

COMMENTARY

BOUNCING BACK FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AFRICA WILL TAKE MORE THAN A VACCINE

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Bouncing back from the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa will take more than a vaccine

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) looms, the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 report (SOFI 2020) indicates that the world is off-course to achieve SDG 2, commonly referred to as zero hunger. The targets for zero hunger include, among others - to **end hunger** and ensure access by all people, particularly the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food all year round by 2030. By 2030, **end all forms of malnutrition**, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons. And, By 2030, **double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers**, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists, and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.

Concerning SDG 2, Africa's situation is dire. Its prevalence of undernourishment (19.1 percent of the population in 2019) is more than twice the world average (8.9 percent) and is the highest among all regions. Africa is significantly off track to achieve zero hunger targets in 2030 [1].

In 2020, the COVID19 pandemic and unprecedented desert locust outbreaks in Eastern Africa [2], floods in West and Central Africa [3], and drought across Africa [4] are endangering the economic prospects of vulnerable smallholder farmers, investors, and private sector in ways no one could have anticipated. The situation may only worsen if we do not act urgently and take unprecedented action to address the increasing fragility. On the other hand, the growing food insecurity in Africa can worsen diet quality and increase the risk of morbidity and mortality from malnutrition.

There is no single solution and no predefined 'toolbox' for addressing vulnerability and increasing fragility. However, thinking 'out of the box' and piloting innovative approaches is vital and will be at the core of designing disruptive interventions that give African farmers and African agriculture a fighting chance.

Post-COVID19, it is no longer 'business-as-usual.' Agriculture solutions, tools, and interventions must apply a fragility lens to be more sensitive to multiple co-occurring and unexpected shocks. This change requires that traditional agriculture research institutions – such as the CGIAR – further strengthen strategic partnerships with non-traditional partners to go beyond the conventional resilience-building interventions. Given the locust experience of East Africa, it is clear that interventions must adopt a

regional approach to address regional dimensions of fragility, reaching out to a wide range of actors to build resilient agriculture and deliver innovative solutions.

It is argued that "without good data, we're flying blind. If you can't see it, you can't solve it" [5]. We have multiple sources of fragility data in Africa, yet we don't use it. Either it lies dormant or is not layered on top of each other to find meaningful patterns that can help enhance our food systems' resilience. Using advancements in artificial intelligence, we have an opportunity to 'breathe new life' into dormant data [6]. By linking different datasets together and using predictive algorithms, we can leverage machine learning to guide proactive actions by farmers, investors, the private sector, and the government that de-risk agriculture and boost food security in the face of increasing fragility in Africa.

In my opinion, there isn't a better time to address the issue of inclusion, as the ongoing pandemic has revealed the need for more inclusive food systems. If we are honest, we must acknowledge that the pre-Covid19 food systems, particularly in Africa, were dysfunctional in this respect. Emerging interventions must integrate a gender perspective and adopt a longer-term view of building resilience at scale. Yes, there are numerous ongoing efforts to identify, understand, and document food policy implications of the pandemic and the appropriate responses by governments. But one thing remains crystal clear. Post-Covid19 rebuilding efforts must strive to identify and respond to everyone's needs - the visible and vocal and the less visible, invisible, and silent. We can best support marginalized and at-risk groups by engaging them in decision-making processes on resilience building and risk reduction. We must acknowledge that exclusive processes do not lead to inclusive outcomes. Only by having each voice represented at the table will resilience and rebuilding efforts reshape our food systems to include all of us, leaving no one behind. Then, and only then will our nutrition goals be within our reach.

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