



THE NEED FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE MESSAGES FOR FARMERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a public health emergency and of international concern. This was followed by the issuing of health guidelines to combat the pandemic by health ministries. Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19 in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late December 2019, many other countries have taken on various measures to combat the rapid spread of the virus. Uganda is one of the countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with a total of 6661 positive individuals with 74 Confirmed cases as at 24th April 2020 according to WHO updates.

1.1 The Problem

Whereas the cases in Uganda are still small, the government has placed the country under lock-down and curfew with only essential services like; Health, Banking, Agro-input shops, Food items supply shops, Security, Works & transportation of boda etc. operating since 30 March, 2020. On the other hand boda-bodas and public transport have since been shut down or restricted in the case of boda bodas hence limiting mobility of the population engaged in agriculture to effectively contribute to food and nutrition security. More than two weeks in the lock-down the country is experiencing interruption in food production supply and marketing chains, implying that there is a direct linkage between Health and Agriculture. Additionally, the supply of fresh produce in the market is on a decline as few farmers are able to afford the cost of transporting their produce to the market. Most importantly, this is discouraging farmers to effectively engage in farming and yet a lost planting season will impact negatively on food and nutrition security during and the aftermath of COVID-19.

Much as the country has reached some milestones in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic through creating massive awareness campaigns on the virus and precautionary measures to prevent it, essential Supplies Forecasting Tool (ESFT), and food supply systems through the office of the prime minister, the country has done little to ensure critical preparedness among the farming communities yet sustainable measures to food security at household level are so crucial during and after the pandemic. The situation is very alarming and is now being escalated by starving families with literally no food. There is generally food deficiency gap created by the pandemic, which needs a collective action by all stakeholders. Similarly, during this current lock-down, we have observed with concern that agriculture information messages can complement health related information sharing and services towards a more resilient population in amidst of a rainy season and especially in planning for post COVID-19.

2.0 IMPLICATION TO THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Farmers are heavily dependent on the following key essential services every rainy season; extension, agro input supply, Market information, which is provided by MAAIF and agencies, private sector and CSOs in Uganda. Whereas we applaud MAAIF for partnering with organizations like IFAD to supporting farmers during the **COVID-19 crisis**, with the prevailing lockdown the provision of such services if not prioritized will be non existing or decline hence leading to uncertainty of farmers to engage in this planting season and ultimately anticipate no harvest during Post COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, it is evident that food and nutrition security are being emphasized as one of the ways of managing the crisis.

As CSOs we believe that agriculture extension service messages at a time like this, is essential and therefore call upon the ministry and other stakeholders to design messages that will guide farmers. In as much as the access to agro inputs has been guaranteed, access to production and market information towards food and nutritional security is neither guaranteed during and after hence foreseen Hunger during and after COVID-19. Allowing the input supply shops to be open without support extension messages is a disservice to farmers in that; **how will farmers make use of the season with limitations like regular updates?**, how can farmers make use of media and community radios in providing extension messages during COVID-19 lock-down?.

3.0 CONCLUSION

As stakeholders working with farmers to ensure sustainable production for food and nutritional security, our thoughts and perspective is that extension service message be prioritized as an essential service and as one of the preparedness during and the aftermath of COVID-19 crisis because hunger breeds unrest among the communities.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

We therefore recommend the following in order to foster self-reliant farmer households with production as an immediate emergency action;

- Support farmers with information on quality seeds especially maize and beans since it is rainy season.
- Support farmers with information on fertilizers (Organic fertilizers) to enhance productivity
- Support regular sensitization through radio programs on proper farm management , planting, integrated pest management
- The Agricultural Ministry should advise or encourage farmers on how to better control the locusts. There is traditional information in regard to this. Besides, it encourages innovation too.