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Mini Review

Will Africa Agriculture survive the Impacts of COVID-19: What are the possible Impacts and Opportunities?

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that COVID-19 could have an enormous impact in African agriculture. Faced with the reality that agriculture is key to its future, Africa is putting effort into agricultural transformation to address the demand of its growing population. African governments are putting in place the reforms necessary to unlock agriculture's potential. These include access to land, new technologies, extension services, market access, access to finance, and private sector investment facilitation. To achieve reforms in the agricultural sector, the African nations are investing in building state capacity. All these gains are currently threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens to disrupt the agricultural value chain of the already vulnerable and undernourished populations. To ensure post-COVID-19 bounce back, African policymakers need to take a long look into the future post-COVID-19 and design specific programmes to support the recovery of the sector.

Introduction

This paper seeks to elucidate the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture in Africa. The paper discusses the impact and coping strategies require African agriculture to bounce back post-COVID 19. Africa reported its first case of COVID-19 on 14 February 2020 when Egypt's health ministry announced the first case in the country at Cairo International Airport involving a Chinese national on 14 February. The case in Egypt was quickly followed by Algeria, which reported its first case on 25 February 2020 when an Italian adult, who arrived in the country on 17 February 2020, tested positive for coronavirus disease. Since then, almost every country in Africa has reported cases of COVID-19. As of 13 May 2020, there were 69,578 cases reported and a total death toll of 2,403 and 23,978 recoveries. While this may seem a small number compared to other continents, the vulnerability of Africa to shocks makes this a serious concern. Since the first case in Africa was reported, many aspects of life have changed in Africa and globally. The pandemic has disrupted the political, social, economic, religious, and financial structures of the whole world. In particular, for Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading against the backdrop of persistent undernourishment because of the agricultural sector that has failed to cope with the growing populations and high vulnerability to external shocks.

According to OECD/FAO [1], the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region accounts for more than 950 million people, approximately 13% of the global population. By 2050, this share is projected to increase to almost 22% or 2.1 billion. The region has long-standing challenges with uneven progress across the different nations. Undernourishment remains one of the biggest challenges. Despite being reduced from 33% in 1990-92 to 23% in 2014-16, the percentage of undernourishment remains the highest among developing regions [2]. Slow progress towards food security has been attributed to low productivity of agricultural resources, high population growth rates, political instability, and civil strife. The situation seems to get worse as food security continues to become a critical issue for Africa today as the continent continues to battle with climate change-induced shocks such as floods and recurring drought conditions. Adding to the list is the devastating effect of locust invasion in 2019 and 2020 and currently the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, which has rendered many households hopeless while further threaten already weakened productivity, making the situation more precarious.

Over 80 per cent of food consumed in Kenya is produced by rural populations who often participate as farm owners (producers) or farm employees. Disruptions in their livelihoods would adversely affect the poor and other marginalized groups with less purchasing power and resources to adapt to this unpredictable global crisis. As one writer puts it "Empty shelves can be frightening, but empty fields and barns would be devastating." The study was conducted using qualitative approaches involving tracking news in the media, including social media, literature search, Government, and World Health Organization (WHO) updates and discussion with key informants in the sector. Based on this, the following key issues emerged.

Access to Agricultural Inputs

Rwanda was the first nation in Africa to be placed on lockdown as a way to control COVID-19 on 21 March 2020. Since then, almost all the counties in Africa have imposed varying levels of restriction in movement ranging from total county lockdown, curfews, and cessation of movement from certain areas within the same country. Due to the lockdowns and economic slowdown that most countries are experiencing, the production and distribution of critical inputs: Fertilizer, Seeds and Pesticides. Besides the limited access to critical inputs, their prices are also likely to hike because of suppressed supply against the growing demand. Timely access and costly inputs are critical factors of agricultural production. The disruption is therefore 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.

Low production due to Suppressed Labor Markets

In Africa, agricultural production remains labour-intensive due to the low mechanization of the agricultural production system. With the limited time due to curfews and different levels of movement restrictions, availability of labour is affected. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has a direct impact on the physical and mental health of the labour force hence limiting output per person. The anxieties and limited movement because of lockdown is likely to limit labour mobility, creating labour shortages and eventually leading to low labour productivity. In areas where group labour practices are standard practice such as the Mwehya Women group in Eastern Kenya, social distancing requirements will most likely limit the number of people who can work at the same time if they can work at all, with implications on labour.

Table 1: World Economic Growth Projections.

