

During this unprecedented time where the coronavirus pandemic has paralysed daily lives, work, business and travel, people still need to feed. The government of Rwanda issued instructions aimed at farmers to continue delivering food and get needed services amid the coronavirus lockdown but challenges remain mostly because of the unforeseen crisis.

Systems in place helping farmers are like the Farm to Market Alliance (FtMA), initiated to support smallholder farmers to increase productivity and gain access to market has eased the link between farmers and buyers during this period.

Elie Mugishawimana, the manager of COOPAMA cooperative in Mimuri of Nyagatare District says having signed pre-harvest contracts with EAX and AIF facilitated the selling of their produce without any problem.

However, Mugishawimana notes they still have remaining stock that is yet to be taken but was facing one or two problems that needs to be solved to sale. Buyers normally send their field officers to scout for the harvest and check quality like levels of aflatoxin in the maize and the cooperative sends along their own worker to accompany the cargo up to the buyer's warehouse.

During this period, some buyers were not able to send anyone because of transport blockade and trucks are currently not allowed to carry more than two people which prevents the person who normally accompanies the produce to the buyer.

Mugishawimana explains that accompanying the produce is an assurance that their cargo is not tampered with on the way because transportation is undertaken by a third party. He observes that something can be done on this issue by building a system that answers such small matters.

Arnold Ihimbazwe, EAX field officer in Gatsibo District says that during this period when travels have been suspended to curb the spread of coronavirus they faced transport challenges to reach the cooperatives.

The most commonly used mode of transport has been motor cycles which have been grounded. Ihimbazwe says is unable to scout for produce and test the quality before its transported to their warehouses.

"We haven't created a system where farmers can automatically send the produce directly to buyers and we need to go on ground test the quality of the harvests to

give them a go ahead.

Many farmers or cooperatives lack equipment to test aflatoxin levels in maize while some are lacking knowledge for postharvest handling.

Anowarita Musabyimana, Manager of Codegrifoga cooperative in Rwesheke in Gatunda sector, Nyagatare District said that last week they delivered maize to their contract buyer but it was refused because of aflatoxin.

She blamed this to lack of equipment that can monitor and test levels of aflatoxin in the maize. She says the cooperative was still facing postharvest handling challenges.

Aimable Usengimana, RDO senior extensionist for the Eastern Province confirmed such challenges as postharvest handling in affecting some cooperatives lacking knowledge and resources.

He notes that the FtMA project was initiated by the World Food Programme (WFP) in Rwanda in response to such challenges. The project supports smallholder farmers to increase on-farm productivity and market access, it has already mobilized off-takers willing to offer forward delivery contracts to farmers and cooperatives. Agricultural input dealers willing to provide high quality seeds and fertilizers to farmers have also been mobilized.

The project which is implemented by Rwanda Development Organization (RDO) and Rwanda Rural Rehabilitation Initiative (RWARRI) works in 18 districts. They are currently assisting 207 cooperatives regrouping 72,039 farmers including 35,570 women which are growing maize or beans in season A, B, and C.

FtMA supports Farmer cooperatives in terms of capacity building such as Good Agriculture Practices, Post-harvest handling and Storage, quality control and food safety training, to ensure they have high quantity and quality produce in each season, and be able to bring surpluses on market.