

Original Research Article

COVID 19 and Resilience of Village Farmers in Tabou Department

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Abstract: This paper discusses the process of adaptation and farmer resilience to the effects of COVID-19. It illustrates the change in behaviour of farm managers faced with the structural crisis of value chains in the oil palm sector. The study in Tabou combined both quantitative and qualitative research. These two (2) approaches were implemented using techniques (documentary research, interview, observation) and data collection tools (interview guide, questionnaires, observation grid). The study shows that the health crisis linked to COVID-19 has led to disorganisation within the oil palm cooperative societies. These companies are losing members due to the slowdown in palm oil processing companies, the inability of the supervisory structures (PALMCI [1] and cooperatives) to absorb almost all village production, and the instability (downward) of the purchase price per kilogram of palm oil. Faced with the crisis, poor sales, rotting production and food insecurity, farmers created networks for the direct purchase of production and the artisanal processing of palm oil. Thus, in the face of the agrarian crisis, peasant societies are finding endogenous resources to meet their daily needs.

Keywords: COVID-19, resilience, peasant exploitation, health context, production.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is a major health crisis that has given rise to several initiatives at different levels (national, regional and global) in the world and in Africa, led by development actors (States, technical and financial partners, research institutions, farmers' organisations, etc.). These initiatives all aim to respond to the health and socio-economic emergency in the most effective and pragmatic way possible (Niang, 2020). In West Africa, in order to deal with the health crisis, some countries, such as Senegal, have initiated an economic and social resilience programme (Prés), with a response fund against the effects of the coronavirus, FORCE COVID-19, with a budget of one thousand (1000) billion CFA francs, financed by the state, voluntary donors and technical and financial partners (Niang, idem). It was on 11 March 2020 that Côte d'Ivoire recorded its first case of a patient infected with the coronavirus, and two weeks later, its first case of death linked to this disease. Faced with the situation, the state adopted a series of measures to curb the spread of the disease. The state intervention was supported by technical and financial partners (Ministry of Planning and Development *et al*, 2020).

As soon as the pandemic broke out in Côte d'Ivoire, the government set up a 95.5 billion CFA Francs health response plan. It also drew up an

Economic, Social and Humanitarian Support Plan valued at CFAF 1.7 trillion, of which CFAF 629 billion was dedicated to the emergency programme for the agricultural sector (FAO, 2020). This plan has enabled the first distributions of seeds and agricultural materials in rural areas. This action aims to maintain prices for producers in all agricultural sectors. The oil palm sector is not left out of this initiative (PALMCI, 2020). In the oil palm sector, the state has disbursed FCFA 500 million to boost activities. This has enabled the supply of inputs (seeds, fertilisers) to producers (PURGA, 2020). The state also committed to raising the price of palm kernels by adding 20 francs to the initial price granted by PALMCI for three months (June, July, August 2020) (PURGA, idem). This subsidy was held in the major oil palm producing regions, more specifically the Lower Sassandra region, and the sub-prefecture of Tabou is no exception to this reality.

In Tabou, the news about the evolution of the pandemic in the media has led to a psychosis among the rural population. This state of affairs was accentuated by the quarantine of the greater Abidjan area. The closure of the border with Liberia and that of the port of San Pedro. To this must be added the decline in collection activities by oil palm producers. In response to this situation, PALMCI has set up an awareness campaign on the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to

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this campaign, the PALMCI authorities in Tabou are reinstating the "PALMCI planter day" initiated in 2015 to encourage the best producers. They are also informing growers about the significant increase in the price of palm kernels. These initiatives were intended to support producers from the adverse effects of the pandemic and to build loyalty to PALMCI. Despite these initiatives, new distribution networks for village production are emerging. What are the explanatory factors for this change in behaviour? The work is organised into the following three sections. The first section deals with the conditions of data production and the theory used. The second section presents the results of the research. The last section discusses the results of the research.

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORIES USED

In the framework of this study, the survey was carried out in the department of Tabou in the Bas Sassandra region in the south-east of Côte d'Ivoire, 443 kilometres from Abidjan and 537 kilometres from Yamoussoukro. For the purposes of the study, field surveys were carried out in three (3) villages, namely Blidouba V1, Béoué and Niplou.

