



PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE, AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING OF RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS FOR KENYAN COMMUNITIES DURING COVID 19; Observations and Recommendations

Preamble:

This position paper has been developed by the resilient food systems working group¹ to highlight observable gaps in the preparedness, response, and contingency planning by the government in the fight against COVID 19 with a deliberate focus on resilient food systems. It also provides recommendations that are intended to elicit action from government, stakeholders, and other actors to support adoption, scaling up or scaling out of resilient food systems for Kenyan communities.

Introduction:

COVID-19² was this year declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. In Kenya, the first case was confirmed on 13th March 2020. Since then, the number of people infected by the virus has continued to rise putting people's lives – particularly society's poorest and most vulnerable – at risk. While the emerging crisis is viewed primarily through a public health lens (as it should), its containment measures including restriction of movements, social distancing, closing of markets, and the closure of non-essential businesses and economic activities have caused immediate and long-term effects on national food and nutritional security in the country.

Observations:

While we acknowledge and applaud the raft of measures put in place by the government of Kenya in a bid to contain and prevent further spread and impact of the Virus, we note the following observations:

The COVID-19 health crisis is rapidly exacerbating an already existing food security and nutrition crisis. According to the 2019 Long Rains Assessment conducted by the Kenya Food Security Steering Group (KFSSG) in collaboration with the County Steering Groups (CSGs) an estimated 2.6 million people face acute food insecurity and need humanitarian assistance. Of the affected population, about 2.3 million are in Crisis Phase of food insecurity (IPC Phase

¹ See logos for member organizations

² Coronavirus disease 2019 (**COVID-19**) is a communicable respiratory disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus that causes illness in humans.



3) with the rest in Emergency Phase (IPC Phase 4). In a matter of weeks, COVID-19 has laid bare the underlying risks, fragilities, and inequities in Kenya's food security. Public commentaries across the counties are calling on the government to provide food assistance.

So far, the government guidance on food commodity flow and supply during the COVID-19 pandemic is mixed, at best. Across the country, guidance on food production, transformation, handling, processing, and marketing is a jumbled patchwork. The national government has listed them "essential services," but has not offered concrete guidance on their operationalization during the crisis, leaving their fate up to shifting guidelines from county governments. This ambiguity has put smallholder food handlers and food-insecure consumers in a precarious position during a time in which access to healthy, affordable food is needed more than ever.

The directive on 'stay at home' has led to closure of local and territorial public marketplaces such as open air and street markets impacting heavily on urban poor households especially the bread-to-mouth earners who can only afford to buy food in small quantities, depend on small shops and open-air markets rather than supermarkets or food delivery services. Measures to close or reduce the activities of small food outlets or open-air markets for public health reasons compromise people's capacity to buy food and the livelihoods of producers, vendors, and informal sector workers.

Social protection is and continue to be the weakest link in the response to COVID 19. As the pandemic triggers a food and economic crisis, it is evident it has affected groups of diverse women and men differently, with more severe and sustained impact on women. Women are overrepresented in informal employment hence disruption to supply chains, lockdowns and increased care responsibilities mean that more women than men lost their jobs and livelihoods. Over time, rural women and marginalized groups have had the opportunity to access credit through table banking systems which have been affected with the governments' directive on control of gatherings. Meeting the food and other livelihood needs for the most vulnerable populations especially women headed households has always postponed the fear for death as noted through the continued pursuit for daily income by women without considering the danger of contracting COVID-19.

Whereas, it is increasingly becoming clear the causes and the factors that aggravate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are closely linked to several structural causes of hunger and malnutrition, the government has fallen short in making fresh, nutritious food accessible and affordable to all, much needed for reducing the diet-related health conditions that make people susceptible to diseases. Instead, pursuant to notice No 3234 dated April 17, published in a special issue of the Kenya Gazette, the government plan to



import four million bags of maize to avert a possible food crisis in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan is ill intended because unlike the 2007-2008 global food crisis, scarcity is not an issue this time in the country. The supply of staple commodities is functioning well, and the crops need to be transported to where they are needed most.

Agriculture sector is not receiving adequate focus and attention in the response to COVID-19. In the counties, agriculture sector continues to receive less budgetary allocation while agricultural services supporting crop production such as extension diagnostics, and official support services including training, coordination meetings, field visits, and pest monitoring and surveillance have been disrupted. The disruptions to these activities coupled with the ongoing stresses from transboundary pests and diseases (in particular the current desert locust upsurge) and the increasing frequency and intensification of erratic weather events due to climate change, have considerable short, medium, and long-term consequences. While largescale food producers may experience temporary setbacks from which production systems may recover relatively easily, the effects on more vulnerable smallholder farmers will be long-lasting.

It has now become clear than ever that as a country we cannot rely on food that requires transportation across borders or even from distant regions within a single country. Lockdowns have disrupted international logistics and distribution while Kenya being highly agrarian rural and informal society, restrictions of movements is preventing farmers and farm workers from accessing farms or harvesting crops. The ripple effects of this, in some counties, food is beginning to rot in the fields while supplies of fresh food items in supermarkets disappear quickly through panic buying and profiteering, among many others. Local solutions now needed urgently than ever are closely linked to the ability of communities to undertake innovative local agroecological practices. The agroecology approach aims to create sustainable food systems, and at the core of this approach is a set of practices based on 'locally adapted' farming.

