

## RUFORUM THOUGHT PIECE ON Pre-UN Food Systems Summit 2021



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### Current status of food systems in Africa and implication for poverty, food security and nutrition

I would like to congratulate Prof. Adipala Ekwamu, RUFORUM Executive Secretary, for hosting this important pre-UN Food Systems Summit Dialogue and for inviting FAO to share our perspectives.

Let me start by stating the obvious that the food system that Africa aspires to build is not essentially different from what the rest of the world wants to achieve.

The food systems that Africa aspires to build must be that delivers food security and nutrition for all. It should be a system that sustains the livelihoods of the diverse agri-food system actors, along the agri-food value chains. It should also be a system that does not compromise the economic, social and environmental bases needed to ensure the food security and nutrition of future generations.

When we assess the current status of the agri-food systems in Africa against this framework, we find that there are legitimate concerns that significant gaps remain, with huge consequences for achievement of the SDGs on eradication of poverty and that of hunger.

### **Africa's agrifood systems are defined by vulnerability to multiple and overlapping shocks**

A notable feature of Africa's food systems is the issue of having to deal with multiple and overlapping shocks and threats! These include, climate related shocks, transboundary pests and diseases (e.g., desert locust, FAW), conflicts, economic downturns/slowdowns). For example, before Covid-19 pandemic, there were 250 million hungry people in Africa in 2019. Prevalence of undernourishment increased from 21.2% in 2015 to 22 percent in 2019.

The Covid19 pandemic has further compounded the problem. There has been increased levels of food insecurity in 2020. Covid-19 may have added between 23 to 39 million people to the ranks of the undernourished in 2020 in SSA. Among the most impacted include the agrifood SMEs (through decreased sales, difficulty accessing raw materials and inputs, and reduced availability of workers); the vulnerable groups – including women, rural youth, smallholder farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk, migrants, seasonal workers, and internally displaced persons.

The impact of reduced incomes on food security and nutrition is huge. Healthy diets have become out of reach for three-quarters of Africans because simply they are not affordable. Over half of all Africans (51%) cannot afford a nutrient-adequate diet. Globally there are about 185.5 million people who cannot afford an energy-sufficient diet. The vast majority (80%) of these live in Africa.

What is more worrisome is the fact that adequate mechanisms to effectively manage the impacts of those shocks are either weak or non-existent. For example, African governments, with few exceptions, could not provide stimulus packages or protection systems similar to what developed countries have done, mainly because of fiscal constraints. There are legitimate concerns that most African economies won't be able to provide post-pandemic recovery options. These capacities have been further dwindled because of public health emergency considerations – due to Covid-19 pandemic. Recovery is therefore likely going to be slow and uncertain because the crisis is still unfolding.



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### **The agri-food systems in Africa feature a lot of inefficiencies caused by structural deficits.**

A definitive feature of agri-food systems in Africa is the resource use inefficiencies. The source of agricultural growth in Africa has largely been through expansion of the cultivated area, at the expense of forests, grasslands and other uses, rather than from increased productivity. A recent study by FAO on Land use changes between 2000 and 2018 indicates that about 12 million hectares of forests were cleared and converted to cropland. Water use efficiency has been the lowest compared to other regions, showing only marginal improvement overtime. Irrigated agriculture is still in single digit percentage point, about 7% on average. Failure of rains in just one season could have devastating impacts and could wipe out whatever little progress may have been achieved. These practices are not sustainable!

In addition, there are significant leakages along the agri-food value-chains. Post-harvest losses in Africa are estimated to be about 14%, one of the largest against a backdrop of low production levels overall. The task of food processing usually falls disproportionately on women – in many African countries, women spend on average four hours per day pounding grain.

There is huge dependence on food imports – in several countries. Weak inter-sectoral linkages, market and institutional failures, – e.g., low farm-gate prices running parallel to high urban food prices within relatively short geographical distances.

The good news is that there is a way out of these undesirable situations!

### **Transformation to a more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems provides a lasting solution.**

FAO encapsulates strategic actions around four inter-related Betters: Better production; Better nutrition; a Better environment; and a Better life – for all.