The choice of these localities stems from the fact that village oil palm plantations account for 90% of the crop area (PALMCI report, 2017). In the face of the sanitary context, a decline in village production and

non-compliance with technical monitoring is noted. The research has mobilised the mixed approach. It includes documentary data collection techniques, direct observation and semi-structured interviews. For the data collection instruments, we opted for the questionnaire and the interview guide. For the quantitative survey, we were able to enumerate 350 farmers according to our inclusion and exclusion criteria. We sampled 10% of this population, or 35 farmers.

With regard to the qualitative approach, individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with stakeholders according to their social status. These included managers of framers, direct buyers, planter delegates, oil palm plantation owners, village chiefs, youth and women's leaders, and PALMCI managers in the said localities. In order to ensure rigorous qualitative representation, we chose 12 people according to their direct or indirect relationship with the village plantations. We also chose the accidental sampling technique, which allows all actors to be chosen according to their availability. To carry out this analysis, we used the systemic approach to focus on the problems arising from the crisis context and the strategies mobilised by the producers. We also used the theory of social change and dependency to understand the behaviour of producers. However, what are the factors that explain the change in the behaviour of oil palm producers.



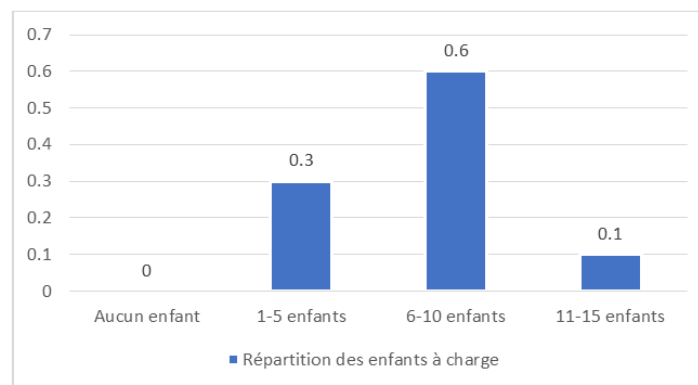


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3. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

3-1. Socio-demographic characteristics

3-1-1. Number of dependent children



Aucun enfant : No children

Enfants : children

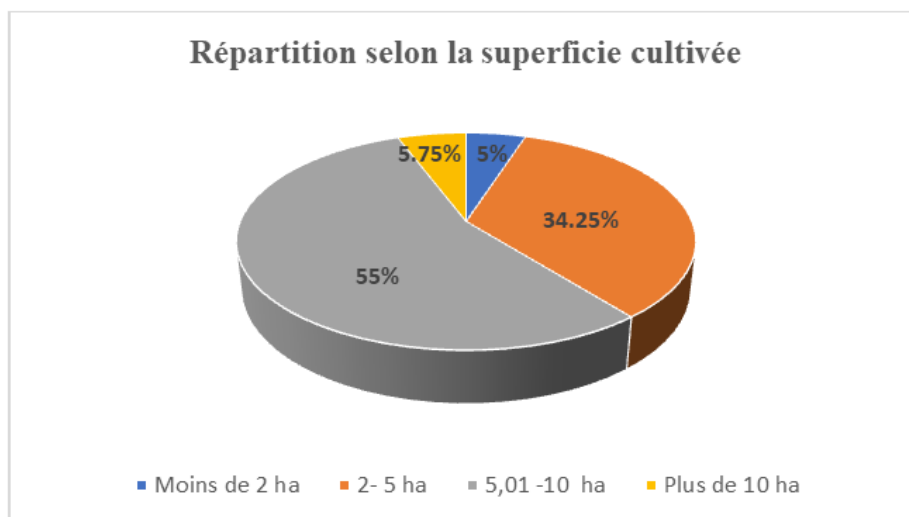
Répartition des enfants à charge : Distribution of dependent children

Source: our survey, October 2021

This variable is essential for an understanding of producers' family burdens. The histogram shows that 90% of respondents have between 1 and 10 children. This high frequency can be explained by the fact that children are considered in the rural environment as family labour, i.e. a means of production that is indispensable for the development of plantations. In the

context of the health crisis and the monetisation of production relationships, the question of food, social and financial security for dependent children remains a major concern for planters

3-1-2. Distribution of Farmers According to Area Cultivated



Répartition selon la superficie cultivée : Distribution according to cultivated area
 Moins de : Less than
 Source: Our Survey, October 2021

The graph shows that 89.25% of the respondents are small and medium-sized oil palm farmers. This predominance of these categories is explained by the fact that the development of large farms requires considerable financial and logistical resources. Thus, these growers, for the most part, do not have the technical means to maintain and modernise large plantations and are content to create small

plantations. In addition, the evolution of the plantation economy and the demographic growth within families explain the fragmentation of certain family farms over the last thirty years. This situation is creating land saturation.

