



Hon. Dr. Owusu Afriyie Akoto
Minister of Food and Agriculture,
Ghana

Delivering Food for Africa in a Transforming Agri-food System in the 'New Normal'

I thank the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) for inviting me to exchange ideas on how we can continue to effectively deliver food for Africa in the “new normal”.

As of June 2020:

“256 million (20%) of Africa’s population remain hungry while estimated 239 million are undernourished in Sub-Saharan Africa”. These numbers raise anxieties for African Governments, particularly

Ministers of Agriculture because of our commitment to end hunger by 2030, which is 10 years from now.

World Bank analysis in April 2020 indicate losses between \$37 and \$70 Billion USD of food output due to the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic resulting in food security and nutrition issues . This is attributed to labour shortages for production, disruptions in food supplies (domestic & imports manifesting in spikes in food prices in urban areas affecting the urban poor and exacerbating already existing poor socioeconomic conditions), Fight mode is education for job creation, modernisation and industrialisation -post-colonial design.

Effects of COVID 19 and Ghana’s Response

The effects of COVID-19 on the agri-food system in Africa is already well known and documented. In Ghana, COVID 19 was first reported in March 2020. Although agricultural activities were exempted from the restrictions of movement of people, agricultural supply chains were affected. Key impacts include:

- Increase in input prices due to rising international market prices and high freight costs
- Increase in price of imported food items such as rice, wheat, soya and poultry, tomatoes, and cooking oil due to initial threat of export bans
- Slump in export prices of key export commodities such as cocoa, cashew and oil palms,
- Loss of export revenue for vegetable producers due to closure of borders and increase in freight charges
- Labour shortage, thus restricting farm production and other agricultural activities such as seed processing

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- Low demand for food items due to closure of restaurants, schools, and hotels. Egg glut and rotting reported.
- Whilst African Governments are addressing the interim fallout of this crisis, there is the need to take a comprehensive approach and leverage on the opportunity the “new normal” provides; to transform agriculture and use it as a vehicle to accelerate the achievements of the SDGs.
- Ability to leverage on this golden opportunity depends on policy, research, and coordination of financial and human resources for implementation.

Areas of Deliberation on Delivering Food for Africa in a Transforming agri-food system in the “new normal”

a. Re-contextualizing support for enhancing productivity and marketing systems for smallholder farmers

- The bane of African agriculture has been low productivity of smallholder farmer who are the major producers of primary agricultural products. Average yield being below 60% of potential which can be increased with use of improved inputs and good agricultural practices.
- Three (3) years of aggressive pursuit of high productivity through the Planting for Food and Jobs campaign in Ghana has yielded positive results. Yields of **targeted crops recorded significant improvements over 2016 levels: maize yield increased by 89 percent from 1.8 Mt/ha to 3.4 Mt/ha; rice yield increased by 48 percent from 2.7 Mt /ha to 4.0 Mt/ha and soya yield increased by 200 percent from 1 Mt/ha to 3.0 Mt/ha.** Maize production has increased from 2016 level of 1.72 million tons to 2.90 million tons in 2019 representing about a 68.4% increment. Similarly, rice production increased from **2016 figure of 687,000MT to 919,000MT also indicating 33.8%** increase over the same period.
- As a result of the gains under Planting for Food and Jobs campaign (PFJ), the pandemic has had marginal impact on food prices apart from the initial spikes caused by panic buying prior to the partial lock of some cities in Ghana.
- To accelerate the agricultural transformation agenda in Africa we need to support production as well marketing systems by ensuring proper access to markets by the producers through several mediums and policies. Guaranteeing minimum floor price based on realistic return to capital, linking producer to markets created by governments, supporting the role of Commodity Exchanges, and creating strategic stocks are some of the key strategic intervention areas that the Government of Ghana is pursuing. In Ghana we are doing these through the National Buffer Stock and Ghana Commodity Exchange. A well-developed Market Information System (MIS) to provide up to date pricing systems and stock movement will be key.