In Africa, where smallholder agriculture is predominant, agriculture is not only the source of food, but also the source of incomes and livelihoods. Better access to productive resources, to information, technology, infrastructure, markets, etc., is therefore key. Naturally, most of the solutions reside not just within the ministries of agriculture per se, but in several sectors – trade, industry, health, infrastructure, energy, environment and of course education, S&T, and finance, etc., hence multi-sectoral engagement and coordination remains to be key.

A relevant question to ask would be whether public policies and practices have not systematically neglected agriculture and the rural sector; in other words, is the agrifood sector a policy priority? Available figures on allocation of public investment in agriculture indicate that it has been low but also declining over time. For example, the Agriculture orientation index for government expenditure fell from 0.64 in 2001 to 0.15 in 2018 Africa-wide. This doesn't tally very much with the African leaders' commitment to allocate at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture in the framework of CAADP.

We need to recognize the fact that the agrifood systems involve several actors and stakeholders – not just farmers and government – hence multi-stakeholders engagement is absolutely necessary. This is also an aspect of the inclusive process.

In terms of policy, governance and investment – we may need to focus on the following: (a) address issues related to access to resources and opportunities to rural producers and disadvantaged social groups (e.g., women, youth, etc.); (b) address the infrastructure deficits – in its both soft and hard aspects (digital agriculture, but also roads, storage, processing, transportation, logistics, skills, etc.); (c) address the issue of incentives to invest by relevant actors across the agri-food value-chain – bringing value to the farmers, rural producers, consumers, investors, etc., such as factoring in consumers as significant stakeholders – for healthy and nutritious diets, for example; (d) address structural vulnerabilities through well designed and implemented mechanisms to strengthen resilience; and (e) effective multi-sectoral approaches and engagement of partnerships and multi-stakeholders



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### **There are emerging regional and global opportunities to support transformation**

On the demand side, the fact that each year Africa imports food worth tens of billions of dollars is a good indicator of the size of Africa's food markets. With the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement entering into force, the African food markets are growing. The UNECA estimates that the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement would expand intra-regional trade in agri-food products by 20 to 30 percent by 2040.

On the supply side, the potentials for increased productivity and opportunities for agrifood transformation are huge. For example, according to some estimates, Africa could be two-three times more productive. The AfDB estimates that the value of annual agricultural output could increase from the current level of US\$ 280 billion to as much as US\$ 1 trillion by the year 2030.

Advances in technology and innovation are providing immense options in generating knowledge and providing solutions to increase productivity. New digital technologies are driving the agrifood transformation process at a faster pace that has never been experienced before, shifting how agricultural value chains are organized, providing new opportunities for more and better jobs, entrepreneurship, and innovations to address the binding constraints in agrifood systems.

The development of post-production segments of food value chains, including processing and logistics, could particularly have a big impact on productivity, competitiveness and job creation.

The youth can take advantage of such opportunities to support the process as well as to benefit from it.

I would like to conclude by outlining some imperatives towards making this happen.

**First** is about getting the narratives right – the need to debunk some of the inherited narratives, that agriculture is not economically attractive business, and that the youth is not interested in agriculture. Agriculture is not just about a tedious farming – it can be modernized; it can be made more productive and economically rewarding.

**Second**, exploring into what is emerging and the need to seize it as an opportunity – e.g., digital innovations; the AfCFTA, the nature positive solutions (in the context of FSS) in which Africa can have comparative advantages and make a significant contribution.

**Third**, bridging the missing middle between the global-scale options that are available and the local and national level capacities that are weak – and the key role of institutions such as universities to promote science, innovation, technology and knowledge sharing and application.

**Last** but not least, the need to have effective multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholders dialogue and engagement.

*This is our First issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Pre-UN Food Systems Summit 2021. This Thought Piece is part of the discussion Issues presented by the author during “Selected Advocates for Africa’s Development Dialogue”. You can get more information about RUFORUM at [www.ruforum.org](http://www.ruforum.org). You may also share your thought piece about the Food Systems with us by writing to [e.adipala@ruforum.org](mailto:e.adipala@ruforum.org) and copying [e.acan@ruforum.org](mailto:e.acan@ruforum.org)*



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### About the Author

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Abebe Haile-Gabriel holds a Doctorate in Development Studies and a Masters' degree in Agricultural and Rural Development from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University, the Netherlands, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Economics from the Alemaya (now Haramaya) University in Ethiopia.