Food security agenda in the country is largely premised on private sector investments and growth models across the value chains, an approach of food product system that disadvantages smallholder farmers who make 80% of food producers in Kenya. Agricultural expansion is a major driver of this trend and industrial farming model is not fit for purpose either. Its insatiable use of finite resources, its countless adverse impacts on the health of humans and ecosystems and its dependence on fossil fuels and chemical inputs render it fundamentally unsustainable. Land grabbing, often paving way for industrial agriculture and extractive industries, also leads to the dispossession of communities, putting them in a situation of increased vulnerability in their daily lives and also during crisis. An essentially different paradigm for how we think about farming is urgently needed.



Even as the government gears up to fight a devastating pandemic to save lives, we must also know that until we address the root causes of such outbreaks, one will follow another. Human health and the health of ecosystems are inseparable. Destruction of natural habitats brings us face to face with diseases that were once confined to the wilderness. The spread of COVID-19 appears to have originated in a market selling dead and living wildlife, including some endangered species. Research also shows that many of the most serious outbreaks such as Ebola – have been linked to biodiversity loss. We can therefore avoid future pandemics if we protect and value nature in ways that support sustainable development and human health.

Lastly, it is evident COVID 19 has not stopped other climatic disasters. Desert locust swarms continue to manifest, with new swarms starting to form while floods are causing havoc in various counties in the country, presenting an unprecedented impact on food security and livelihoods at the beginning of cropping season.

Recommendations:

We therefore draw parallels of the impact of COVID 19 with the impact of previous health epidemics elsewhere (such as the Ebola outbreaks) and with the food price crisis of 2008 and draw the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: keep the food supply chains going and working for smallholder farmers. Unlike the 2007-2008 global food crisis, scarcity is not an issue this time but connecting the producers to consumers is. The government should harmonize across the counties the guidelines on food commodity flow and supply during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation #2: Expand and improve emergency food assistance and social protection programs. Social protection measures must incorporate provisions on the Right to Food, both in terms of choice, quantity, and nutritional quality. Any conditionalities attached to assistance to most vulnerable households should be lifted.

Recommendation #3: recognize, support, and protect farmer markets, grocery stores, and informal food vendors. These markets serve as important sources of food for urban households and informal settlements, enables daily purchases meaning people do not need to go far from home for food. This will also ensure greater value goes to the producers and makes fresh produce more affordable for low income populations. Government must make sure that containment measures do not result in favoring supermarkets and industrial/processed food.

Recommendation #4: adopt and promote a food system transformation that builds resilience at all levels. As we face the even greater crisis of food and nutrition insecurity



caused by impacts of COVID 19, family-scale farms using agroecological³ practices provide the surest solution to world hunger and malnutrition and to the countless environmental issues emanating from biodiversity loss. Extensive use of pesticides increases the vulnerability of agricultural workers to the Coronavirus and other pathogens since their immune systems are weakened by prolonged exposure. A paradigm shifts from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems is more urgent than ever.

Recommendation #5: implement measures to combat climate change, ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss. Many may argue that the preservation of biodiversity is far removed from human health. But although the linkages can be complex, human life is intimately bound to all life as the spread of pathogens is exacerbated by the destruction of wild ecosystems (CBD/WHO, 2015). As a leading zoonotic disease expert stated: "Destroy landscapes, and the species you are left with are the ones humans get the diseases from." The government must conserve its natural areas and their rich assemblages of microbial, plant and animal species. This however must not be used as a smokescreen for land grabs.

Recommendation #6: build stronger short food supply chains through community supported agriculture. As a country we are on the brink of a looming food crisis, not because of lack of available food, but rather because it cannot be harvested or transported to consumers through the industrial long chain food system. At this frightening moment when we need solidarity and compassion so badly, but must remain separated, Community Supported Agriculture has a critical role to play in feeding local communities safely. Government must build stronger short food supply chains that allow local food sovereignty and traceability. This drastically reduces human contact with the food and between people.

Recommendation #7: fully implement Malabo declaration on accelerated agricultural growth. Government should allocate and provide financial support measures for smallholder farmers, for example deferring agriculture credit payments, reducing and/or waiving interest rates on loans and price control of essential inputs.

Recommendation #8: Fully implement the Maputo Declaration to increase the budget supporting agriculture to at least 10 % towards the realization of food and nutrition security in Kenya.

³ A practice of applying ecological concepts and principles to optimise interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment (UN FAO). An approach that relies on, and maximises, ecological processes to support production systems; to produce food in harmony with nature, not against it.



Recommendation #9: Put in place plugs that will prevent the introducing systems of agriculture those that weaken the existing resilient indigenous food production. This includes putting on hold on all the commercialization of genetically modified crops.

Declaration #10: promote and support local food production. The term “think global, act local” seems to be more appropriate than ever. The government should support local communities and citizens to increase local food production (including home and community gardens, and urban and peri-urban horticulture) through appropriate stimulus packages (in cash and kind) to enhance food resilience.

Declaration #11: provide support to smallholder farmers to both enhance their productivity and market the food they produce. Restrictions on movement are curbing farmers’ access to markets to buy inputs and sell products. Fresh produce is accumulating at farms, resulting in food loss. In addition to provision of inputs necessary for agricultural production, government should bring collection center’s closer to smallholder producers to reduce the need for mobility. Further, government should purchase agricultural products from smallholder farmers to be used to deliver safety net programs.

Declaration #12: address tenure security of vulnerable communities. Displaced communities face expounded threats to COVID 19 pandemic. Secure tenure and housing have become the front-line defense against COVID 19 as government is relying people to stay home to prevent spread of the virus, having secure tenure is crucial to be able to implement this. Government must prevent forced evictions and displacements.