



Dr. Agnes Kalibata
President, Alliance for a
Green Revolution in Africa
(AGRA)

Re-contextualising support for enhancing productivity and technical assistance for smallholder farmers

If there is anything that is important, in terms of delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food system in light of the COVID-19 Pandemic, it is really keeping the voice of the agricultural sector going and ensuring that we focus on what the critical issues are. We have previously had a discussion on this very topic and some of the things that stand out are: COVID-19 is something that happened suddenly; it is not something that we expected and the initial reaction that **we saw, as would be expected, was to protect people** and to

lockdown. The impact this was going to have on the agricultural sector was huge if we had, all of us, not stood up and really made ‘noise’ and tried to make sure that everybody understands that **we have a very weak social safety net system** and take into consideration that a huge part of our population depends on the agricultural sector as their social safety net. So, locking down meant that these people would lose their own mechanism of coping especially because in many of the countries we are working in, the rainy seasons were coming in- it happened when East Africa was in the midst of the rainy season and it happened just before West Africa was going into the rainy season. I think that right now, as we speak, Ghana is in the midst of a planting season.

Some of the things we thought then we should do immediately were: **making sure that we advocate and ensure that everybody understands that we could not allow a health crisis to turn into a food crisis**; and the only way we could do that was to make sure we really highlighted the role and place of the agricultural sector and also highlight that it is not the first time we are seeing a crisis come on our door, even though the health crisis has been one of a kind. We had a food crisis in 2008 and I must really congratulate the African Union with regard to the response in terms of **mobilizing the continent**, mobilizing all of us to start talking about what is right; and indeed they mobilized all of us – they mobilized Ministers and some of the things have helped a lot: **preventing lockdowns of borders** even though we do have challenges around there but at least we managed to prevent total lockdowns and as a result, we have had significant stability in food – it is not as stable as we would want it but in terms of food process, it is significantly stable. Something that really is great to applaud.

From where we are as an institution (**The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa – AGRA**), some of the things we thought that needed to be done immediately were to ensure that the agricultural sector was also stepping up – and that this was also an opportunity to look around and see where the farmers could find inputs and make sure that there was a crop in

the field, and that the harvest is likely going to be larger than would have been the case under different normal circumstances.

We at AGRA have supported a few countries with what we call coordination mechanisms to ensure that they are having conversations among themselves but also within the sector and engaging the government and different partners. This was to ensure that there is a degree of engagement that is going on and that people are not isolated and not feeling that they are alone. In fact, we do hold a meeting every month with Permanent Secretaries of Ministries of Agriculture from the countries we work with to help them share knowledge so that they understand what is working in different countries and what they can borrow from one another. That is creating opportunity for decisions based on knowledge. But we also try to understand what is not going well: for example, in our first meeting in April 2020, we were able to understand that countries have very **limited buffer reserves** and yet we have a huge number of people that have fallen off jobs and are being supported by governments. Through that and really creating a consciousness around that, the following month, you could see that the food reserves had started building in some countries, countries had gone back to the private sector, checked with them the reserves they had and even in some cases, booked those reserves just in case they needed them. That is from an immediate reaction perspective.

From a perspective of going forward, we definitely need that crop in the field and we definitely need to make sure that farmers have planted. Let us look at it from a different perspective: COVID-19 actually happened when we were in the midst already of another crisis: The **climate crisis** was already happening.

From an agricultural sector perspective, we were already reeling from drought, we were already reeling from low yields, we were already reeling from floods in different places, and the locusts invasion in parts of eastern and north Africa. In spite of these spiraling challenges, we see significantly **lower investments in the agricultural sector** both from the governments and from the development community in general.

This sector could do so much more but it is still constrained by the fact that the types of investments that are going in there are limited. A lot of people will talk to you about absorption capacity and issues around the ability to use these resources which is true, I do not want to underrate that – it is also true that sometimes we do not see and use money as fast as we should and yet development comes from that. As such, doubling down on addressing those weaknesses within the system is very critical.