3-1-3. Producer income

Revenu income /month	Workforce	Percentage (%)
Less than 50 000	2	5,72
[50 000-100 000]	16	45,72
[100 005-200 000]	7	20
[200 005-300 000]	6	17,14
+ 300 000	4	11,42
TOTAL	35	100

Source: our survey, October 2021

The table shows that 65.72% of respondents have a monthly income of between 50,000 and 200,000 CFA francs. This relatively low frequency is due to the traditional production of oil palm plantations. This production is characterised by insufficient fertilisation and maintenance of family farms. In the context of a health crisis, the low income leads to a lack of interest among producers.

3-2. FACTORS EXPLAINING THE CHANGE IN PRODUCERS' BEHAVIOUR

3-2-1. Problems related to village production

The problems linked to village production are located at three levels of operationalisation: (i) the problem of collecting production, (ii) slowness in the execution of payment transfers, (iii) abusive levies by the PAMLCI company.

3-2-1-1. Problem of collecting village production

Village production represents nearly 70% of the area exploited in Tabou (MINAGRI, 2020). It is an important supplier of palm oil. Thus, collecting production was a major challenge for village producers during the COVID 19 pandemic. In order to contain the spread of COVID 19, PALMCI officials took security measures to reduce the number of staff working in the oil mills. These measures resulted in a significant reduction in the tonnage of palm oil in the oil mills. This has had an impact on PALMCI's demand for village production. As a result, more than half of the palm diet collection vehicles stopped their services. This situation is highlighted by D.F., chief of the lineage in Niplou, who states:

"The collection of production was very complicated because of health issues and rumours of contagion among workers and technicians in the oil mills. In response, PALMCI reduced the daily tonnage

in order to comply with the health authorities. This situation has had an impact on the village plantations by stopping almost all the vehicles that collect the palm bunches ‘’. (D.F., lineage leader, October 2021, Niplou)

In this regard, we note that the reduction in PALMCI's palm oil processing capacity has caused a dysfunction in the value chain. This dysfunction has led to a huge loss of production and frustration among producers. This was illustrated by J.T., a producer delegate in Niplou:

‘‘We experienced a total nightmare during the truck stop. There were planters who wanted to burn their plantations, because they were discouraged, desperate to see their produce rotting in the bush. The trucks that worked were either for the big owners or for acquaintances. Production was considerably higher than PALMCI's demand’’ (J.T., producer delegate, October 2021, Niplou).

Thus, social position, family ties and networks of belonging become social capital that some planters mobilise at will in order to collect their production from transporters. The mobilisation of this capital is an important element in the disinterest and devaluation of oil palm cultivation during this period. F.C., president of the youth of Béoué, spoke along the same lines:

‘‘The planters were very discouraged because of the closure of Greater Abidjan. PALMCI started to work partially. This had an effect on our production, because the transporters were being clever. They were towing the production of their relatives and acquaintances. The production of the poor was rotting in the bush’’. (F.C., youth president, October Béoué).

In addition to these problems, the health situation requires a problem of payment transfers from the village production.

3-2-1-2. The problem of slow payment transfers for village production

The quest for professionalisation of the oil palm sector has led PALMCI officials to prefer direct debit of planters' pay to banking institutions. This provision obliges farmers to have a bank account number (RIB) in order to receive their income. In Tabou, two (2) banking institutions are accredited for the payment of oil palm farmers. These are the National Investment Bank (BNI) and the Savings and Credit Cooperative (COOPEC). In these banking institutions, the monthly transfer of funds from the farmers is not systematic. It follows procedures that do not suit the aspirations of the farmers. S.F., HRD of PALMCI in Tabou, gives details of this disagreement among farmers:

‘‘Planters are always impatient. For them, payment for production must be made systematically.

They don't know that several jobs have to be done to pay properly. It's not enough to just take the weight of the production on Monday and pay on Tuesday or Friday. To protect them, one cannot pay two (2) or three (3) times in a month even if the production collection can be done several times in a month. They forget that each transfer requires costs and checks on several thousand accounts that last several weeks’’ (S.F., HRD of PALMCI in Tabou, Blidouba, November, 2021).

