

RUFORUM WEBINAR SERIES-2020

Webinar 4: Delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food systems in the 'new normal'

Synthesis Report

Introduction:

The COVID-19 Pandemic has delivered debilitating effects on economies and livelihoods globally, necessitating a consideration for urgent strategic response directions. Containment measures of the COVID-19 by the World Health Organization and state governments have led to significant reductions in production, demand, trade and distribution across sectors. In agriculture, there are a series of heterogeneous impacts on different agricultural value chains; varying only by product types, access to inputs, trade dynamics, transport dynamics and costs as well as commodity prices and regulations. The current disruptions associated with COVID-19 are having a greater impact on urban areas, refugees and internally displaced persons, countries with already existing multiple natural and environmental crises, poor and vulnerable populations, and fragile and those states already experiencing high costs of food. Indications are that the Pandemic will grossly impact the food security of the people at local, regional and continental level. Therefore, it remains critically important to keep the agri-food systems functioning in order to deliver requisite food quantities of the quality needed to avoid a food and nutrition crisis in Africa and to maintain stability of livelihoods.

This report covers points of action and emerging issues from Webinar 4 on *Delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food systems in the 'new normal'* held on 15th July, 2020.

The Problem:

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, its implications on food and nutrition security will be profound. The disruptions on production and food supply chains for both domestic and imported food and food products as well as income loss and limited remittances are creating considerable tensions and food and nutrition security risks across the continent. The associated food price spikes due to disruptions in the supply chains have the potential to increase the depth and scope of poverty among many segments of society.

Webinar objectives:

This webinar on delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food system in the 'new normal' sought to deliberate on the need to:

- (i) Re-contextualise support for enhancing productivity and marketing systems for smallholder farmers;
- (ii) Innovate agricultural advisory services to farmers to enable them make smart decisions;
- (iii) Innovate for the reduction of logistical bottlenecks and enhancing ecommerce;
- (iv) Innovate agricultural and social protection interventions; and
- (v) Galvanize partnerships and collaboration to strengthen African agricultural research and innovation capacity.

This Webinar was moderated by Prof. Dora F. Edu-Buandoh, Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Cape Coast, Ghana; while presentations and discussions were given by:

1. Dr. Simeon Ehui, Regional Director for Sustainable Development for Africa, World Bank, Washington
2. Dr. Agnes Kalibata, President, AGRA, Nairobi-Kenya
3. Prof. Abebe Haile-Gabriel, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Africa, Accra –Ghana
4. Dr. Owusu-Afriye Akoto, Minister for Food and Agriculture, Accra-Ghana
5. Dr. Godfrey Bahigwa, Director, Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture (DREA), African Union Commission (AUC), Addis Ababa- Ethiopia
6. Prof. Frans Swanepoel, Director, Strategic International Partnerships, University of Pretoria, Pretoria-South Africa

Key learning and Action points:

Policy and Advocacy:

- While complete lockdown was important for protecting the lives of the people, it would have meant a total disruption of agriculture; this is especially so considering the timing of the onset of the Pandemic which coincided with the onset of the planting season in some parts of the continent. There is a need to ensure that the health crises does not turn into a food crises by highlighting the role of the agricultural sector.
- Fortunately for Africa, there is a strong political will to address the challenges associated with COVID-19. There has been a quick response by the African Union that has mobilized the Ministers of Agriculture of its member states on the continent to ensure some form of stability in food systems. The voice of the agricultural sector should be kept going, as it still needs to be heard on the continent. Additionally, the sector in general needs to take an opportunity to step up to ensure that there is a crop in the field and essential actions taken to keep food moving through local and regional trade.
- Development partners can support players in the agri-food system through engagement and dialogue, thereby reduce the feeling of isolation.
- There is a need to have strong partnerships among different stakeholders (development and technical) to ensure synergy among different continental interventions through the ministries of finance, agriculture and trade.
- There is a need to continue supporting regional knowledge sharing and joint learning on how to mitigate and minimise the effects of COVID-19 on food systems and to advocate for government initiatives that can build food reserves at country level.
- With the realization that there is still very low investment in agriculture by governments and development partners, there is a need to repackage the agricultural sector more strongly as a 'safety net' and to deal with institutional challenges that limit the absorption capacity of development funds. There is a need to stop the reversal of investment in agriculture, even in terms of technologies. In the same spirit, there is a need to invest and build resilience in Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) who handle 64% of the food away from the farm gate and to invest in agricultural extension services while super-imposing digitization.
- In order to respond to the long standing issues of the weak agri-food sector, there is a need not to be blinded by the current COVID-19 Pandemic, as it is not solely responsible for the current status on the continent.

Agricultural Innovations:

- Public investments in Africa should outsource new technologies and approaches that can quickly and effectively scale-up and enhance food and agricultural services in order to address challenges associated with the current and traditional agricultural technologies that have systematically fallen behind other regions. For example, through the use of digital technologies, e-commerce, solar power, to mention a few.
- There is a need to improve knowledge and skills to produce technologies, for agriculture business management, and agriculture and food policy analysis. There is a need for demand-driven curriculum by universities and other tertiary institutions to develop more resilient food systems in Africa.

Agriculture Extension and Advisory Services:

- The 'new normal' demands a shift from the regular suite of services to a wider range, requiring therefore, that the Agriculture Extension and Advisory Services partner with other institutions. In particular, the advisory services should also package health information to help farmers adopt to the effects of the Pandemic.
- Agriculture Extension and Advisory Services should shift to more pluralistic systems where services should be provided by different actors; from centralised top-down systems to more delegated systems that are more anticipatory and less sluggish. There is a need to take advantage of existing data and innovative solutions to facilitate this shift.
- Agriculture Extension and Advisory Services should be digitized, multi-stakeholder, demand-driven and be designed as part of agricultural innovation systems to provide a wide range of information and services along the value chain.
- Agriculture Extension and Advisory Services should innovate from within and build on already existing local innovations.
- Closer engagement with farmers as well as provision of farming inputs and extension services can enhance farm productivity, this will in most cases, demand increasing the numbers of extension workers.

Main Conclusions:

- There is a need to continue advocating for increased investments in agri-food systems in the Continent.
- There is a need to transform the Agricultural Extension and Advisory Systems so as to respond better to the demands of the agri-food systems value chain actors and provide a wider range of information and services.
- Universities and other Higher Education Institutions can contribute to delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food systems in the 'new normal' by developing and delivering demand-driven curriculum, and appropriately training human resources with requisite skills for innovation and technology development, and Agricultural Extension and Advisory services.

This synthesis report has been prepared by Dr. Alice Mutiti Mweetwa, RUFORUM Deputy Executive Secretary, Program Development and Implementation (email. a.mweetwa@ruforum.org)