As an institution that works to improve the wellbeing of millions of Africa’s smallholder farmers, we are deeply concerned about COVID-19, the global pandemic that threatens so many of us. We continue to keep those that are affected in our thoughts and prayers and urge the rest of us to practice prevention measures as guided by governments and public health experts.

Each of the 14 countries that AGRA partners with has 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.

As health workers battle to slow down the spread of the disease, all measures must be taken to ensure that people have food now, in the recovery period and beyond. If this is not done, COVID-19 will result in a food crisis that will affect poor people the most, in both rural and urban areas. It is obvious that we can protect the interests and well-being of the most vulnerable among us by ensuring farmers continue to do their work. Africa’s smallholders produce 80% of the food we eat. It, therefore, goes without saying that if they can’t farm because of COVID-19, Africa will inevitably face a food crisis.

At AGRA, we are committed to supporting governments and other partners in the countries where we work to support farmers to continue working on their farms. There are very good lessons coming from across Africa and beyond and we will bring these to our countries as we go. For example, the Indian Government has exempted agriculture and allied activities from the ongoing lockdown. Closer home, we commend efforts by the governments of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ghana and Ethiopia that are developing or already have guidelines to keep agricultural value chains alive even as they abide by public health guidelines.

**COVID-19 should not lead to food crisis in Africa:**

Smallholder farmers are our lifeline

Message by Dr. Agnes Kalibata, AGRA President
The Government of Ethiopia, for example, is finding ways to get inputs to farmers at lower prices than usual to ensure that all farmers have access to the right inputs. In Ghana, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture has secured inputs, seed and fertilizer, for farmers through the government flagship Planting for Food and Jobs program.

The government is also supporting rice millers with working capital so they can continue purchasing rice from farmers. In Kenya, the government will stock up cereals and pulses for use to mitigate the COVID-19 food security challenges. Additionally, the Village Based Advisors (VBAs) in the country have come up with creative ways of delivering government subsided inputs to farmers while educating them on COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Our collective duty now is to ensure that efforts like these are scaled up across the continent. At AGRA, we are committed to 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. We will do this by working with governments to ensure that village-based agrodealers shops stay open to enable farmers access inputs at affordable prices. We will also expand the role of the Village-based Advisors (VBAs) to continue providing extension services to farmers. To this end, we will equip the agrodealers and VBAs with safety equipment and information as well as step up the use of digital tools, mobile phones and radio to enable the VBAs reach farmers easily and safely. We are not being prescriptive but believe that we all have to do what it takes to support the farmers; doing nothing and wishing this pandemic away is not an option.

In addition to our partner governments, we recognize the hundreds of implementing partners, we work with. We want to assure them that we remain fully committed to our partnership and are prepared to be as flexible and supportive as possible in how they organise their operations to deal with the pandemic while continuing to deliver. My team and I are available to support them in all ways possible. Let us communicate openly about the challenges we are facing and work together to find ways of overcoming them.

In the long-term, this pandemic underscores the need for Africa to focus on agriculture transformation as its surest path to inclusive economic growth to build the resilience of its population. Our fragility with regards to food access is exacerbated by the fact that we import significant amounts of food, we depend on smallholder-led and rain-fed agriculture and we are in the midst of already existing shocks from climate change and locust invasions. As countries grapple with COVID-19, African countries must maintain laser focus the sufficiency of their food production. Together with our partners, we will carry on rolling out innovative ways and building partnerships to transform smallholder farming from a solitary struggle to survive to farming as a business that thrives.

In all these, 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.

Keep an eye on our website https://agra.org/ and social media platforms - www.agra.org, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube for more information on our responses that we will continue reviewing in line with updated guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the governments of the countries we operate in and public health experts.

See our position paper on COVID-19 for more information on our response and recommendations to enable African governments, smallholders farmers and agri-SMEs cope with the pandemic: xxx(link to the position paper)

In whatever you do, whether working from home or office or out tending to your field, make sure to take measures that are critical to keeping you, your colleagues, family and the world safe.

*Stay safe, stay calm and God Bless you all.*