Proposed Solutions for Sub-Saharan Africa for Food and Agriculture in the Context of COVID-19

By:

Alex Kiragu
Patricia Ahawo Gwambo

May 16, 2020

The world is facing unprecedented times and with the wake of COVID19. In addition to the already strained economies struggling to stay afloat, the fact that food is made largely available through human contact and the fact that social distancing and stringent measures on food handling has resulted in food supply declines and unmet demand because of food limited availability. A look at the global south with a focus on Sub- Saharan Africa (SSA) right now brings to light the fact that most governments are struggling with the decision to call for total lockdown in part because of the impact on making food available for its lowest-income earners or lower-income settlement dwellers who are often the most vulnerable. Agriculture also suffers a double fate with many countries

having their agriculture adversely impacted by the latest locust movement across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). In addition, the changing weather patterns and in effect lower agriculture performance than expected means that COVID19 will compound these challenges. Some of the challenges that are being faced can be addressed by a review of policies to alleviate food problems in SSA. We also then need to strengthen policy by ensuring greater implementation and support through new laws.

For now, we must think of solutions not only for today but for the future as well, to ensure sufficient food supplies for now and the future. We currently know that SSA still has the highest number of malnutrition for children under the age of 5 years. As of September 2019, we were at 77 deaths per 1000 live births. The region has been plagued with periodic seasons of drought in certain areas resulting in lower agricultural output. According to the World Bank, the '"*the extreme vulnerability to rainfall in the arid and semiarid areas of the continent and the poor capacity of most African soils to retain moisture result in almost 60 percent of SSA being vulnerable to drought and 30 percent being extremely vulnerable. Since the 1960s, rainfall in parts of the Sahel and Southern Africa has also been significantly below the norms of the previous 30 years.*"'

We must think of food in terms of quality and not just quantity; people may be able to access an abundance for instance of maize but without a proper balance in the amount of maize they eat and other foods, we may only be forestalling a problem. Hence, we must look at the agricultural solution of cross-farming. This means encouraging farmers to grow foods that are nutritionally complementary and not just look at the commercial viability of selling their farm outputs. We then are able to achieve a balance of produce that meets the food needs with quality as a focus and not just the production of large amounts of one food. Regional focus on specific productive crops and livestock should be implemented in counties and wards. Non-Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) regions should be encouraged to promote climate-resilient crops such as cassava, millet, and sorghum, which will offer alternative food sources. Intensive farming should be inculcated in farms, with the option of cooperative/community farms being advocated, to address the economy of farming land that is together, which would greatly reduce the costs of inputs. Assurance should be given to the farm inputs to mitigate contrabands that have

flooded the market. Technology has been used to discourage counterfeit products, through SMS verification. More action and stricter laws on counterfeits should be put in place. We can advocate for the Law of Contract, covering aspects of individual and joint obligations more thoroughly. We could also introduce intellectual property law, to protect those who innovate when it comes to agricultural production. In addition, it is important to establish viable systems of protecting the knowhow of indigenous practices so that it is preserved in a way that gives these farmers their rightful credit, in effect making deliberate efforts towards preserving traditional knowledge. We must move in the area of policy in a unilateral manner, looking at the needs of the current bulk of growers of food in SSA, who are the subsistence farmers. It is important to note that some of the current policies and laws may not fully protect them and need to be regionally adopted for the protection of the farmers' traditional knowledge, their produce viability, and their ability to continue to trade from what they produce.

Another perspective is how agri-business can be tapped to enable farmers to engage in commercial production with the lowest input possible, especially of land but with a high enough output to meet the ever-increasing need for food. This is especially important given the current pressing food needs arising because of COVID19. This pandemic has resulted in the loss of daily income for a vast majority of people in SSA. There has been a disruption of the distribution chain for food supply, where limited movement and interaction have been prioritized. A new look into the value chain should be adopted to enhance the reach of products to consumers within a shorter period, enhance traceability, remove brokers from the value chain, thereby increasing the prices for farmers and substantially reduce the cost of farm produce. A novel solution is taking on technology to link requests and farms including payments, we could also think of block chain technology and how the ability to store data and also track performance can edge towards better sustainability.

The use of technology has notably gained prominence in organizations linking farms to fresh produce kiosks, eliminating the need for brokers and market cartels. Other expected benefits of this tech-linkage would be reduced post-harvest losses, timely planning for harvesting and planting, market linkages which would ease financial access and credit provision in agriculture. To

strengthen such innovations, there need to be strong stimuli in contract farming, where farmers can be guaranteed a market and the off-takers can be assured that farmers will not side sell their products once contracted. Contract law and strict measures put in place to uphold agreements in farm production. We note however that there are challenges to contract farming from implementation framework, to timelines, cultural view on legal transactions versus operating on trust, and other factors that could compromise the contract agreement like market fluctuations and acts of nature, like drought and famine. In view of this contract farming can only be one approach that is part of a matrix of different applied approaches to engage and protect the small scale farmers and the contracting party that aims to support them so as to achieve better outcomes.

The shrinking land sizes have played a large impact on reducing the capacity of farmers to produce more. This had been attributed to the population rise, land inheritance culture, and land laws in agricultural areas. To curtail the reducing farm sizes, policymakers should develop laws on land subdivisions in agricultural zones, limiting land size to a minimum of 2 acres per individual. This would in itself enhance the use of land for agricultural production. Further to this, we have seen productive agricultural land being converted to housing and real estate projects, further straining in food availability. With the need to address food security, even the harsh circumstances set by the pandemic, it is an opportunity to revisit existing land laws and an appreciation of how such policies eventually impact agricultural productivity and food security.