Real GDP annual percentage change	2019	Projection	
		2020	2021
World Output	2.9	-3	5.8
Advanced economies	1.7	-6.1	4.5
United States	2.3	-5.9	4.7
Euro Area	1.2	-7.5	4.7
German	0.6	-7	5.2
France	1.3	-7.2	4.5
Italy	0.3	-9.1	4.8
Spain	2	-8	4.3
Japan	0.7	-5.2	3
United Kingdom	1.4	-6.5	4
Canada	1.6	-6.2	4.2
Other Advance Economies	1.7	-4.6	4.5
Emerging Markets and Developing Economies	3.7	1	6.6
Emerging and Developing Asia	5.5	1	8.5
China	6.1	1.2	9.2
India	4.2	1.9	7.4
ASEAN-5	4.8	-0.6	7.8
Emerging and Developing Europe	2.1	-5.2	4.2
Russia	1.3	-5.5	3.5
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.1	-5.2	3.4
Brazil	1.1	-5.3	2.9
Mexico	0.1	-6.6	3
Middle East and Central Asia	1.2	-2.8	4
Saudi Arabia	0.3	-2.3	2.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	3.1	-1.6	4.1
Nigeria	2.2	-3.6	2.4
South Africa	0.2	-5.8	4
Low-Income Developing Countries	5.1	0.4	5.6

Disruption of Extension Services

Another aspect of agriculture facing severe negative impact of COVID-19 is extension services. With lockdown and restriction of movement in place in many countries, agricultural extension services in Africa, which still rely heavily on physical contacts, has been severely restricted. To enhance productivity at the farm level during this period, access to extension services remains critical, and this has largely remained elusive even in regular times.

Access to Local and International Markets

The COVID 19 pandemic has brought the world partially to a standstill and hampered the movement of people and goods at national and cross-boundary levels. Currently, governments in over 70 countries have imposed various degrees of lockdowns affecting 3 Billion people worldwide. The restriction of movement has severe consequences for many sectors, including the agricultural sector. For example, border raw has emerged between Kenya and Tanzania. In the raw each is blaming the other for spreading the COVID-19 across the shared border. The raw has impacted cross border trade, especially on agricultural products. 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 have reduced drastically. Kenyan effort to limit disruption of its flower export to the European market, the national flag bearer in Kenya, Kenya Airways (KQ) has converted its passenger planes to cargo under exceptional government support for flower industry that otherwise could have collapsed. 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 substantial 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 on farmers will depend on the magnitude of the positive and the negative impacts.

Dependence on Foreign Aid and Budget Inefficiencies Threaten Sustainability of Food-Security Interventions

Africa's heavy reliance on foreign aid is becoming under severe test during the COVID-19 period when most of the traditional donor countries are themselves facing serious COVID-19 burdens which is threatening the rundown of their health system and the economy. As countries implement necessary quarantines and social distancing practices to contain the pandemic, the world has been put in a Great Lockdown. The magnitude and speed of collapse in activity that has followed is unlike anything experienced in our lifetimes. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) [3], the COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting high, and rising human costs worldwide, and the necessary protection measures are severely affecting economic activity. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy is projected to contract sharply by 3 percent in 2020, much worse than during the 2008–09 financial crisis.

With the type of economic projection, the major world economies are likely to give higher priorities to internal economic revival and spend less in supporting the growing economies in Africa. In Ghana, external resources heavily support several ongoing social protection and agricultural growth programs. In Uganda, foreign aid overshadows government investment in agriculture. Dwindling donor support raises concerns about the sustainability of food security interventions. Even with sufficient resources for food-security interventions, inefficiency in allocation can act as a bottleneck for successful programming. Senegal is a great example. While it has the fourth-largest public budget for agriculture, certain areas and populations have experienced greater vulnerability to food insecurity. One potential explanation is Senegal's relatively weak investment in infrastructure. Research shows that areas with sufficient infrastructure have higher agricultural productivity and suggest that more efficient budget allocations - namely to support infrastructure - would enhance food-security initiatives.

Will African Farmer Bounce back after COVID-19?

In the short run, the focus is on controlling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is the most urgent thing. A few countries like Kenya are already looking into securing economic stimulus and social support packages such as the Uwezo Fund for the aged. Further, Kenya has predominantly focused on economic stimulus measures thus far. For example, two weeks ago, the Government cut the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) policy rate and reduced cash reserve ratios. There are also industry-specific packages (such as the \$5 million available to the tourism industry), and bank fees for money transfers between bank accounts and mobile wallets have been waived. While these are positive steps, there is little mention of the agriculture sector. The focus needs to concentrate on equipping farmers with the necessary personal protection equipment and sanitizers to enhance the protection of farmers and their labourers. There is also a need for farmers who need 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 a need to focus on eliminating any physical barriers on the movement of goods and services.

Furthermore, there is a 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 essential inputs and basic commodities to cushion farmers and other vulnerable groups against the impacts of COVID-19. Finally, measures to enhance the resilience of the agricultural sector against external shocks like this kind of pandemic crises seem desperately needed. This could



entail more circularity and autonomy in local-based production systems; increased availability of and access to processing and storage facilities or creating food banks and emergency stocks at decentralized levels. The term “think global, act local” seems to be more appropriate than ever.

Conclusion

The already vulnerable African Agriculture is facing one of its worst threats in decades. While immediate action is needed to protect African farmers against COVID-19 by providing protective clothing, sanitizers and other protective devices to reduce exposing the farmers to COVID-19 infection, African policymakers need to take a long look into the future post-COVID-19 and design specific programmes that will support the recovery of the sector. These could be achieved by designing smart subsidy programmes, availing low-cost agricultural credit, and other fiscal measures such as reduction of VAT and other fiscal incentives to enhance access to essential inputs and basic commodities to cushion farmers and other vulnerable groups against the impacts of COVID-19.

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