

# WILL THE AFRICAN FARMER SURVIVE COVID-19?

Dr. Daniel Kyalo Willy

Contemporary Opinion Series

Friday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020



Mr. Wycliff Wepukhulu 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 ways.



## 330 Million Africans likely to face Hunger

- 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 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 downs is likely to limit labour mobility, creating labour shortages and eventually low productivity.

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

In the short run, terminating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is critical. Farmers 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. 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.

- 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 and flowers 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.