We have for a long time in SSA moved foods that have a longer capability to withstand the road network, yet we now realize even perishables need to be transported from areas of abundance to areas of need. We have a largely untapped potential in the railway system considering that now people are not moving especially across borders, could we convert these same trains to move food and more agricultural produce? A look at economic development historically shows a strong link to the development of strong transport networks and especially railway networks. We must then think of better diplomatic engagement and even easing of trade and foreign policy tensions where needed so that the most vulnerable are assisted and those with economic capacity also have what to buy so that prices do not become inflated. Africa is

at a pivotal place right now with a greater push towards developing its economic law, we can however as we continue to build best practices rely on existing international economic law for guidance as we continue to build regional capacity in SSA. For a long time, the treaties and consensus documents from the United Nations have served as a guide on certain matters within the field of economics with two core general documents being in place currently. These are, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (2008), these were instituted with the focus on establishing guidelines for the protection of human rights. We also have a lot of input from the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to provide guidance on trade as relates to law, the current Doha Round that began in 2001 has the focus on better trade engagement for developing countries with a focus on tackling trade barriers and revised trade rules.

We need to think of regional food storage centers that carry different food types, especially with some countries imposing stringent national lockdowns and curfews that are coming in the way of ensuring that every food need is met within such a country. We understand even better now how food supply is actually a national security issue hence the need to build better internal capacity for food production through diversified agriculture and better storage mechanisms. In the wake of COVID19, we are challenged to think, how much food is enough to sustain a country and regions within a country for protracted periods of time? We need internal legislation to be effected on food security. For example, each country must be required to hold a certain capacity of national farm produce in storage and to replenish also within specific periods to avoid going bad. The world has today been drawn to work toward sustainable goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. We can attest to this serving very strongly as an incentive to get governments to work towards policies on food security that are actionable; the task ahead is still daunting but we see SSA where a bulk of developing nations fall being encouraged to action this better with the great call of moving from talk to action with an increased focus on monitoring and evaluation and reporting on outcomes.

For now, we must also release what is in the food reserves, governments

should be willing to buy any surplus produce from farmers and make this available to the most vulnerable. The wake of digital finance should also make this very viable as payment and support to farmers can move across these platforms as well as create opportunities for better engagement in the future in this area. Taking into consideration the case of M-Pesa in Kenya, there has been financial inclusion that has bridged the gender gap and the financial gap, allowing individuals who did not have bank accounts previously have them. And for women and youths, they can now have money sent to them, a trend that was not common before the onset of digital finance.

Considerations in investment in value addition for food products should be done, as experienced in the current pandemic, opportunities for food processors have proven necessary and hence those engaged in this have thrived. In addition, more local value addition reduces the import burden and allows for the much-needed forex to serve other purposes. This would, therefore, be a call for the financial regulators and government to provide a stimulus to promote investment in food processing. As the raw food products suppliers are grappling with how to sell the highly perishable vegetables and dairy products, an alternative to process into long-life products should be provided, where long-life UHT milk, tomato paste, and pre-chipped potatoes can be sold to the market available in supply chain supermarkets and to the small kiosks. We have the potential for increased innovation in food preservation and even revisiting old methods but with better technological advancement these can be made more efficient and serve bulk purposes. Again, we see a linkage between intellectual property opportunities of application that also provides a guideline on what to capture in instituting economic law for Africa.

The Malabo Declaration (2014), is a product of the annual theme of the African Union that took us a step further in defining what needed to go into agricultural growth and transformation. It came at a pivotal time for SSA as other support mechanisms continue to be put in place to ensure better food security in the region amongst other agricultural developments that are required for this to be feasible. We have also seen the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), take a lot of initiatives in this direction with pilot projects and studies on how best to implement the much-needed policy. The Declaration has a target

achievement date of 2025, with 8 declaration points to be pursued as listed below.

I. Recommitment to the Principles and Values of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Process

II. Commitment to Enhancing Investment Finance in Agriculture

III. Commitment to Ending Hunger in Africa by 2025

IV. Commitment to Halving Poverty by the year 2025, through Inclusive Agricultural Growth and Transformation

V. Commitment to Boosting Intra-African Trade in Agricultural Commodities and Services

VI. Commitment to Enhancing Resilience of Livelihoods and Production Systems to Climate Variability and other related risks

VII. Commitment to Mutual Accountability to Actions and Results

VIII. Strengthening the African Union Commission to Support Delivery on these Commitments

IX. A Call for Action

The 8 points without a doubt are a strong hinge upon which states in SSA can establish their policy, with a focus on making core changes in addition to doing away with some policies that have proven to be more retrogressive than beneficial. The shortcomings of the current legal and policy framework does not mean that responses to COVID19 should be lacking. Instead, there is adequate room for responses as we learn lessons and take notes to do better. The best way to move policy and law is to ensure that it is constantly reviewed to make sure they serve their purpose.

Written and Submitted by Alex Kiragu and Patricia Ahawo Gwambo, both from Strathmore Business School, Master of Science Development Finance (MDF) 2018 Class, Kenya

View online: [Proposed Solutions for Sub-Saharan Africa for Food and Agriculture in the Context of COVID-19]

Provided by Afronomicslaw