

Safeguarding input supply chains for small-scale agricultural producers in the context of COVID-19 in Africa

(12 April 2020)

Key messages:

- Facilitating inter-regional (and inter-continental) trade of key agricultural inputs.
- Keeping input supply mechanisms working for small-scale producers by classifying small-scale, rural agro dealers as “essential” in containment regulations.
- Building on the lessons from the Ebola Virus Disease response in West Africa.
- Where feasible, using electronic disbursement of vouchers for government-subsidized or -supported input distribution schemes and access to services (tractor, transport and mechanized services).
- Considering cash advances to small-scale producers to secure their access to inputs for upcoming seasons and avert potential indebtedness after the pandemic and containment measures are eased.
- Enabling informal seed markets of input trade fairs to continue within strict observation of health regulations.
- Investing in storage facilities (including cold storage for veterinary inputs and perishables).
- Ensuring that livelihoods-saving assistance (for example, large-scale seed distributions) is included as essential in regulations on continued humanitarian work.

Small-scale producers are an important constituency producing food for the households, as well as the world from an increasingly scarce natural resource base. These are farmers working on less than 2 hectares of land, keepers of livestock at home and (agro) pastoralists, as well as fishers and forest dependent people.

There are around 500 million smallholder farmers in the world, and they produce up to 80 percent of the food consumed in Africa and Asia¹. In Africa, specifically, they feed and employ two-thirds of the population and work 62 percent of the land². Small-scale producers are extremely vulnerable to shocks and stresses. Their livelihoods are season-dependent and can be easily derailed by spikes in input prices and by climate extremes, such as drought or flooding events.

According to the 2019 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report, hunger has continued to rise in almost all African sub-regions, making Africa the region with one of the highest prevalence of undernourishment, with one in five Africans going hungry. The consequences of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic could be drastic. It is important to note that some African countries are under food crises from various shocks, including climate-induced, conflict as well as plant and animal pest and diseases, as is the case of the ongoing desert locust emergency in East Africa.

¹ Smallholders, food security, and the environment IFAD, 2013

² <http://www.fao.org/family-farming/regions/africa/en/>

The African Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) indicates that 52 AU Member States had reported positive cases of COVID-19 as of 7 April 2020. Consequently, governments have rapidly put in place measures to control the spread of the pandemic. Some of these measures are not fully aligned with those of neighbouring countries which could have implications for containment of COVID-19, as well as food security across the region. In addition, many of these measures could have adverse implications in terms of agri-food value chains¹ and flows especially for the poor and vulnerable populations.

Challenges specific to the Covid-19 pandemic

Small-scale producers present a major opportunity in this crisis as they can continue producing at family farm level. It is therefore fundamental that the agricultural input and service supply chains are prioritized and the necessary phytosanitary and health measures be put in place to ensure safety of the people engaged. In order to facilitate their continued food production at this time, it will be critical to address some of the challenges they are already or could be facing in accessing inputs, including services that are provided by local and national authorities, such as extension workers and veterinary support.

The small-scale agricultural producers are, in many cases, dependent upon larger supply chains to obtain agricultural inputs and services. Restricted movement at national level, as well as slow down and/or closure of services such as ports and border checkpoints affect imports, including across borders. These are adverse for small-scale producers.

The production calendar is at various stages in the continent and there is need to consider the seasonality aspect, while instituting the various control measures in order to ensure that important opportunities are not missed. For example, in East Africa (Kenya, Somalia and parts of Ethiopia), the planting for the main agricultural season is now on; any delays in input flows will have snowballing impacts. In the Sahel region, where acute food insecurity rose significantly last year (from 10.6 million in the 2019 lean season to 17 million forecasts in the coming lean season), the planting season is starting from June and farmers need to start accessing inputs as soon as possible.

In addition, in countries where the planting season is later in the year, such as in Southern Africa, not acting now to secure input supply chains could have knock-on effects in terms of accessing these in time for the seasons and therefore on food production. This would be devastating in some areas of the sub-region that experienced cyclones and severe drought last year and were already facing rising levels of food insecurity.

As noted, small-scale farmers produce both for their households as well as for the market for income. It is therefore critical that access and flows to both input and produce markets remain operational in order to minimize demand side contractions. This will incentivize the producers to obtain inputs and produce their crops, livestock and products.