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b. Innovations for delivering agricultural advisory services to farmers to enable them to make smart decisions

- COVID 19 provides an opportunity to leverage on digital technology to make agricultural advisory service more accessible and affordable to farmers.
- Extension delivery should be enhanced using digital solutions and multimedia information packages to improve the productivity of crops and livestock. It will be cost-effective and lead to standard information on good agricultural practices.
- There is need to intensify the use of electronic media (Community information centres, Community radio/FM stations, TV programmes, recorded role-plays, social media platforms) to disseminate information on gaps and prevention of COVID-19 spread by observing improved personal hygiene, social distancing while performing farming activities and the use of face masks.
- We need to organize demonstrations on improved practices for smaller groups of farmers, record these demonstrations and disseminate to larger groups using e-agriculture platforms and social media platforms.
- We need to provide smartphones/tablets to field officers for extension delivery and data collection and management.

c. Innovations for reducing logistical bottlenecks and enhancing ecommerce Logistical bottlenecks are barriers to domestic and international trade.

- This is characterized by poor roads, limited warehousing capacity for storage and inadequate and inappropriate transport for food and livestock.
- Restrictions in movement of persons and social distancing imposed as COVID 19 protocol affected the marketing of food items in markets. This calls for scaling up the use of digital trading platform. The establishment of the Ghana Commodity Exchange is one digital platform that will improve grain trading in terms of transparency in prices, quality of grain and efficient transport and storage systems.
- Small and Medium-scale businesses however need the requisite skills to be able to participate in e-commerce. It therefore calls for support to existing digital marketing plants to be able to build the capacity of small agribusinesses to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

d. Innovations for multiple agricultural and social protection interventions

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- Multiple agricultural and social protection interventions are needed to sustainability lift poor agricultural households from poverty and enable them to participate in productive enterprises.
- In Ghana input subsidy is used to support smallholder farmers. For example, in 2019, some 330,000 metric tons of fertilizers and 18,000 metric tons of seeds were distributed to about 1.2 million smallholder farmers. Similarly, agro-chemicals were distributed free to farmers to fight army worm. Farmers however need complementary interventions such affordable financing to enhance their capacity to adopt new technologies and to scale up their activities. Under the COVID, Government has been able to bring down interest rate for value chain financing from 18% to 10%. The Government's digitalization agenda, will also promote inclusive finance.
- Ghana is also implementing the Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) which provides cash grants to poor and vulnerable households. These households, with access to land, could also be targeted with the subsidized or free inputs to enhance their productivity capacity.
- Again, smallholder household income and nutrition could be enhanced if they are also supported to rear livestock such as chicken, and small ruminants. This is being pursued under the Rearing for Food and Jobs programme in Ghana.
- The Ministry of Food and Agriculture in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development is also supporting farmers to grow tree crops to enhance their diversification of income sources and increase export earnings of the country. Free seedlings of cashew, rubber, coconut, mango, coffee, oil palm and shea are given to smallholder farmers under the Planting for Export and Rural Development Programme.

e. Galvanizing partnerships and collaboration to strengthen African agricultural research and innovation capacity.

- Research and innovation underpin the Agricultural transformation agenda. That is why the African Union under the Malabo declaration agreed that countries should allocate 5% of their budget to research.
- Agricultural Research need to be better coordinated by Governments. Better coordination is pertinent in countries where research institutions are under a different Ministry than the Ministry of Food and Agriculture.
- There is also the need for both public and private sector to set the research agenda and to ensure that resources from Government and international agencies are aligned to national research agenda.

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Conclusion

African Ministers of Agriculture have an onerous responsibility to feed Africa and for that matter contribute to the achievement of SDG 1 and 2 which depend on largely on the transformation of agriculture. The time is now to implement the plans we have been designing and redesigning. It requires mobilization of resources and coordination of investments. It is high time Development Partners resources are directly contributing to national priorities.

We should also focus on few investments to demonstrate success and ensure strong partnership with the private sector. We also need to leverage digital technology and be able to accelerate the development of the agricultural sector on a sustainable basis. The new normal provides us with another opportunity to be pragmatic and to take very bold decisions too.

This is our fourteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. This Thought piece is part of the discussion points raised by the Minister during the 4th RUFORUM Webinar on “[Delivering food for Africa in a transforming agri-food system in the ‘new normal’](#)” You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying m.agena@ruforum.org

About the Author

His Excellency Dr. Owusu is the Minister for Food and Agriculture in Ghana. His Excellency is a two-term Member of Parliament for Kwadaso, and, whilst in Parliament, he was the Deputy Ranking Member for Committee on Food and Agriculture and Cocoa Affairs. Honorable Minister also worked as a consultant to the World Bank, United Nations on Soft Commodities.

His Excellency worked as an Economist, Senior Economist, Principal Economist and Chief Economic Advisor over a period of 18 years at the International Coffee Organization (ICO), London, England. He obtained a PhD in Agricultural Economics from the University of Cambridge, England.

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