

AGRA Position Paper on COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic now entering its fourth month has sparked an unprecedented global health crisis that has fundamentally disrupted the social and economic fabric of all countries. Governments have imposed severe restrictions on movements and travel that have virtually locked down countries.

Schools and universities have been shut. Restaurants closed. Manufacturing severely curtailed as factories are forced to work with fewer people to observe social distancing. Borders have been shut and international travel impacted.

Most African countries have imposed some degree of restrictions to protect the populations from the spread of the virus. This is clearly an important protective step, but we also need to consider the very real danger that the Covid-19 pandemic will leave in its wake a food security crisis that could affect the political, social and economic health of African countries. Already over 250 million people in Africa are without food. These vulnerable populations will suffer more from both the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Africa's GDP growth is expected to drop from 3.2% to 1.8% which will likely increase the number of people without food in Africa.

COVID is overshadowing other challenges like locust in East Africa, and likely climate volatility issues such as draught and flooding that normally get attention and now they may

impact communities while everybody is looking somewhere else.

As governments constantly update their planning to confront the immediate challenge, leadership and coordinated action are required at global, national and local levels to find solutions for food systems that are responsive to and supportive of public health measures.

At AGRA, we are committed to continue working with our partners and governments to support farmers, most of whom are women and youth, to plant, harvest, transport, and sell food without endangering their safety and that of others. This will also include supporting the over 5,000 micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and the Village Based Advisors (VBAs) that service the farmers.

As most of AGRA's activities are field-based and require human interaction with large groups of people, we have adjusted our delivery plans to ensure that both our partners and beneficiaries are protected. We are calling on governments and donors to join us in finding innovative ways in allowing the village based advisors and partners to support farmers without placing themselves at risk. This can be done, for example, by stepping up the use of digital tools and mobile phones to enable the VBAs reach farmers easily and safely.

AGRA remains ready and willing to support governments and other partners as the continent grapples with the immediate health emergency

triggered by Covid-19 ensuring that sufficient, coordinated and sustainable action is taken to secure the vulnerable populations against a potentially more devastating food emergency that the pandemic could leave in its wake.

In the meantime, AGRA recommends action in the following areas:

a) Ensure Uninterrupted Food Production

In countries in the eastern part of Africa, the Covid-19 pandemic has coincided with the critical planting season. It could be catastrophic if farmers cannot freely access their farms to plant and cultivate their crops. AGRA urges governments in Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and South Sudan, which are currently in the middle of their planting seasons, to designate farmers, suppliers of farm inputs like seed, fertilisers and chemicals, and ploughing services providers as critical and allow them ease of movement while protecting them from the virus.

In other parts of the Africa like Mozambique where harvesting is complete, produce is accumulating at farms and this may easily result in food loss. Farmers must be assisted to access markets to reduce the losses and ensure supplies. The Ebola outbreak in 2014 disrupted the agricultural market chains in West Africa because access to markets was restricted. Covid-19 should not trigger a repeat experience.

In West Africa, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria are preparing their fields in readiness for planting later in the year. Governments and partners can plan early enough to shield farmers from the impact of Covid-19 restrictions that may well be in place then if the pandemic is not brought under control sooner.

As governments roll out plans to cushion their economies from the ravages of the pandemic, cash and loan support for poor farmers will be essential, as well as grants to restart production. Banks should consider offering interest moratoriums on farmers' loans and extending payment deadlines. A capital injection in the agricultural sector can help small and medium agri-businesses, and in turn help their salaried staff and temporary workers stay afloat.

b) Food Assistance for Vulnerable Populations

More than 250 million people on the African continent do not have access to nutritious foods at all, or on a sustainable basis. With schools closed across the continent, millions more children now have no access to free meals that was the only source of elements of a balanced diet to most of them.

The sudden loss of income from job losses or production disruptions, break-down of regular food support networks and price spikes as a result of Covid-19 will have disastrous consequences for vulnerable communities, reducing their resilience to fight off the virus and other diseases and increasing the loss of life and burden of disease from malnutrition.

Governments across Africa will need to extend social safety nets to ensure all vulnerable people have access to sufficient nutritious food. Where safety nets or other support mechanisms are unavailable at short notice, public health interventions must be calibrated carefully to protect the extreme poor.

Many countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda have allowed food distribution systems, especially cross-border movements of food, to operate with clear health guidelines for drivers and their assistants. This ensures food availability and assures traders of income. Other countries may wish to learn from this experience. Similar guidelines on how farmers and traders can protect themselves from the virus should be issued to ensure that local-level food production and markets can operate safely.

c) Secure Strategic Food Reserves

As food production will definitely be impacted, the critical importance of keeping a flexible strategic food reserve is all-too-evident. Regrettably, not all African countries affected by the pandemic have sufficient

reserves that can sustain the needy populations for a reasonable amount of time to allow the food production and distribution systems to recover from such a disruption.

Commending those countries that have strategic food reserves, call on the rest to boost and secure their strategic and emergency food reserves as a safeguard against production shortfalls. Ministries of Agriculture and emergency response committees should mobilise support and resources now and stock up critical supplies that their populations may require in the testing months ahead. To stock these reserves, governments should consider buying agricultural products from small farmers, especially non-perishable commodities.

d) Collaborate at Regional Level

The impact of Covid-19 as a health emergency will be felt most directly in individual countries but the solution to its impact on food security must be collaborative. This is because agricultural production is largely smallholder-based and markets are trans-boundary.

A large percentage of the goods traded between the borders of African countries, such as in East African countries, are food. Well-intentioned attempts to control the Covid-19 spread by restricting cross-border movements of traders for extended periods of time will trigger scarcities and encourage hoarding and price increases. Governments may wish to consider mechanisms that actively facilitate cross border trade, while maximising public health. These could include providing water and soap for washing hands at convenient locations, enforcing safe distances between people and limiting interactions.

Short-term taxation policies or simplification of regulations to stimulate production or cushion farmers in one country should ideally be coordinated at the regional level to mitigate any unintended adverse effects on another country.

e) Strengthening the resilience of vulnerable countries

Even before the pandemic, many countries were confronting threats to their food production. Changing weather patterns, exhausted soils, lack of or improper use of chemicals have all contributed to reduced crop yields. Political instability in some countries have interfered with production patterns. Poor post-harvest handling has led to huge losses in many countries and lately, the desert locust menace has compounded the prospect of food insecurity.

Although international food prices currently remain relatively low, there are already warning signs that they could increase, especially as the Covid-19 response measures extend over different growing seasons. Countries that are unable to easily access finance on global markets, not least because of the global downturn affecting their own export income, will need strong, well-coordinated international support to provide the kinds of social safety nets that richer developed countries have been able to put in place.

While African governments are taking the lead in efforts to combat Covid-19, they need significant global support. UN agencies, multilateral development banks, SMEs, businesses, development partners and civil society must offer significant financial and other resources to support countries that are least able to prepare and respond. While such support must initially prioritise health systems, AGRA encourages that the support also needs to strengthen the resilience of these countries' food systems.