This assertion shows that the levies are intended as social security for the material and financial well-being of farmers. The length of time it takes PALMCI to process farmers' transfers is a precautionary measure to ensure that all users are taken into account. However, the impatience and discontent of farmers is an illustration of the uncertainty of the family burdens that farmers face. This state of affairs is justified by J.D., President of the Tabou oil palm planters, who states that

‘‘We palm oil producers are suffering, we work very hard. To pay for our production, PALMCI is dragging its feet, leaving our fate to the banks. It's a mafia. These banks pay whenever they want. You can't believe that we often receive our pay on the 15th or 18th of the month. Meanwhile, we have bills that don't wait, because everything is paid for these days. To say that the oil palm farmers even buy the chilli before they eat. You have to manage the family's food, send the children to school, etc.’’ (J.D. President of the oil palm farmers of Tabou, Blidouba V I, November 2021).

The development and expansion of oil palm cultivation has created food insecurity and dependence on this crop. In this context of COVID 19, food crops (manioc, rice, tomatoes, etc.) that are subject to family subsistence have become expensive, or even inaccessible due to the agricultural unemployment of farmers. Thus, the inflation of basic foodstuffs is breaking age-old community rules. This is why festivities around ceremonial activities such as weddings, baptisms and funerals are disapproved of. This situation affects social cohesion between planters and community members and leads to mistrust and conflict. In reality, the oil palm grower considers himself as a salaried employee with the same privileges as civil servants. Consequently, he should receive his pay before the 5th of the month. This is why the previous respondent said: ‘‘These banks pay whenever they want. You cannot believe that often we receive our pay on the 15th or 18th of the month. In addition to these uncertain payment dates, there is the problem of PALMCI's direct debit.

3-2-1-3. PALMCI's problem of abusive sampling

PALMCI is an agro-industrial company whose mission is to purchase and process palm oil. As a private company, it seeks to maximise its assets. It communicates the indicator price per kilogram of palm

kernel to the planters in collaboration with the state regulatory structures. This price is subject to several deductions (tax duties, collection, OPA, reprofiling of tracks, etc.) by PALMCI. The levies (0.17 F/ kg for the maintenance of tracks, collection of production, etc.) are made independently of the social reality of the farmers. They are an instrument of rural development. This vision is implemented by F.S., a PALMCI supervisor, who states that

"Levies are a necessary evil. They contribute to the development of the rural environment. PALMCI has organised several seminars with farmers and OPAs to explain them, but they don't understand. The levies make it possible to maintain the village tracks, to collect village production without them" (F.S., PALMCI supervisor, Blidouba V I, October 2021).

The development of the oil palm sector is consubstantial with the existence of an organisation based on the anticipation of levies on planters' production. Indeed, levies allow for the guarantee and quality of the supervision of planters. They are the linchpin of technical assistance to farmers, prevention and regulation of farmers' production activities. In spite of these advantages, harvesting operations are less desired by farmers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, collection operations cause resentment among farmers. S. K., a producer delegate from Blidouba V I, thinks that

"Frankly, PALMCI is not doing anything social. In this period of low activity, the state has increased the price of bunches by 20 francs per kilo to support the farmers. In reality, this sum is being pumped out by PALMCI, which is taking its levies without taking into account the crisis situation. This is a pity. Those who were able to give their production to PALMCI regret it, because they no longer have anything on their bulletin" (S. K., Blidouba V I producer delegate, October 2021).

Through this discourse, we can say that the levies contribute to the reduction of producers' income. This situation contributes to the social and economic precariousness of farmers by making them financially dependent. This reality is supported by Penouil (1979). According to him, the price is set by the state after deducting marketing costs or the costs of transport, evacuation, insurance and loss, etc. This price to the producer is thus a price that is not fixed by the state. This producer price is thus a residual price, as the price is the result of a series of operations. The starting point is the likely world price. Thus, the reference price is set at a sufficiently low level so that in any case it is possible to cover the marketing costs and the producer price. This situation significantly alters the income price for growers. The increase in levies is also decried by F.H., a notable farmer in Béoué, who expressed his thoughts in the following terms:

"We work for nothing. We live to enrich PALMCI and its managers. PALMCI agents in this period of health and financial crisis lack nothing, because everything is subsidised by our work, our production. Everything is taken from us for them" (F.H. notable, Niplou, October 2021).

