

# Towards an Integrated and Coordinated Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Agricultural Sector

## Policy Brief

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### Key Messages

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| <p>The agriculture and food sectors are often not linked sufficiently to other parts of government in 'normal' times; the institutional capacity for government to deal with large shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic could be enhanced by better coordination amongst sector "silos".</p> |   |
| <p>What are the solutions AGRA suggests?</p>   |   |
| <p>COVID-19 response should be anchored within sector strategies and investment plans</p>  | <p>COVID-19 response plans need to be aligned and integrated to existing sector priorities, even if those priorities need to be updated to respond to COVID-19.</p>   |
| <p>Foster coordination between agriculture and food sectors and others</p>   | <p>The agriculture ministry and similar institutions should also be supported to strengthen their capacity to collaborate with other sectors such as health, education, trade, industry and finance.</p>  |
| <p>COVID-19 response coordination should be integrated within established agricultural sector coordination platforms</p>   | <p>It is critical that the coordination and leadership structures for COVID-19 in the agriculture sector be aligned with and integrated into the already established coordination platforms in the sector while maintaining close links with COVID-19 national response coordination structures.</p>  |
| <p>Data and evidence must be collected and used to guide the COVID-19 response</p>   | <p>African governments should forge partnerships with local think tanks, international organizations such as the International Food Research Institute (IFPRI) and others to ensure tailor-made and 'close to' real time information to guide policy decisions for the sector. Data generated should be used to inform policy prioritization in the short, medium and long term post COVID-19</p> |
| <p>Institutional capacity should be strengthened to deal with current and emerging shocks</p>  | <p>The technical and financial support provided by central government, development and knowledge partners should aim to enhance and strengthen institutional capacity for the functioning of established government-led sector coordination structures.</p>   |



## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has already impacted negatively on most African countries' economies and societies. Given the share of the agriculture sector in African economies and livelihoods, it has been inevitable that food production, income and trade has been impacted significantly. The pandemic has found most African country agricultural systems and institutions unprepared – previous epidemics have not necessitated large scale responses in the sector. Consequently, national agricultural institutional architecture significantly lacks cushioning mechanisms to build resilience and support farmers and SMEs in exceptional times. The agriculture and food sectors are often not linked sufficiently to other parts of government in 'normal' times, and are therefore unlikely to address adequately large-scale shocks like those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.


Government responses to COVID-19 have consistently impacted the agriculture and food sectors. For example, restrictions on movement and social distancing have seen agricultural market operations (input/output and food markets) experiencing severe disruptions resulting in loss of income and food insecurity for people living in poverty including smallholder farmers. The export and import systems for agricultural commodities and supplies have on occasion been hobbled due to border closures, impacting in turn food markets, input supplies and income streams for the farmers. Farmer support systems have also been affected due to restrictions on social distance, movement and office operations. These include extension, technical services (e.g. veterinary services, pest control), agro-dealer services, land administration services and financial services. Prioritization of funding to health systems to support COVID-19 responses has limited resources available to other sectors that are vital for the pandemic response, including agriculture.

## The COVID-19 Response

African governments, in collaboration with development partners, have developed National COVID-19 Response Plans, mostly in the form of emergency response plans within the legal framework of disaster management. In most countries, a special high-level task force or committee has been established by the highest political leadership to function as a command center leading and coordinating response. In line with the national response plan, each sector is tasked to come up with its own sector response plan.

### Kenya war room

In Kenya, the Government has established a national command center that is monitoring impact on business, security, health and food security. To coordinate food security issues, the Government has established the national County Government Co-ordination & Food Security Working Group, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Cooperatives. Other ministries in this committee include Devolution and the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs); Water, Sanitation and Irrigation; and Lands and Physical Planning. The Council of Governors and the Presidential Delivery Unit are also members of this committee. To ensure seamlessness of information flow for decision making by this committee, the Ministry of Agriculture has set up a "War Room". This is a multi-stakeholder, multi-agency coordination mechanism on food and nutrition security. The war room is providing coordination to ensure availability and access to food, support subsistence farmers, and maintain agricultural output and value addition at a national level. The coordination role of the war room is expected to transit to the role of the ASTGS- Agriculture Transformation Office.



