoid checks at border crossing points. Other traders are going directly to livestock farmers in their villages and camps in order to buy animals without having to go to the livestock market. The market managers have negotiated with the authorities and law enforcement, promising to make sure everyone at the market complies with the Covid safety measures.”

(Statements by livestock sellers and traders at the Agbassa market in Togo)
In most countries, the public authorities set up national solidarity funds to support economic sectors affected by the health crisis. At regional level, however, the pastoral sector received very little attention in those support plans. The support provided to the pastoral sector declined further at regional level in January/February 2021 (18% of relays vs. 25% between June and December 2020).

Many livestock-farming families in Niger, Benin and Mauritania received support through projects carried out by RBM and its members.

There have been several major achievements in terms of support for the pastoral sector:
- warning systems that have provided useful real-time information on the situation of pastoral households;
- the provision of support through projects and programmes, taking into account the food needs of families and their animals.
Despite effective awareness campaigns, a downturn in compliance with Covid safety measures has been observed in livestock-farming communities.

Campaigns to raise awareness and share information with livestock-farming families about the Covid-19 pandemic were highly effective in nearly all countries, particularly at the start of the health crisis.

But in August 2020, it was noted that compliance with Covid safety measures was starting to wane (organisation of private gatherings for family and social occasions). The number of relays reporting large gatherings of people has been higher in coastal countries than in Sahel countries.

At regional level, the abnormal surge in patients increased between September and December 2020. That period overlaps with the cold dry season in the Sahel countries, which generally sees an increase in abnormal inflows of patients with chronic diseases.
The health crisis has further complicated the fight against terrorism, as countries must now mobilise greater support in a number of areas (military, political, institutional, economic and social) while simultaneously dealing with the pandemic. Instead of declining, security-related incidents have shown renewed vigour during the health crisis, which has created fertile ground for terrorism and a rise in new types of conflict. Livestock raids were reported, particularly in western Niger (Tillabéry region) and northern Mali (Gao region).

Data shows that in January/February 2021, 1.5 million animals and 57,000 herders were stranded in the Central Transhumance Corridor for various reasons. Insecurity is still the main obstacle to transhumance.

Reasons why transhumant herders were stranded

43% Reasons linked to Insecurity (dangerous routes)
30% Reasons linked to Covid-19 (restrictions limiting livestock mobility)
26% Other reasons foreign transhumant herders not allowed into the country; lack of pasture on planned routes

Map 3 - Transhumant herders stranded in the Central Transhumance Corridor
Source: Consortium OIM-RBM, 2021
Interruption of herd mobility has had a number of consequences and created multiple risks (see figure below).

Of the stranded herders, 31% plan to stay where they are and 69% plan to leave.

The main negative consequences of interruptions to herd mobility:

**Impact on transhumant**
1. Overexploitation of available natural resources
2. Widespread damage caused by animals in unharvested fields
3. Exacerbation of conflicts between crop and livestock farmers

**Impact on livestock-farming families**
1. Exposure to disease and high mortality in herds
2. Food insecurity
3. Loss of income

**Impact on host communities**
1. Depletion of natural resources
2. Aggravation of conflicts between users of rural areas
After analysing the data from its system for monitoring the impact of Covid-19 on pastoral communities, RBM made several key recommendations:

### Step up Covid-19 measures in livestock-farming communities

Set up a system to monitor the Covid-19 pandemic in pastoral areas, focusing on the incidence rate of infections in home grazing territories and backup areas of transhumant herders;

Promote innovative initiatives to step up awareness campaigns using rural radio and mobile phones, and provide kits for individual and group protection against coronavirus.

### Support the management of transhumant-herder movements

Support governments in the Sahel so that they can have suitable and effective decision-making tools, particularly for counting animals on the move and determining their location, in order to improve the management of cross-border flows of transhumant livestock between the Sahel and coastal countries.

### Encourage greater consideration of the pastoral sector

Monitor the application of policy measures for supporting or regulating the pastoral sector in order to assess their level of implementation and gauge their socioeconomic impact on the communities they target.
Secure access to pastoral zones

Make sure livestock farmers have secure access to pastoral zones and transhumance corridors.

Encourage greater consideration of gender and social inclusion

Produce data broken down by sex in analyses focusing on the socioeconomic profile of pastoral households and their level of food security.

Combat brush fires

Incorporate parameters relating to brush fires and flooding into RBM’s information-monitoring system;

• Organise awareness campaigns in rural communities on the environmental and socioeconomic impact of brush fires in areas prone to recurring fires;

Help livestock farmers’ organisations and fire brigades team up to ensure that anyone who intentionally starts a fire is brought to justice;

Help livestock farmers’ organisations develop advocacy initiatives to push for the integration of a module on combating brush fires into the training curriculum for magistrates;

Encourage technical and financial partners to support initiatives promoted by local authorities for the creation of firebreaks;

Give local authorities permission to mow and commercially exploit brush straw, making sure to establish a system for collecting a fee to help fund the group of activities identified.
This illustrated report was produced by Inter-réseaux Développement Rural and is based on RBM’s analytical note on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the livelihoods of pastoral communities.

Réseau Billital Maroobé (RBM) is a regional network of livestock farmers and pastoralists in West and Central Africa. It seeks to defend its members’ economic, political, social and cultural interests. Its mission is to secure the pastoral economy by helping people band together and make use of technical innovations, and to re-establish balance with respect to ecology and herd size.

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https://www.inter-reseaux.org/

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