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Universities Supporting Family Farmers during and Post Covid-19 Pandemic in Africa

I thank RUFORUM and FAO for the invitation to deliver the Opening Remarks at this Webinar on how Universities can assist family farmers during and Post COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. I consider the topic to be extremely important because universities are at the centre of innovation and scientific discoveries all over the world. They have also been at the vanguard of the battle against the coronavirus, from the search for a vaccine by Oxford University, to the rapid design and manufacture of ventilators, to the mental health challenges of self-isolation and analysing and sharing data to inform policy-makers such as through Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center and Imperial College's infectious disease modelling.

Unfortunately, not much has been heard from African Universities during this pandemic era apart from few research work and manufacture of sanitizers in some. The fault is not altogether theirs as they have suffered from poor funding in recent years despite a substantial increase in their numbers especially private universities. Moreover, records from World Bank indicates that as of April 8, 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 175 countries including most African countries. About 98% of the 8.5 million tertiary education students in Sub-Saharan Africa have been at home as a result of the lockdowns implemented to save lives.

COVID-19 and African Agriculture

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which first emerged at the end of December 2019 in Wuhan city of China has spread quickly to all parts of the world and it **continues to worsen in many countries**. As of 29 July 2020, Africa CDC update indicates that 891,199 cases have been reported in all 55 African countries, with over 18,884 deaths. South Africa has also become the fifth country in the world in terms of number of active cases.

Beyond a global human health tragedy on a scale that has never been experienced in living memory, the measures required to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a massive disruption akin to those observed during the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is reversing developmental progress made by African continent in the recent years and threatening its ability to meet the SDGs by 2030.

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The pandemic is fast leading to a food and nutrition crisis and exacerbating the challenges in Africa's already fragile food systems. Even before the virus, more than 820 million people were already identified as chronically food insecure, 235 million of them in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in 2019. Africa's food system is no stranger to crises. The Continent was already grappling with food security challenges: Fall Armyworm in 2018; locust swarms in the Horn of Africa, the worse attack in the past 70 years; regional insecurity and conflict; climate-change-related droughts and flooding; and now the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa's food imports bill was a staggering \$47 billion in 2019, an amount the continent can ill afford

We believe it is now time to focus on the opportunity this crisis has brought forward and "build back better". It is for this reason that the African Union collaborated with FAO to hold a Ministerial Meeting on 16th April 2020 to evaluate the implications of COVID-19 on Food Security in Africa. All 55 AU Member States were represented at this meeting which came up with a political declaration, and some far reaching recommendations.

A Task Force comprising of all major players in African agricultural sector have been put in place to oversee the implementation of the actions identified by the Ministers in the Declaration (by the African Union Commission; FAO; European Union; African Development Bank; World Bank; International Fund for Agricultural Development; World Food Program and AUDA-NEPAD). A Tripartite meeting of African Ministers of Agriculture, Trade, and Finance was held on 27 July 2020 to take forward the recommendations.

Assisting Small-Scale Farmers in Times of COVID-19

It is important to note that back in July 2003, African Union Heads of State and Government had adopted the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Through CAADP, African governments agreed to allocate at least 10% of their national budgets to agriculture and rural development, and to achieve agricultural growth rates of at least 6% yearly.

In 2014, African leaders recommitted to the principles of CAADP by endorsing the AU Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods. The Malabo Declaration adopted 7 commitments including; commitments to Ending Hunger in Africa and halving Poverty by the year 2025. CAADP/ Malabo represents the Department's flagship programme as captured in Agenda 2063, the *Africa We Want*.

Our second Biennial Report of 2020 on progress in achieving the Malabo Declaration indicates that only four countries are on track in meeting the 2025 goals; 36 countries however improved on their performance relative to the first Report of 2018.

Science and indeed universities do have a major role in attaining the Malabo Declarations and now the planning for this future of building resilient agriculture and food systems in Africa.

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Family Farming and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Family farming is the most predominant form of food and agricultural production in both developed and developing countries. A major distinguishing factor is that they rely on family labour for production and other farm operations.

