Food Protectionism and Nationalism in the Age of COVID-19

By Darius Okolla

In June 2018, Kenya’s food and beverage import bill crossed the psychological 100 billion mark, underscoring the country’s overreliance on food imports for sustenance. This isn’t news to those in the agriculture sector who recently witnessed our diplomatic kerfuffle with Tanzania degenerate into a blockade that dented food imports and spiked the price of produce in the local market. Kenya imports onions and oranges from Tanzania; eggs, tomatoes, and pineapples from Uganda; poultry products from the United States; as well as fish and garlic from China.

This kind of skewed dependency on imports strains an already dysfunctional agricultural supply chain that has atrophied and shrunk over the decades, thanks to mismanagement, theft and a lax policy environment. The agriculture sector, despite its potential, has been the victim of legislative failures, beginning with the decimation of parastatals in the Ministry of Agriculture in the 1990s, and the consolidation of state functions in ways that were incongruent with the needs of the respective agriculture sub-sectors.

The litany of social and economic ills that result from this laxity stretches long – from local farmers to reduced earnings in state coffers, disadvantaged agro-processors, heightened pressure on the shilling and import shock risks.
Kenya’s agriculture sector employs more than 50 per cent of the labour force, accounts for 34.1 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and yet only contributes Sh23.3 billion to state coffers. The growing of crops and animal production combined account for 31.8 per cent of GDP, while support activities account for 0.5 per cent.

However, a weak regulatory environment, lax enforcement, brazen importers who gang up with state operatives to bring in cheap agro-imports, and depressed prices that have precipitated a significant decline in acreage under farming have negatively impacted the sector. The resulting drop in local supply, coupled with low yields and erratic rain models, have since produced critical shortages such as the ones that hit maize supplies in 2018.

Hence, while competing countries have been regulating their agro-industries, modernising their agro-supply chains, firming up the value chain, and managing the market to control prices, Kenya’s unofficial policy has been one of irascible cartelism, fueled by a few powerful industry players both on the regulatory and market side, who seek to cash in on their connections to state powers.

It also hasn’t also been helpful that in recent years, cash crop farming has monopolised acreage at the expense of other crops. Additionally, the top foods consumed in Kenya constitute milk, maize, wheat, vegetables, potatoes and bananas, which are easier to produce under mechanised farms controlled by a few oligopolies. The end result is loss of agency by the consumer and a patent inability to determine what ends up on a typical Kenyan dinner table.

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This marks the genesis of the cycle that has ensured that Kenyans are vulnerable to the certain kind of food protectionism and nationalism, such as the recent border shutdown by Uganda to truckers and Tanzanians due to a diplomatic tussle that saw food prices spike in the country. While Kenyans made fun of Mexican maize imports, Ugandan ginger, and tomato shortages, underneath that satire lay the profound vulnerability of Kenya’s 50 million tummies to the whims and impulses of random policy makers in countries hundreds of miles from our borders.

If the current food protectionism has taught us anything, it is that food has to become a national security issue and should be accorded the respective policy and structural and supply chain securitisation needed to forestall potential starvation.

The global picture

In March 2020, Vietnam and China stopped rice exports. Russia and Kazakhstan followed suit and briefly banned wheat exports. Around the world, two dozen nations took the cue and started hoarding their primary food exports in false anticipation of global shortages amidst the unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic. In total, seventeen major food supply nations placed some form of constraint on agricultural exports in the early weeks of the pandemic. Luckily, speculative behavior in agricultural commodity markets and imposing unnecessary trade restrictions, didn’t trigger food price spikes similar to those in 2007-8. The respective states almost immediately rescinded on the move amidst piling pressure and global economy concerns since the protectionism didn’t bode well for global supply chains and consumers around the world.
In recent years, we've increasingly gotten accustomed to the geography and ethnicity of food: that *tea is British*, coffee is Kenyan; tomatoes and onions are Tanzanian; ginger and bananas are Ugandan; strawberries are South African and Egyptian; fish and garlic are Chinese, poultry is from the United States; maize is from Mexico; and butter comes from South Africa. While this may portend well for global culinary multiculturalism, in times of pandemics such as this, the nationalistic fervour and export disruption exposes us to the vagaries of shortages on the shelves, potential hoarding, and hiked prices.

In recent years, the international food system has been built around the capacity of certain countries to specialise in the production of some foods to feed demand in other countries, while importing food items that could not be efficiently produced locally. This has produced a complex cog of farmers, transporters, financiers, and distributors spread across all corners of the globe. In this system, the world has become highly dependent on a globalised production chain in which dozens of countries straddle the middle of this chain, each adding a new component to the final agro-product. Take the US for example, whose imports account for half of the fresh fruits, a third of the vegetables, and 90 per cent of the seafood consumed in the country.

Food nationalism sometimes gets politicised around origins, such as whether falafel originated in the Mediterranean or in the Middle East, or whether rice from Vietnam is better than rice from Pakistan. In some jurisdictions, this has taken the form of policy protectionism, such as the European Union (EU)’s Protected Geographical Status framework that limits the production of certain potato, tequila, vinegar and cheese varieties to certain regions under specified conditions.

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Luckily it isn’t only the exoticism of certain foods that drive food nationalisms; even the working classes in recent years have expressed their concerns through political dissent driven by food: Sudan’s 2018 Bread Revolution, Kenya’s 2011 Unga Revolution, Egypt’s 2017 Wheat Revolution, the French Milk Farmers’ Revolution, among a host of other displeasures with the volatility of the national food basket.