This speech clearly shows that oil palm production is no longer attractive. The efforts of the planters are not rewarded to their true value. Oil palm production therefore predisposes the planter to exploitation by the agro-industry. It allows the planter to be confined in a vicious circle of exploitation by PALMCI. Indeed, the price of palm bunches is designed to subjugate farmers. It does not contribute to the improvement of the farmer's well-being. On the other hand, it does contribute to improving the standard of living of certain actors in the sector (AIPH, Ministry of Agriculture, supervisory structures, etc.). Producers are slaves to their work. This analysis confirms Nurkse's (1968) thesis that the underdevelopment of Third World societies is self-perpetuating. Indicators such as low commodity prices, low investment, etc. help to confine these countries in a series of vicious circles described by low income of farmers, low savings, low investment, low purchase prices, poverty or financial dependence. Faced with these problems, what are the coping strategies?

3-3. Coping Strategy for the Problems Caused by the Health Crisis

The health crisis at COVID 19 has led to social insecurity among oil palm farmers. To overcome this crisis, farmers resort to direct purchase and the creation of traditional oil mills.

3-3-1. Recourse to direct purchase by producers



Photo showing a direct purchase from Niplou (our survey, October 2021)

Direct purchase is the marketing of a planter's production to an intermediate trader or direct buyer. This intermediary can be a natural person (trader,

supervisor, delegate, etc.) or a company. The direct purchase is then carried out by people with financial resources who buy the production of the planters at less than the value. This operation is called direct, because it gives the farmer direct access to his income after the production is marketed. Thus, it exempts the farmer from bank procedures and dealings. The operation is carried out outside the official distribution circuit through cooperatives and agro-industries. The survey found that there are two (2) types of direct purchase. Direct purchase is initiated by traders to supply their artisanal oil mills and that organised by small private agro-industries. The revival of direct purchase in the context of COVID 19 is consubstantial with the structural crisis.

From 2020 onwards, growers will experience setbacks due to the reduction in services provided by PALMCI oil mills. Indeed, as a result of the social distancing measures enacted by the state, PALMCI officials have restricted the number of staff and the collection activities of village production to avoid the spread of the virus in the oil mills. This restriction by PALMCI had a profound impact on the collection and marketing of village production. In fact, PALMCI is unable to absorb all village production. This production was rotting in the village plantations, due to the fact that half of the vehicles collecting the palm bunches were stopped. Faced with this lack of sales, the planters created new informal marketing networks for palm bunches. This new structuring of village production relationships not only allows village production to be sold, but also constitutes a means of satisfying occasional family constraints. The challenges of direct purchase are highlighted by F.J., a direct buyer in the village of Béoué, who said

"Direct purchase was a relief at a time when some farmers wanted to burn their abandoned production in the bush. Thanks to direct purchase, the farmers have started to have hope. The price offered by direct buyers is relatively low, but the farmer prefers it to losing his production. Direct selling allows him to meet urgent family needs and maintain his status in the village while avoiding loans" (F.J., direct buyer in Béoué village, November 2021)

Direct purchase is a coping strategy in the face of difficulties caused by poor sales. It is considered a cohesive factor of social reproduction in the context of a health crisis marked by the irregularity of farmers' money and the risk of losing their production. This analysis lends credence to De Sardan's study (1995), according to which producers seek to minimise risk when official marketing channels malfunction. These producers therefore prefer traditional or 'informal' networks to market their products. Faced with PALMCI's structural crisis, growers have been forced to turn to direct buyers. In addition to this informal exchange, the context has allowed the revival of

traditional oil mills for the processing of palm oil products.

3-3-2. Creation of traditional oil mills by producers

The structural crisis in the village plantations has inexorably developed an artisanal oil processing circuit in Tabou. This circuit is fed either by production from direct purchase or by seeds collected from family plantations. In the context of the health crisis, the owners have installed presses or artisanal oil mills in their concession for the extraction of palm oil. Women are the cornerstone of this palm oil processing circuit. They process 15 to 25% of the production abandoned in the bush or sold by the planters for this purpose. This oil does not have the same treatment and quality as the industrial oil produced by PALMCI. However, it can be used to solve the occasional problems of the population. A.T., a palm oil trader in Niplou, describes the usefulness of traditional oil mills during the COVID 19 crisis.

