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ESAFF Communique and position on Covid-19 “Make Cushioning Small-Scale Farmers High Priority for Assured Food Security”



Calling Every government in EAC and SADC blocs should make definite assistance to cushion small-scale farmers, fisherfolks, and agri micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) from the aftermath of coronavirus pandemic

1. The need to forestall the looming food crisis

This communique is the result of the two webinars and consultations that were organised by ESAFF Uganda for East African Community (EAC- countries) and ESAFF regional office for (SADC countries). The two events brought together smallholder farmers and CSO stakeholders as well as law makers and policy makers. They were organised in collaborations between ESAFF and Oxfam after the outbreak of COVID – 19 in African continent. The event took place on 8th and 21st April 2020 respectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved unrelenting (January/May 2020) pushing healthcare to be the top priority for many countries, including the 16 countries spread across East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) blocs¹ where the Eastern and Southern Africa small-scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) network represents the interests of over 2.1 million small-scale farmers.

According to the United Nations, the pandemic is a huge global health crisis and has become the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War Two.² Every nation has taken diverse measures to contain the pandemic. In some cases, its economic showdown, partial economic shutdowns, and even where there is no shutdown, there is a huge economic slowdown in efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus. This will have a devastating impact on the small-scale farmers/fisherfolks/traders/livestock keepers, who often live hand to mouth life.

Apart from exacerbating the crisis of limited basic healthcare capacity in the region's nations, it has also created a crisis in education and food supply. Smallholder farmers would like to state that availability and access to basic healthy food is one of the most critical factors that cannot be gained, even in the fight against Covid-19 and all the times, for the good and health of our nations.

All small-scale farmers must be extra cautious. All agriculture sector workers must collaborate with local and national governments to prevent smallholder farmers from infections, while at the same time, being able to produce. It is a simple fact that during and after the crisis, every individual needs to eat a balanced diet, stay alive and healthy.

The coronavirus crisis brings to the fore that healthy diets (derived from good sustainable agricultural practices- agronomy) are key to good health, including a strong immune system for fighting off diseases.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)³ has warned that a protracted pandemic crisis will “quickly put a strain on the food supply chains, a complex web of interactions involving farmers, agricultural inputs, processing plants, shipping, retailers and more.”

Amidst uncertainties and economic meltdown brought about by the pandemic, unless decisive measures are taken to cushion small-scale farmers in the region, a looming food crisis will be inevitable with far-reaching ramification to the wellbeing of Eastern and Southern Africa nations.

EAC has over 130 million small-scale farmers while SADC has 169 million (includes crop growers, pastoralists, fisherfolks and foresters), who supply over 70 percent of food and are all vital in the two arms of the agriculture value chain- product supply (farmers to processors) and input supply (manufacturers to farmers).

¹ ESAFF operates in 16 countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, namely-. Tanzania through MVIWATA; Kenya (Kenya small-scale Farmers Forum – KESSEF), Uganda (ESAFF Uganda), DRC through FOPAC, Zambia (ESAFF Zambia); Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Small Organic Farmers' Forum – ZIMSOF), Lesotho (Lesotho small-scale Farmers Forum); South Africa (ESAFF South Africa); Malawi (National small-scale Farmers Movement - NASFAM); Rwanda (APEEE); Burundi (ESAFF Burundi); Madagascar (Confédération des Agriculteurs Malagas-CPM); Mozambique (ROSA), eSwatini (ESAFF eSwatini), Seychelles (Seychelles Farmers Association - SeyFA), and South Sudan (SSAPU).

² <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/coronavirus.html>

ESAFF members on the ground have seen the pandemic already creating a food supply disruption, where millions of small-scale farmers are affected and face multidimensional losses, from post-harvest loss, inability to access inputs and markets, and in some cases women smallholder farmers are unable to continue with farming activities due to gender based violence and insecurity in rural setups.

Smallholder farmers and their families constitute the majority populace in the region thus their wellbeing or ill-being carries the welfare of a nation. In essence, ESAFF and members are calling for deep and practical measures to support and protect the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak and post the outbreak, so as to forestall a food crisis. Smallholders apart from providing the food supply (food security, including for the urban masses), are the pillars of rural development and poverty reduction.

ESAFF members at the grassroots continue to collect data on how the pandemic is adversely affecting smallholder farmers using mobile devices and as the pandemic unfolds, we will analyze it and share, for the benefit of smallholder farmers.