**Food sub-nationalism**

Within gastro-nationalism there exists local nuance that drives certain protectionisms too. Nyandarua produces 35 per cent of our national potato output. Cashewnuts come from Kilifi. Mwea and Ahero produce rice. Flowers are grown in Naivasha. Vegetables come from the Kisii highlands. Maize is from Kitale. Freshwater fish is from Kisumu. Sisal is from Taveta. Milk comes from Githunguri. Tea comes from the Nandi region.

The March 26th shutdown of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale counties disrupted huge markets that are the purveyors and outlets for these agriproducts. Because of claims of corruption at police barriers along these counties’ borders, rural farmers effectively reduced their supply of farm products, sending the prices of food sky high in urban neighbourhoods.

Barriers erected to contain in-country COVID infection rates have, in turn, created logistical bottlenecks that reduce the supply of basic food commodities, creating an overcapacity in the
producing counties while precipitating shortages in urban agricultural markets, such as Kondele and Kibuye in Kisumu, Mwembe Tayari and Kongowea in Mombasa, Soko Mjinga in Kitale, Marikiti in Nairobi, Daraja Mbili in Kisii county, Kagio in Kirinyaga and similar large food markets spread across Kenyan urban centres.

This chokes a critical cog of an already disadvantaged food infrastructure, given that there is an annual demand for 4.5 million tonnes of maize, 2 million tonnes of wheat, 1.3 million tonnes of sugar and 0.7 million tonnes of rice, which is barely met by local production. This deficit is often filled by the import of 1.3 million tonnes of maize, 1.8 million tonnes of wheat and 625,000 tonnes of rice. The overall outlay of Kenya’s food system, therefore, is a combination of disempowered (mostly urban) eaters, powerful agro-cartels who chase higher margins through unregulated food imports, and traders who, as a result of overreliance on imports, have reoriented their supply chains.

Food capitalism

Ironically, hoarding and food nationalism hit amidst a global sufficiency and oversupply mainly driven by China’s and India’s massive investment in grain production, and investments in agriculture in Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Canada, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. Overall, less than 25 countries in the world are global net exporters though many in South America, Eastern Europe and South East Asia range between food sufficient and stable exporters.

The world’s poor are bearing the brunt of this, thanks to their poor storage capacities as well as the fact that they often merely make up the unskilled labour needed within the global food supply systems. Britain, a key importer and exporter, had to rely on the importation of labour as a deficit of 90,000 workers had left fruit farms unattended, thus heightening the possibility of farm losses. Britain was forced to seek nearly 10,000 workers from EU and non-EU countries, which remained closed during the height of the pandemic.

Cross-border supply chains and the free movement of consumer goods have increasingly been subjected to unfair trade subsidies, consumer protectionism, and border logistical bottlenecks that reduce the flow of consumer foodstuffs. Surprisingly the hoarding happens just when, unlike previous periods of rampant food inflation, global inventories of staple crops like corn, wheat, soybeans and rice are plentiful.

Food nationalism feeds a strain of food capitalism that sees approximately 1.5 billion tonnes of food wasted globally even as the COVID pandemic impacts food production and supply and guts distribution. Meanwhile, 2020 estimates are that due to the pandemic, a billion people face starvation globally and suffer from some form of hunger brought about by war, climate change, or simply a lack of means, especially in the Global South, while 300 million are at a crisis point.

It’s a testament to the global architecture of hunger that the majority of those in need are in the Global South, partly due to conflicts and climate disasters, but also predominantly due to economic instability that hampers both physical and economic access to food. Resource-rich nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia get stunted by unfair global practices, disastrous political systems propped up by and from the West, and predatory firms from both the East and the West who loot these countries through tax havens and illicit financial flows.

Hence, the food systems across the Global South are impoverished through laxity and political interference, while critical capital that could boost agri-production gets siphoned to the Global North. The resultant losses and deficit are what precipitate the vulnerability and susceptibility to shocks, such as that which has been wrought by the current pandemic.
Culinary identities

While food nationalism entrenches a protectionist model that compromises the legal and political rules of global trade espoused by many treaties and pacts, culinary nationalism simply raises the pride in a country’s culinary history. Large swaths of societies are having to rediscover their comparative advantages as the imports from farmers halfway around the world grind to a halt.

The coronavirus strain and its disruption of supply and value chains has simply fed into a hand-wringing method of protectionism quietly accepted and sometimes loudly proclaimed by belligerents like Donald Trump. This localisation inadvertently provides a perfect cover for those who have long embraced the idea of nationalism.

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Even so, the pandemic has also necessitated the closure of some plants, resulted in bankruptcy among some agro-producers, and slowed down processing plants in India, in parts of China, in the United States and Canada, across Brazil, and in Western Europe. On the upside, this has helped citizens to audit the resilience of their local food systems and their capacity to feed people over the long haul.

Grounding of flights and border restrictions have limited the flow of migrant workers to farms that rely on hired labour during the growing and harvest seasons. Meanwhile, wars have decimated grain research centres in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, while coercive legislation is being pushed in certain African countries even as there is criticism of the “NGO-isation” of agriculture in Africa and the push for legislated monopoly on seeds in countries like Kenya and India.

The global food infrastructure in the entire farm-to-plate conveyor belt and the related value chain industries and their support industries are staring at a significant disruption that will overhaul certain sectors, expand others, neuter many, and rejig the wider global reserves, primary producers and suppliers.

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