¹ Agri-food value chains comprise interlinked networks of various actors—including farmers and producers, both large and small, suppliers and distributors of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, machinery, etc.) and services, providers of transport and logistics services, agro-processors and manufacturers, exporters and importers, and quality and safety inspectors and systems, among many others.

The current crisis challenges us all to consider how we can simultaneously facilitate and strengthen local-level systems, bringing responses as close to the people and their needs, while simultaneously maintaining and enhancing upstream inter-regional, cross-border and international agri-food systems.

Proposed actions for consideration in addressing these challenges

Integrated solutions will be critical to secure agri-food systems, tailored to the needs of both small-scale producers, as well as the larger commercial producers, recognizing that they are inter-dependent even for the most remote communities.

Facilitating inter-regional (and inter-continental) trade of key agricultural inputs

Building on opportunities created by the African Continental Free-Trade Area, for example, through exemptions on import restrictions for and movements of food products and/or inputs to agri-food supply chains across borders.

- Scaling up the import of basic food security crops to ensure stability of national supplies.
- Allowing exemptions on import and movement restrictions for key inputs (seeds, fertilizers, equipment, spare parts, etc.)
- Establishing protocols for the movement of live animals across borders, for example, building on existing IGAD-facilitated agreements for cross-border livestock movement in the Greater Karamoja Area. This will be particularly important for vulnerable pastoral populations who rely on seasonal movements across borders for their survival.

Keeping input supply mechanisms working for small-scale producers

Given that small-scale producers rely on a mix of informal and national-level input supply mechanisms, from their own or local-level seed production to major subsidized schemes such as those in Zambia, specific measures to continue these mechanisms could include:

- Classifying small-scale, rural agrodealers as “essential” in containment regulations.
- Building on the lessons from the Ebola Virus Disease response in West Africa, where producer organizations exist and are functioning, support them to enable their full engagement in negotiations, purchasing inputs in bulk, accessing transport, moving supplies, accessing storage facilities and moving the supplies as close as possible to local levels.
- As much as possible, and where feasible, using electronic disbursement of vouchers for government-subsidized or -supported input distribution schemes and access to services (tractor, transport and mechanized services).
- Considering cash advances to small-scale producers to secure their access to inputs for upcoming seasons and avert potential indebtedness after the pandemic and containment measures are eased.
- Enabling informal seed markets or input trade fairs to continue within strict observation of health regulations. This would mean significantly increasing the

number of sites at which informal seed or produce markets are held and limiting the number of vendors and buyers, as well as ensuring safe distances between vendors. Governments to provide oversight and coordination with the private sector and producer organizations.

- Investing in storage facilities (including cold storage for veterinary inputs and perishables) at local authority, community and household level for both input reserves and to reduce post-harvest losses. This could be done in collaboration with WASH actors and others.
- Use of informal systems at local level, for example, youth organizations with motor cycles (boda boda in Kenya and Uganda) to ensure delivery in local areas. This could be accompanied by health and safety related messaging.
- Policies to ensure continuation of key support services for agri-food value chains - governments can facilitate continued functioning of advisory support mechanisms, producer associations, cooperatives, enterprises, pest control programmes, veterinary and extension workers – with special emphasis on disease control, food safety and quality control measures – for example, by scaling up innovations in digital technologies, such as in Rwanda, among others, where these have already been tested. This would ensure maintenance of technical advice to farmers.

Ensuring that livelihoods-saving assistance is included as essential in regulations on continued humanitarian work

Livelihoods assistance, for example, large-scale seed distributions using most appropriate mechanisms, has been widely acknowledged as central to humanitarian operations and this must be reflected in national and local agreements on continued humanitarian operations. For example, in 2018, one-third of national main season production in South Sudan was done using FAO-provided seeds and inputs.

- Local purchases of agricultural inputs for humanitarian purposes should be exempt from restrictions.
- Establishment of efficient and effective humanitarian food, seed and livestock feed reserves should be considered and implemented well ahead of the seasons.
- Stocks of critical veterinary supplies (vaccines, drugs) should be developed and moved as close as possible to local communities, alongside cold chain support at this level.

Guiding questions for consideration by the Ministers:

- What are the major difficulties you expect on the input supply chain?
- Which inputs are the most affected?
- How are you resolving them?
- Do you think this could affect the next planting season?