Ministries of Agriculture across the continent have developed sector COVID-19 response plans to address the negative impacts the pandemic on livelihoods and the agriculture sector. Countries are putting in place interventions to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of food and water; support subsistence crop and livestock farmers, and fisher folks; maintain functioning of agricultural inputs, output and value addition activities. All such strategic interventions require functional information systems to provide real time data. However, across most African states, these systems are weak so that validity of data, including required internal capacities for analysis is significantly lacking. There is also a challenge of inadequate capacity of the government statistical authorities to generate real time data for effective early warning systems.

## Fostering an integrated and coordinated response to COVID-19 in the agricultural sector

### **1. COVID-19 response should be anchored within the sector strategies and investment plans**


The agriculture sector COVID-19 response plans have to a large extent been established as ad-hoc arrangements to facilitate rapid utilization of the COVID-19 central emergency response funds. While aligned to the national COVID-19 response plans, sector response plans need to be anchored within the guiding national agricultural frameworks (Agriculture sector Strategy and National Agriculture Investment Plan (NAIP)). This means that the COVID-19 response plan needs to be aligned and integrated to existing sector priorities, even if those priorities need to be updated to respond to COVID-19. There is a strong imperative to revisit NAIPs where necessary to nurture and build resilience in farmers, supply and value chains, and the rural poor more broadly. In Kenya, the data needed to inform the war room activities, in relation to availability and access to food; support to subsistence farmers; and agricultural output and value addition, will form an integral part of the agricultural sector M&E framework that is about to be developed. Apart from being used to secure additional funding, the sector response plan should also be used to guide how existing investments in the sector (e.g. flagships) can be used or adjusted to deal with the COVID-19 effects and to build internal systems.

### **2. Foster coordination between agriculture and food sectors and others**

The agriculture ministry and similar institutions should also be supported to strengthen its capacity to collaborate with other sectors such as health, education, trade, industry and finance. Maintaining the status quo (of working in silos or with minimal coordination and integration across sectors) will not yield adequate and sustainable solutions for the multi-dimensional challenges brought by the pandemic. Agriculture and food security are fundamentally linked for example to economic planning, social safety nets, capital expenditure and trade. Government architecture must reflect that.

### **3. COVID-19 response coordination should be integrated within established agricultural sector coordination platforms**

In the past decade, the agriculture sector has championed multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary coordination platforms to facilitate inclusive planning and implementation of sector investment plans as well as tracking of results. Agriculture Sector Working Groups (ASWG) have been the main coordination and leadership platforms for the sector. In addition, several Technical Working Groups (TWG) have been established to provide technical and analysis support to the ASWG based on priority areas of the sector. Based on emerging lessons from COVID-19, the question remains how inclusive these platforms are.



For the agriculture sector COVID-19 response, specific task forces or steering committees have been the common platforms for coordination of sector efforts. These coordinating structures have also been established as temporary arrangements specifically for COVID-19. For an inclusive and sustainable response, it is critical that the coordination and leadership structures for COVID-19 in the agriculture sector are aligned with and integrated into the already established coordination platforms in the sector while maintaining close links with COVID-19 national structures. The specific committee or task force on COVID-19 needs to work seamlessly with the Agriculture Sector Working Group to ensure coordinated response within the sector. TWGs should be used for technical and analytical work in relation to the COVID-19 sector response.

#### **4. Support generation of evidence to guide COVID-19 response**

At national, regional and global levels, research think tanks are undertaking COVID-19 related analytics for the agricultural sector. African governments should forge partnerships with local think tanks, international organizations such as the International Food Research Institute (IFPRI), the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) to ensure tailor-made and 'close to' real time information to guide policy decisions for the sector. This will ensure that the response is evidence based and within the framework of sector investments priorities and plans to drive recovery and resilience building beyond the emergency response phase.

#### **5. Strengthen institutional capacity for dealing with current and emerging shocks**

The technical and financial support provided by central government, development and knowledge partners should aim to enhance and strengthen institutional capacity for the functioning of established government-led sector coordination structures. Priority capacity strengthening interventions should focus on development of individual skills of the government officials to design, implement and coordinate response and recovery interventions. Governments should target a cadre of persons closest to the pandemic response to boost skills in the short term, while strengthening over the longer-term human capital. Similarly, institutional capacity could be boosted in the short- and long- term to bolster pandemic response and support agricultural transformation. International and national partners should focus on supporting African governments to have in place integrated and inclusive COVID-19 response plans in the agriculture and food sectors that foster accountability and focus resources.

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