

By Olusegun Obasanjo and Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe;

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Africa has so far escaped the worst health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the continent looks like it could be the worst hit from the economic fallout of the crisis: 80 million Africans could be pushed into extreme poverty if action is not taken. And disruptions in food systems raise the prospect of more Africans falling into hunger. Rural people, many of whom work on small-scale farms, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis. It is therefore vital that the COVID-19 response address food security and target the rural poor.

At this time, the international development agenda is prioritizing health, economies and infrastructure. But there must also be a focus on food security, agribusiness and rural development. This is especially important on the African continent.

Agriculture contributes 65 per cent of Africa's employment and 75 per cent of its domestic trade. However, the rich potential of agriculture as a tool to promote food security and fight poverty is at risk from the effects of COVID-19.

In March, the UN Economic Commission for Africa predicted growth in Africa would drop from 3.2 per cent to 1.8 per cent in 2020. Within the continent, lockdowns are disrupting inter-regional trade. The effect of restrictive measures on food trade is especially worrying, in particular for food-importing countries, but also because of shrinking export markets for the continent's farmers.

Across the European Union (the largest export market for Africa's fresh fruits and vegetables), demand has dropped for popular produce such as Kenyan avocados, South African citrus and Moroccan vegetables. Kenya has also recorded an 8.5 per cent decline for tea exports to destinations like Iran, Pakistan and UAE. Within countries, we are already seeing that interruptions to transport and distribution systems are impeding small-scale farmers from accessing essential inputs – like seeds and fertilizer – and from getting their food to markets.

African governments have defined stimulus measures to mitigate national and regional economic impacts of COVID-19. As they do, they must remember that investments in agriculture can be up to five times more poverty-reducing than investments in other sectors. Investments in rural, small-scale agriculture are

particularly important for the region's food security, for safeguarding the livelihoods of some of its most vulnerable people and for sustaining the gains in poverty alleviation and wealth creation.

Small farms everywhere traditionally make a huge contribution to global food security. Around the world, small-farm dominated systems produce 50 per cent of all food calories on 30 per cent of the world's agricultural land. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, the role of small-scale farms is even more significant: 80 per cent of farms are small in most of these countries.

Even before the current crisis, globally more than 820 million people were going hungry daily. And the majority of the world's poor and hungry people live in the rural areas of developing countries. In Africa, reliance on food imports, and lack of services and infrastructure to enable small-scale farmers to produce and market food, along with the shocks of climate change, have all increased the fragility of food access.

In April, the World Bank projected the pandemic would hit Africa the hardest of any region, pushing 23 million people into poverty. This raises the question of how small producers in Africa can get access to inputs and finance to grow and sell the food needed to ensure food security and support livelihoods. African leaders must be in the vanguard of funding solution

In April, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (<https://bit.ly/2WSOWbw>) launched a multi-donor fund- COVID-19 Rural Poor Stimulus Facility (RPSF) (<https://bit.ly/2AmoUpj>) – to address the immediate fallout of COVID-19 for rural people in Africa and elsewhere. IFAD specializes in investing in poor rural people, targeting the poorest and most marginalized. Among other goals, the new facility will provide small-scale farmers and fishers with basic inputs, and help them access markets and maintain cash flow. IFAD committed US\$40 million to the new fund, but aims to raise at least \$200 million more from UN Member States, foundations and the private sector.

The Facility will complement and scale-up the work IFAD has already been doing to repurpose existing project activities. In Malawi, for example, a programme is providing social cash transfers to ultra-poor farmers and delivering messages about financial literacy and COVID-19 prevention. In Eritrea, vulnerable households are receiving small ruminants and seeds to strengthen, maintain production, access markets and safeguard household food security during the crisis.

These immediate actions are essential to mitigate the worst risks of the crisis. They are also important to safeguard IFAD's past and ongoing investments to build the long-term resilience of rural livelihoods. Ultimately, we need to ensure that rural people and their businesses are the foundation of resilient rural economies and food systems across Africa. Then, when the next crisis strikes, the vulnerable people of today will be better able to protect their livelihoods and avoid the risk of falling into poverty and hunger.

So while it's urgent to feed people today, we also must look to the days, months and years ahead. This is one reason why IFAD prioritizes long-term rural and agricultural development and building resilience to future shocks. It is also why we urge policy makers to adapt any relevant lessons from how previous outbreaks like the Ebola virus affected agriculture and food systems.

In the long term, this pandemic underscores the need for Africa to transform agriculture and agribusiness as the surest path to inclusive economic growth, wealth generation and greater resilience.

As Special Envoys, we believe in IFAD's exceptional mandate and will continue to work closely with the Fund in mobilizing resources to support the most vulnerable on the African continent. The pandemic will expose the livelihoods of rural marginalized groups to unprecedented challenges. To restore hope to those affected, we commit strongly to the idea that no one will be left behind, especially in Africa.

The authors are Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe, former Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Both are IFAD Special Envoys engaged to mobilize support and advocate for greater investment in rural areas.

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