Some of the areas that we see that we must really focus on going forward are **how we present the whole agricultural sector differently to our governments**; how governments understand that this is not just an area you invest in to keep food going, this is actually our safety net system. This is actually a form of development that we are stalling on. Going forward we must increase investment in the Agricultural sector and invaluablely give greater attention to the small holder farmers, small and medium enterprises and promote

agriculture as a business. We must also harness technology to advance the agricultural sector including the skilling of farming communities.

I want to underscore the need to **invest in SMEs**; SMEs are probably the biggest market drivers in our landscape and SMEs have suffered the most during the COVID-19 crisis because many of them are at nascent stages but also a lot of others suffered from what happened: the fact that markets were not working very well, trade was not working well; some of them started suffering from cash flows, loss of employment and all that. These SMEs took us so long to build, so, we must make sure that as we go forward, we do not lose them in the new landscape. It is important to ensure that they remain viable and as key engines for driving the agricultural sector transformation since they handle 64% of the food we use away from the farm – this food is brought to us through SMEs that work in the agricultural sector and they deliver 90% of the inputs that are needed in the agricultural sector. So, ensuring that these SMEs survive is going to be an extremely critical issue.

Four other issues require immediate attention:

- (i) The role of **digitalization** – there are a number of countries that already have this going – we are working with a few countries where we are able to get extension to continue; just by supporting a little bit here and there, we are able to have extension continue in some of those countries and able to communicate with the farming communities through extensionists that are living with them. This is an area that has been under-invested over so many years; this is an area that is limiting our ability to adopt technologies; this is an area that going forward investing in extension and superimposing digitalization on that extension is going to be probably one of the most critical things.
- (ii) Building **resilience** – we have been talking about resilience – we have been suffering from climate change – we need to look at the type of resilience agricultural systems need so that we stop the reversing of the investments – we have already invested so much and we are seeing these gains being reversed. We are seeing reversing knowledge because farmers do not know what to do any more and how to react to climate change. We are seeing reversing in all the things we have known that work including even some of the technologies out there that are not working any more. The only way we can stop that, is if we start addressing the issue of climate change and contribution of the agricultural sector itself to climate change.
- (iii) I want to challenge all of us to also think through engaging with the **2021 UN Food Systems Summit** which has been launched within that perspective. The Food Systems Summit recognizes that the way we produce food, the way we eat food, the way we use food, the way we waste food is just not sustainable for us. This is an issue that we must consider as we go forward. We must engage our research institutions and universities on innovations and

RUFORUM THOUGHT PIECE ON COVID-19

researches out there that will help redefine and build resilience in our food systems. I mean, our future is going to be redefined by the way we re-engineer our food systems through research, and how much energy we put into innovation is going to redefine where we are going, so, we must prioritize investment in research to generate technologies and innovations and in development of uptake pathways.

- (iv) Last, recently, the FAO released a report, **The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) Report** that talks about the number of people that are hungry. Nearly 50% of those people are in Africa and this will be the case for the next 10 years if we do not do anything about it. I am saying ‘have to be’ because we have definitely a situation of hungry people here that has been increasing and we are seeing a reversal of some of the work and the progress we have made. It is therefore a must that we increase our investments in the agricultural sector.

As such I call upon all of us to think about what it is that we need to do differently in terms of how we advocate, how we **position the agricultural sector strongly** enough for us to show the value it represents to our governments, partners and people.

This is our fourteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. It is based on a presentation by the author during the 4th RUFORUM Webinar on “[Delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food system in the ‘new normal’](#)” You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying m.agen@ruforum.org

About the Author:

Dr. Kalibata is the President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). She leads the organization’s efforts with public and private partners to ensure a food secure and prosperous Africa through rapid, inclusive, sustainable agricultural growth, improving the productivity and livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers in Africa. Prior to joining AGRA, Dr. Kalibata was Rwanda’s Minister of Agriculture and Animal Resources (MINAGRI).

Dr. Kalibata holds a doctorate in Entomology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, United States. She was awarded the Yara Prize, Honorary Doctorate from the University of Liège, and the National Academy of Sciences’ Public Welfare Medal United States. Dr. Kalibata is the Nations Special Envoy for the 2021 Food Systems Summit.