The FAO indicates that there are more than 608 million farms in the world, and about 90 percent of these farms are family farms occupying around 70–80 percent of farmland and producing about 80 percent of the world's food in value terms. By spread, China alone represents 34 percent and India 24 percent of the 608 million farms. Twelve (12) percent of the farms are located in sub-Saharan Africa, 5- 6 percent in Europe and Central Asia, 4 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean and 3 percent in the Middle East and North Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, about 60 percent of the farms are smaller than one hectare, and these farms make up close to 20 percent of the farmland.

As during the Green Revolution in Asia, many of these small farms have the potential to contribute to a successful agricultural revolution in Africa; one that is employment intensive and pro-poor, lift farmers out of poverty and help to achieve the Malabo goals by 2025 and the SDGs by 2030. However, they face a number of constraints: reliance on traditional mode of farming and rain-fed agriculture; use of crude implements (mechanization across the value chain is negligible); minimal usage of improved seeds, fertilizers, irrigation and financial services and highly vulnerable to risks and shocks.

Of course, the situation has been compounded by COVID-19 containment measures such as border closures, lockdowns and curfews which have radically disrupted food supply chains. Restrictions are also triggering additional higher post-harvest losses, as unsold and rotting food accumulates on farms. It has already become clear that the income of these smallholder farmers has significantly declined, even for those that can still work on their land and harvest their crops.

Universities and Family Farmers in time of COVID-19

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated prevailing systemic vulnerabilities. The world is increasingly fragmenting and post-COVID-19 Africa will be forced to do things differently and invest much more in increasing productivity, enabling policies for private sector and market infrastructure. African agribusinesses must operate much higher on the value chain, producing processed goods for domestic consumption and export. The rollout of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement will be critical to building well-functioning food systems in Africa and increasing trade between African countries, currently estimated at about \$8 billion annually.

While supporting smallholder farmers is never easy, current restrictions make it even harder. As well as staying healthy enough to farm well, they need access to affordable inputs at the right time, to reliable infrastructure, good advice, and many other services. Farm populations must be protected from the coronavirus to the extent possible by testing and practicing social

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distancing. Small poultry and dairy farmers even need more targeted help, as their pandemic-related input supply and market-access problems are urgent.

In what follows I outline some area where Universities can assist family farmers:

- Assist governments to design policies and strategies that will help countries to recover and build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. Such recovery measures both in medium and long term, should be informed not only by the impacts of COVID-19 but by underlying challenges already in the systems.
- New research to develop a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on family farmers in an effort to build greater resilience both in farms and food supply chains.
- Applied research to develop and scale up sustainable, climate-resilient, and gender-responsive innovations for smallholder producers. Scaling up RUFORUM research grant programme for more impactful research as documented in the University of Nairobi led research on '[Beans for Africa](#)' is needed across the continent.
- Deploying digital technologies across gender divides. With uncertainty around when "normal" conditions will return, electronic platforms such as WhatsApp, phone calls, text messages, Zoom meetings, and emails are the new norm. Farmers need to be trained on how to use these applications.

However, for universities to be able to play this role adequately, there is need to substantially increase their funding. It is for this reason that the AU has been advocating for countries to devote 1 % of their expenditure to agricultural research.

To conclude, COVID-19 is partly a blessing in disguise for universities in Africa. It provides them an opportunity to regain the progressively eroding societal trust in them. The universities must use research to generate technologies and innovations, while building capacities and the requisite skills for championing agricultural transformation in Africa.

Reference

See Lowder, S.K., Sánchez, M.V. & Bertini, R. 2019. Farms, family farms, farmland distribution and farm labour: What do we know today? FAO Agricultural Development Economics Working Paper 19-08. Rome, FAO.

This is our nineteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. It is based on the authors opening remarks and some of the emerging issues during the sixth RUFORUM Webinar on 31st July 2020 focusing on "Universities and Research Institutions Supporting Family Farmers During and Post COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa". 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

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About the Author

Her Excellency Ms. Sacko is the Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture of the African Union Commission, and a leading African Agronomist. Prior to that, she was a Special Adviser to two Ministers in Angola. Her Excellency was also the former Secretary General of the Inter African Coffee Organization (IACO) for 13 years in Cote d'Ivoire where she represented Coffee economy for 25 African Coffee producing countries.

Her Excellency also worked with include the Regional Economic Communities (RECS), namely, SADC, COMESA, ECOWAS and EAC, where she has actively participated to address the challenges encountered by small scale farmers in Africa, ensuring that they remain a central focus in regional and national policy making for development.