

On-line Conference on the impact of the COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and sovereignty

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Background

The people of East Africa are largely small scale farmers with a significant role in food production and the agriculture sector, which is a priority policy objective of the East African Community (EAC). Before the impact of the desert locust on the sector could be assessed, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. With the ever increasing number of cases of COVID-19 in the region, the entire East African regional governments have implemented strategic actions to protect the citizens including tightened borders, quarantines, restricted gatherings yet small scale farmers operate in groups. Eastern and Southern Africa Small-scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) together with different organisations in EAC and beyond found it necessary to have small-scale farmer leaders in the region and key strategic partners and stakeholders discuss the possible impact of the COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and food sovereignty as well as develop actionable strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on food security and food sovereignty in the region.

We, the small-scale farmers and representatives from national and regional farmer organisations, national organisations, regional and international organisations, private sector, public and private research organisations, media and students from EAC and beyond convened an On-line Conference on Wednesday 8th April 2020 using Zoom and discussed the impact of the COVID-19 on small-scale farming, food security and sovereignty in the EAC.

We have noted that;

The heads of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a joint statement on 31 March calling on governments to minimise the impact of COVID-19 related border restrictions on trade in food. The EAC has already been struggling with the locusts before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. There is a lot of fear and uncertainty; small-scale farmers aren't well prepared for the likely impact of COVID-19 mostly because of inadequate information and fake news. Small-scale farmers are facing high cost of agricultural inputs especially seeds, hoes, drugs among others. The presence of the COVID-19 in the region has also paralyzed extension services because most extension workers fear risking their lives to go for work in the communities and also movements are restricted. With restriction on gatherings, farms have limited labour force hence reduction on the farm coverage in this season.

In-case the situation escalates, small-scale farmers especially women will be more vulnerable because they take care of the sick, elderly and most importantly provide the labor in the farms. Furthermore, without protective equipment for small-scale farmers, many farmers will opt to stay at home to be safe rather than go into the farms, if this pandemic isn't managed well, the region might face a food crisis, given that the pandemic surfaced during the planting season.

Small-scale farmers are experiencing exploitation by "middlemen" who take the best produce from farmers' gardens at very low prices while other business men in the region are hoarding agriculture produce and inputs to influence the increase in prices at a later stage and will likely make food producers more at risk of food insecurity. The many vulnerable households who can't access food because of the restrictions may end-up struggling with malnutrition or at worst dying of hunger.

There is a likely impact of the current restrictions and lockdowns in the region on land tenure security and other productive resources as some people in the population might use this opportunity to grab land and other resources from small-scale farmers since small-scale farmers cannot access land registration offices and other land services.

Based on the deliberations, we call upon EAC member states to;

Continue standing in solidarity with small-scale farmers in the EAC. This includes standing for their rights to protective resources and against exploitation but especially the rights of women who are most at risk.

Support the promotion of agroecological agriculture in the EAC which is known for providing nutritious foods and being resilient through such situations.

Improve access to information by use of local structures at lower levels; government and other stakeholders should create extensive awareness of small-scale farmers on COVID-19. This would address fake news which is causing fear among the farming population in the region and paralyzing activities.

Provide small scale farmers with resources like hygiene kits, cleaning of infrastructure, etc as measures to prevent COVID 19 contamination including a series of health measures to reduce the risk. In addition to this, social protection provision for the small scale farmers in the EAC needs to be prioritized.

Ensure that the development of policies in EAC emphasizes the development of the agriculture sector in accordance with the Malabo Declaration of 2014. Policies like the National Agriculture Investment Policy (NAIP) in each of the countries should reflect the commitments in the Malabo Declaration especially the need to invest more than 10% of the national budget to the agriculture budget. This is because COVID-19 pandemic has justified the importance of the agriculture sector in food security and food sovereignty of a nation.

Establish and strengthen the EAC Food Reserve Fund to be used during emergencies and disasters.

In conclusion, we agreed to;

Support national governments in developing approved information and communication materials on COVID 19 and distribute them to the small-scale farmers.

Link small-scale farmers especially women who have reported to be stranded with perishable produce in their villages to potential transporters and buyers.

For and on behalf of participants:

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For more information:

On-line Conference Podcast: <https://esaffuganda.org/podcasts/>