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The role of agrifood entrepreneurs during ongoing war in Sudan: A gender perspective

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Abstract

The conflict that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 has undermined the functioning of agrifood value chains, leading the country to a severe food crisis. These circumstances have resulted in the disruption of infrastructures, a dramatic increase in food prices, and in the scarcity of resources and led many farmers to lose their lands as a consequence of their displacement. Micro, small, and medium agrifood-enterprises (MSMEs) play a pivotal role in providing services to farmers facing both war- and climate-related challenges in Sudan. However, the ongoing war has forced most MSMEs to either reconfigure or suspend their operations. Our research explores the perspectives of entrepreneurs regarding the impact of conflict on their operations. Moreover, we shed light on the often-neglected role of women entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector – which existing scholarship reports being mostly dominated by men – and look at entrepreneurs’ coping strategies through a gender lens. We present the results of a qualitative study that builds on semi-structured interviews conducted with forty business-owners (women and men), who work as input sellers and as crop or food processors in the States of Kassala and Gedaref. Our results provide a longitudinal perspective on the experiences of women and men entrepreneurs, which combines insights on their personal backgrounds and business history with their views on the war’s impact on operations (client network, sourcing of material, service delivery, etc.) as well as on their personal ambitions. Drawing from the assumption that conflicts affect and, to some extent, challenge preexisting gender roles and responsibilities, our research also investigates how gender norms shape women’s and men’s capacities to start and maintain their business during times of crisis along with their sense of achievement. By building on entrepreneurs’ perspectives, we develop recommendations that will help support agrifood entrepreneurs in sustaining local value chains and that foster women’s participation and professional growth in the agrifood business sector.

Keywords: Agrifood value chains, conflict, gender norms, MSMEs, Sudan