"The oil made by women is not only for domestic consumption. The oil that we consume is used to grill poison, meat...to cook. With the corona virus disease, we don't have the money to buy the hydro-alcoholic soap to avoid the COVID 19 disease. The women helped us by making solid and liquid soaps to disinfect our hands. The price of the soaps has risen sharply from 100 CFA francs to 200 CFA francs, because we traders used to send them to several villages in the region. The processing and marketing channels have given another way of life to the farmers who were discouraged" (A.T., palm oil trader, Niplou, 2021).

Despite the arduous nature of oil extraction, this activity appears to be a response to the problems posed by COVID 19, which are reflected in the poor sales and low productivity of PALMCI. The extraction of red oil is an economically stimulating activity that contributes to improving the living conditions of the family unit.

4. DISCUSSION

In his book, (Colin, 1990) specifies that farmers use contracts and sharecropping such as the Aboungon (half of the production) to satisfy their economic needs. This contract is a form of remuneration for work on coffee and cocoa farms. The Aboungon contract will be considered here not as a form of remuneration, but as a cost of access to land, insofar as the producer seeks access to land through this formula and retains control of the entire production process. Unlike the Aboungon on coffee or cocoa (who only maintain and harvest), the different meanings of the two statuses are perceived by those concerned, since while the Aboungon on coffee or cocoa declare themselves to be labourers, the Aboungon on cassava consider themselves to be independent agricultural producers. (Léonard *et al*, 2005) in his analysis links the emergence of cannabis in village cocoa plantations (in

cocoa-producing regions of Côte d'Ivoire) to the search for profit on the part of the planters. This new practice follows the devaluation of cocoa income and the increase in family expenses. The rapid spread of cannabis cultivation, as well as its good resistance to dry periods and its adaptation to the poorest soils, provides a substantial income capable of supporting family expenses and children's schooling. Finally, the literature provides economic reasons for the implementation of traditional cultivation practices in village plantations. These practices have not only provided substantial income, but have also enabled the conservation of land assets. This literature is necessary in our study, as it presents farmers' practices as a factor of risk minimisation, asset control and gain in village plantations.

However, these same practices contribute to the search for socio-political security. These practices are not mentioned in this section. (Colin *et al*, 2001) in their article add to the previous study. Thus, this article provides elements of understanding of the dynamics of production relationships through the diffusion of a new contractual arrangement, the 'Planter-Partager', in the village plantation economy in Côte d'Ivoire. According to the authors, the emergence of the Planter-Partager contract in the 1980s and 1990s, and its remarkable development in the 2000s, can be explained by a combination of interests of natives and migrants at a specific stage in the evolution of the Ivorian plantation economy and in light of current socio-political issues. This new contractual relationship is clearly part of a recomposition of relations between natives and migrants. Such an institutional arrangement makes it possible, firstly, to overcome the constraints in terms of land, labour and cash flow of the assignors and lessees, within a logic of complementarity of available resources. This contract thus constitutes a key innovation in a context of income crisis and imperfect land, labour and credit markets, both for natives and migrants. However, the authors believe that this economic register alone is not sufficient to explain the dynamics of the Planter-Partager and must be enriched by a socio-political perspective. Despite all the risks of conflict that this new arrangement entails, due in particular to a rather general incompleteness of some of the terms of the arrangement, the authors share the opinion of the majority of planters and local authorities: the Planter-Partager contract should indeed contribute to mitigating conflicts, compared to land purchase-sales. The studies by (Colin, 1990) & (Colin *et al*, 2001) corroborate in a number of respects our view that farmers change their behaviour in times of agro-sanitary crisis.

5. CONCLUSION

At the end of this work, we can conclude that the COVID-19 context has exacerbated a structural crisis in village oil palm production in Tabou. This crisis affects the production relationship between village producers and PALMCI, creating mistrust between actors through monetary uncertainty, frustration and poor production. Faced with the economic recession and food and social insecurity, village producers will adapt the value chain to the context of the health crisis. This adaptation is reflected in the rise of direct buyers for the marketing of surplus bunches and the manufacture and extraction of palm oil. This activity allows them not only to produce oil palm by-products such as soap and hydro-alcoholic soap, but also to meet daily needs. This article contributes to show the resilience of the producers in a context of health and economic crisis.

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