2. Monumental challenges for EAC, SADC small-scale farmers

The year 2020 so far has been clothed with numerous monumental challenges for smallholder farmers in EAC and SADC blocs. According to the AU Biennial Review Report of the Malabo Declaration that was availed in February 2020, all countries in the two blocks are NOT ON TRACK to achieve the Malabo goals except Rwanda. Many countries in the two regions experience high level of undernutrition (25%-44%), stunting among children under 5 years (26%- 50%) and are not investing 10% to national agriculture budget to ensure sector growth of 6% annually. There has been a devastating locust outbreak and huge flooding (some schools of thought see them as climate change induced problems), followed by the now global health pandemic COVID-19. All the other challenges small-scale farmers are facing have been superseded by COVID-19, which is facing all the attention, but they too need desired attention in mitigation of the aftermath.

In both EAC and SADC blocs, for each nation, there are varying levels of risk brought about by the coronavirus and require diversified strategies to cushion smallholder farmers so as to keep our nation healthy and moving forward.

ESAFF is grateful that both EAC⁴ and SADC⁵ moved swiftly in the wake of the coronavirus to bring forward some mitigative measures including guidelines on cross border transport during the COVID-19, a concern of small-scale farmers.

EAC Heads of State summit⁶ (Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan) 12th May 2020, categorically “directed partner states to facilitate farmers to continue farming activities during this pandemic and post COVID-19 period, support agro-processing and value chains as an import substitution measure and establish special purpose financing schemes for small and medium enterprises, to cushion them from the negative effects of the covid-19 pandemic.”

3 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8388en/CA8388EN.pdf>

4 East Africa Community COVID-19 Response Plan-<https://www.eac.int/coronavirus>

5 https://www.sadc.int/files/9115/8697/9635/SADC_regional_response_to_COVID-19.pdf

6 <https://www.eac.int/communique/1725-communique%C3%A9-heads-of-state-consultative-meeting-of-the-east-african-community>

However, smallholder farmers through ESAFF are calling for, in addition to the set measure and, to look deeper into the needs of the largest economic group (small-scale farmers) in all responses, so that their health is assured, and the ability to produce food supported by better budgetary allocation in 2020/21 financial year for assured food security in the region's two blocs. Past blanked failures by majority governments to invest in agriculture as set out in the Malabo Declaration, will make the current situation worse. A failure to have a coordinated response amongst EAC and SADC member states will likely also prolong the impact on COVID risks, into a huge multifaceted crisis with enormous negative impact on food production.

3. What EAC and SADC can do for the welfare of smallholder farmers:

- a) The blocs should take a nexus approach in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, looking beyond the health sector, to overall sustainability, where food security and food sovereignty is the key. Healthy, safe and nutritious food security is highly important for combating COVID-19, malnutrition, hunger and poverty in general.
- b) To define COVID-19 critical high contact sectors to include healthcare, food supply chain, sustainable/ecological production and education and develop coordinated mitigative measures.
- c) To look deeper into the practical measures to support and protect the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak and thereafter for the sake of regional food security.
- d) Establish coordinated crisis response actions, protocols in health, transport, including mobilization, strategies, monitoring
- e) Take deliberate efforts to domesticate the African Union decision passed by the Heads of State and Governments on Ecological Organic Agriculture Initiative (EOA-I) in 2011 to support organic Agriculture and adoption of Climate Resilience Sustainable Agriculture practices (EX.CL/DEC 631 (XVII)).

4. What nations can do for the welfare of smallholder farmers:

- a) Each country should look deeper into the practical measures to support and protect the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and their families including right to healthy food during the COVID-19 outbreak and thereafter for the sake of national security.
- b) Specific ministries for agriculture should urgently look at the funding needs for small-scale farmers and use the nexus lens in coming out with small-scale farmers cushioning funds.
- c) Ensure progressive domestication and realization of Malabo Declaration goals, especially on agriculture financing (10% annual budget allocation and ensure 6% annual growth), to end hunger and halve poverty and realize all other goals.

- d) Each country, just as the blocs, should take a nexus approach in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, looking beyond the health sector, to overall sustainability, where food security and sovereignty is the key. Food security and sovereignty is highly important for combating COVID-19 and hunger and poverty in general.
- e) Each member state prioritizes food production within the region by using available input to ensure availability of healthy food and food sovereignty instead of using foreign currency for importation of especially rice, wheat, edible oil, fish and poultry.
- f) Each country should strengthen strategic national grain and variety food reserves to support stable prices.
- g) Each member states to increase support to agroecology and family farming as well as support to farmer managed seed systems (Community seed banks and community warehouses) to enable resilience in post COVID19 whereby seed could be expensive and out of reach for many poor smallholder farmers.
- h) International community and International financing institutions support should be in line to assist countries to respond to the COVID -19 crisis in their local context and priorities and not imposing harsh conditions which perpetuate poverty among the vulnerable communities including smallholder farmers.

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