

Written by Dr. Daniel Kyalo Willy

Mr. Wycliff Wephukhulu has just retired from a very productive day at his 5-acre farm. He is trying to rush against time to finish land preparation before the long rains start.

As he listens to the evening bulletin on his favorite vernacular radio station, news stream in that more positive cases of the deadly *Corona Virus Disease* (COVID-19) have been confirmed in Kenya.

With this, the government has restricted travel into and out of four counties in Kenya besides a dusk to dawn curfew, while the government of Uganda, a neighboring country not far from his village, has taken stricter measures, there will be a total lock down for 21 days.

Similar situations have been experienced across the African soil. As he ponders over this news, he cannot stop wondering how this pandemic will affect his plans at the farm and his children residing in Nairobi, Mombasa and Entebbe.

For Wycliff and millions like him in Africa, farming is the main source of income.

Moreover, slightly over 60% of African economies derive 25-40% of their GDP from Agriculture. Consequently, a pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19 cannot be brushed off because it touches the nerves of many farmers and economies.

The pandemic is likely to affect Wycliff and others like him, be it in Nigeria, Senegal, Djibouti, and the other 50+ countries in Africa where the pandemic has already been confirmed in the following three major ways.

Limited Access to Inputs

Due to the lock downs and economic slowdown that most countries are experiencing, the production and distribution of critical inputs: Fertilizer, Seeds and Pesticides will be disrupted.

Besides the limited access to these critical inputs, their prices are also likely increase as a result of suppressed supply. Untimely access and costly inputs are likely to deny farmers the opportunity to apply these inputs at critical stages of crop development and increase the cost of production, hence affecting yields and incomes.

Suppressed Labour Markets

Agricultural production in Africa is generally labour-intensive.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have a direct impact on the physical and mental health of the labour force hence limiting output per person.

The anxieties and limited movement as a result of lock down is likely to limit labour mobility, creating labour shortages and eventually leading to low labour productivity.

In areas where group labour is a common practice, social distancing requirements will most likely to limit the number of people who can work at the same time, with implications on labour

Limited Access to Local and International Markets

COVID-19 has disrupted agricultural supply chains a great deal.

For export commodities, the disruption of international transport and logistics has cut off producers from the foreign markets. Exports of fruits, vegetables, coffee, tea, Cocoa and flowers from Africa to the rest of the world to the world markets has reduced drastically.

For commodities sold in the local markets, the impact can be either positive or negative.

Positive impact comes from inter-regional market opportunities, which can sustain farmers' incomes, so long as the local movement of agricultural commodities is not disrupted.

Negative impacts can be caused by disruptions in local transportation, leading to huge post-harvest losses, surpluses in some regions and scarcity in others.

Also, business closure and job losses in the service and manufacturing sectors will lead to lower incomes hence less purchasing power of consumers in urban areas, leading to lower dietary diversity. The net effect to farmers will depend on the magnitude of the positive and the negative impacts.

How will the African Farmer Bounce back after COVID-19?

In the short run, curtailing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is the most urgent thing.

In the meantime, focus needs to concentrate on equipping farmers with the necessary personal protection equipment and sanitizers to enhance protection of farmers and their laborers. There is also need to farmers to enhance personal protection and capacity to prevent contamination of foodstuffs.

After dealing with the health dimension of the pandemic, the world will be staring at another crisis post COVID-19 if the right measures are not taken now.

The 330 Million people who are already facing food insecurity in Africa need to be cushioned against falling into chronic hunger. Remedy measures need to focus on enhancing farmers capacity to access quality seeds, fertilizer and other critical inputs. Given that border closures and other disruptions on internal transport and mobility of people may subsist for a while, there is need to focus on eliminating any physical barriers on the movement of goods and services.

Furthermore, there is need to eliminate any non-tariff barriers and additional border control procedures that limit the movement of goods and services. This can be achieved through smart subsidy programmes, availing low cost agricultural credit and other fiscal measures such as reduction of VAT and other levies on basic inputs and basic commodities to cushion farmers and other vulnerable groups against the impacts of COVID-19.

It is worth noting that these measures will need mobilization of resources from concerted efforts among several stakeholders. One initiative that has contributed resources into these efforts is the COVID-19 response facility recently launched by the African Development Bank (AfDB) group to assist regional member countries in fighting the pandemic.

The facility is the latest measure taken by the Bank to respond to the pandemic and will be the institution's primary channel for its efforts to address the crisis. It provides up to \$10 billion to governments and the private sector.

Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank Group, said the package took into account the fiscal challenges that many African countries are facing.

“Africa is facing enormous fiscal challenges to respond to the coronavirus pandemic effectively. The African Development Bank Group is deploying its full weight of emergency response support to assist Africa at this critical time. We must protect lives. This Facility will help African countries to fast-track their efforts to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19,” Adesina said, commending the Board of Directors for its unwavering support.

The Facility entails \$5.5 billion for sovereign operations in African Development Bank countries, and \$3.1 billion for sovereign and regional operations for countries under the African Development Fund, the Bank Group’s concessional arm that caters to fragile countries. An additional \$1.35 billion will be devoted to private sector operations.

Dr. Wily, an Agricultural Economist at AATF works with the TAAT Policy Compact.