By Wambui Gichuri;

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World Food Day 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organization, but celebrations this 16 October are muted due to the coronavirus.

COVID-19's multi-sectoral impact should have governments and development institutions rethink investments in food security, healthy diets, and building infrastructure that supports how food is grown, processed, traded, delivered, sold and consumed.

COVID-19 lockdowns and decreases in incomes have generated a double demand shock – increasing the number of poor and vulnerable people, particularly in Africa's cities.

To meet today's needs, the African continent relies on more than $75 billion worth of food imports to supplement its food supply. From cereals like wheat, maize and rice, to dairy products and other animal products – Africa imports essential food in significant amounts and this deficit has quadrupled in the last 15 years.

But we are planting the seeds to reverse this trend.

In line with the World Food Day theme, "Grow. Nourish. Sustain. Together," the African Development Bank's Feed Africa strategy is working with African governments and the private sector to grow more – and more nutritious – food.

Feed Africa aims to build robust food systems. For example, our Feed Africa Response to COVID-19, or FAREC is supporting our regional member countries with a range of investment options designed to stabilize food systems and minimize disruptions to the delivery and accessibility of nutritious food in the short term, as well as build more sustainable, healthy diet-oriented food systems in the longer term.

The Bank's Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation, or TAAT is working with developers of food production technologies, seed companies, farmer groups, regional economic commissions and researchers to more efficiently deliver certified

seeds, breeds and young fish (fingerlings) to 40 million farmers.

To date, TAAT-funded programs have produced 65,000 metric tonnes of heat-tolerant, certified wheat seeds in Ethiopia that resulted in higher-producing, higher-quality wheat harvests in areas that were once inhospitable to the grain. Similarly, TAAT has helped produce 27,000 metric tonnes of certified drought-tolerant maize seed for distribution to farmers in Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

Virtually all African nations have been affected by COVID-19. During this pandemic, we must emphasize advocacy and economic sector work related to agriculture, nutrition and building back food systems.

The reality is that resources are being directed to emergency COVID-19 responses. However, we can maintain the momentum around nutrition and food systems awareness by leveraging the lessons learned from the coronavirus era to conduct analytical work and knowledge sharing. This is also an opportune time to carry out policy research to implement bolder programs as we “build back better” from COVID-19.

Post pandemic, resilience is key. Our priorities to build food systems that deliver safe, affordable, nutritious food and diets include: support to the capacity of smallholder farmers and agro-input providers to enhance productivity; promotion of enterprise development and digital technology; and building up key quality infrastructure that focuses on public-private partnerships financing and support for government-led connectivity programs.

To achieve these goals, we also need closer involvement and engagement with key stakeholders who we are celebrating as Food Heroes on this World Food Day. Food Heroes are important players and influencers in the agricultural value chain, from farm to fork. Let’s recognize just a few:

Food Heroes are the Food and Agricultural Organization, with whom the Bank recently hosted a series of online sessions on Digitalization to Transform Agriculture in Africa and Respond to COVID-19 .

Food Heroes are the World Food Program of the United Nations, which won the Nobel Peace Prize for 2020 for its leadership in supporting provision of food and nutrition to the most vulnerable around the world.

Food Heroes are Bank President and 2017 World Food Prize laureate Dr. Akinwumi A. Adesina, who in his re-election inauguration speech committed to building on the Bank's accomplishments in agriculture to help feed Africa, to process more of what we grow and to generate jobs.

Food Heroes are the African agripreneurs submitting their agribusiness start-up plans to our AgriPitch competition, being held in November. The competition offers business development training and a combined $120,000 in investment fund prizes.

Food Heroes are our newly named SME Champions, part of a growing number of small and medium enterprises dominating Africa's domestic food supply chains, largely in processing, wholesale, logistics and retail.

And Food Heroes are Bank staff and consultants who develop and implement projects and policies to light up and power Africa, industrialize Africa, integrate Africa, improve the quality of life for the people of Africa and feed Africa. They are making the continent's food systems stronger, sustainable and more resilient.

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