



# COVID-19 and the state of food security in Africa

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As COVID-19 continues to leave devastating effects in many countries around the world, many people especially from the developing nations are shifting their focus from the fatal effects of the pandemic to the threats it poses on their daily supply of food. This effect is greatly felt among the urban population majority of whom work in the informal sector and depend on daily casual income meaning that they live every day on their ability to afford a daily meal.

It is unfortunate that the same countries that have severely suffered from the effects of climate change, land grabs and the western dictated unfavorable agricultural and economic policies in the recent past are the same for which the corona virus crisis will pose the most severe impacts on food security.

As many African countries continue to enforce strict directives to combat the spread of the virus, little attention has been put on the effects of the lockdown directives on the people's ability to feed themselves and the resultant outcry from majorly the urban poor has prompted many governments to think about emergency food relief provisions, some of which have turned into huge corruption scandals and supply of low quality food.

Many African countries are net importers of food with the continent spending about \$65 billion of food imports in addition to the majority food supplies produced from within by mostly small-scale producers. Many countries have adopted agricultural policies that have recently put much emphasis on commercial industrial export agriculture in a bid to raise the sectors contribution to GDP and offset the worrying balance of payments. Most of these policies driven by direct foreign investments, support large scale industrial production systems that focus on producing raw materials for export markets and the secondary manufacturing industries.

Such policies have criminalized subsistence production and demoralized many small family farms, consequently pushing them out of production. To make matters worse, the general food import syndrome that made many countries think that the food imports of cereal grains and pulses would save in such situation has been increasingly undermined by the current difficulties in cross border trade as many countries continue to close their borders.

The end result is worsening food situation that is characterized by shortages and skyrocketing prices. The situation is worse in urban areas but will slowly spread to rural communities especially those which have already been affected by social and environmental injustices of climate change and land grabbing.

Although little thought was given to the effects of the pandemic and its control measures on the state of food in many countries, we need to realize that the situation may not get better any sooner and that food relief is just a temporary reaction to the emerging outcries, it may not catchup with the worsening situation as the virus is gaining more ground in the global south. It is very important right now to focus more efforts on strengthening rural small-scale producer communities as well as supporting backyard gardens. Overcoming such shocks like we have today means supporting families and communities to take a lead in feeding themselves with diverse food and supporting the neighboring urban areas with daily supplies. As emerging African Food leaders, we created the Slow Food Gardens in Africa project for this purpose of making African communities more resilient. The home, school and community gardens inspired by the Food sovereignty spirit of Slow Food continue to be a strong pillar in many communities in Uganda, Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, among other countries in this trying moment.

With more large farms facing labour challenges and scaling down production, the hope remains in the remains in the rural communities that have shown high levels of resilience even when mobility of supplies has been greatly affected by the existing logistical challenges. For Africa to handle the emerging and post COVID-19 food security crisis, we need to strategically focus on giving the necessary support

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and facilities to communities of producers, fishers, pastoralists, indigenous people and other key grassroots players in the food system. This is our visionary approach as Slow Food which has facilitated the growth and strengthening of grass root food communities across the globe and more so on the African continent through the Terra Madre Network. In Uganda alone, through this network we have organized more than 100 grassroots communities hosting more than 3000 families all of which remain unshaken in terms of food. The more than 3000 school and community gardens which we have facilitated across the continent continue to provide an additional food source of food and livelihoods and are proving to be an important model of resilience in these times of crisis.

As we continue to fight the pandemic with social distancing, we should continue to support these communities to maintain the social and physical contact with the land through appropriate interventions from public and private sector as well as the civil society.

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