

RUFORUM WEBINAR SERIES-2020

Delivering Agricultural Advisory Services in the COVID-19 Era **Webinar 9 Synthesis Report**

Introduction:

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expanding daily and the direction and control of the virus is still unknown. Governments are confronted with multiple challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in the health sector but also in related sectors such as agriculture and rural development. In the agricultural sector, the COVID-19 Pandemic has caused severe disruptions in food supply chains worldwide and containment measures such as social distancing and lock downs have greatly hampered the provision of face to face Extension and Advisory Services (EAS), thereby threatening food and nutrition security. Good Agricultural Advisory Services are essential for reducing the negative impacts on food security and rural livelihoods and can play an indispensable role at the frontline of the response to the Pandemic by providing timely information to farmers.

The Problem:

There is an urgent need by EAS to respond to the effects of COVID-19 on food supply chains and farmers' incomes. This requires rethinking the role that EAS can play, and possible strategies and tools for addressing emerging needs. Universities could play a key role in the delivery of Agricultural Advisory Services and in providing a platform for all stakeholders within a "safe" space. Further, there is a need to rethink the Agricultural Advisory Services in the Post COVID-19 era.

This report covers key highlights and emerging issues from Webinar 9 organized by RUFORUM on ***Delivering Agricultural Advisory Services in the COVID-19 Era*** held on 31st August, 2020.

Webinar Aim:

As part of RUFORUM Webinar Series, this online convening on Agricultural Advisory Services in the COVID-19 era brought together academia, research and innovation actors, and farmer organisations, and provided for a detailed discussion on:

- (i) Challenges and opportunities in Agricultural Advisory Services in the Pandemic era;
- (ii) Responding to extension needs of smallholder farmers in the 'new normal';
- (iii) Innovating extension and agricultural services from within to ensure an effective and efficient response to covid-19; and
- (iv) Building robust and effective extension and agricultural services programmes and innovations responsive to pandemics crisis moments.

This Webinar was moderated by ***Dr. Hlami Ngwenya*** from the University of Free State, South Africa. The presentations and discussions were given by:

1. **Dr. Carl Larsen**, Executive Secretary, Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services GFRAS, Switzerland
2. **Dr. Silim M. Nahdy**, Executive Secretary, African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS), Kampala-Uganda
3. **Dr Cliff Dlamini, Chief Executive Officer**, Centre for Coordination of Agriculture Research and Development for Southern Africa (CCARDESA), Gaborone, Botswana
4. **Ms. Irene Akidi**, PhD Student at Egerton University in Kenya
5. **Dr Sokona Dagnoko Sissoko**, Country Director, Sasakawa Global 2000, Bamako-Mali

Key Highlights and Action Points:

1. Utilization of existing knowledge and information:

At present, Africa has the necessary knowledge and sufficient information to respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Several local technologies and solutions exist that can be taken advantage of and scaled out to convert the Pandemic into a stream of opportunities. There is already a recognition of increased demand for locally produced foods and connection to food producers.

2. Investing in Agricultural Advisory Services:

The lack of political will to invest in appropriate COVID-19 measures remains the biggest challenge in Africa. To partially address this, linkages with private sector need to be strengthened. The urgent need for enhanced digital infrastructure to cover entire countries, increased capacity of researchers and extensionists to use digital technologies, and the promotion of e-extension and e-commerce in response to the “new normal”, all require a substantial increase in investment.

3. Innovative Approaches to Agricultural Advisory Services:

There are several likely changes anticipated to occur in response to the current COVID-19 Pandemic. Increased need for advisory services, reduced capacity by several actors throughout the agri-food sector to pay for goods and services, decreased human mobility and interaction, increased innovation, turnover in agricultural startups, and increased national and international funding to the agricultural sector to mention but a few. All such changes require more innovative and blended approaches to agricultural extension. In this vein, digital tools and e-extension have already been introduced by some governments and this is likely to be the case in many other countries, hence requiring an increase in investment e-technology and skills development by service providers and end users. The introduction of so called ‘*Call Centres*’ using the example of Gulu University in Uganda, is one innovative way of utilizing digital and remote tools in extension.

Collaboration among various actors, including students, in the extension systems delivery will remain key for the success of agri-food systems. In this regard, existing linkages between research and extension, and public-private sectors need to be strengthened further to support innovation, technology development and dissemination, and effective communication. Further, the formation of strong partnerships even with non-traditional actors in AES needs to be promoted. In this regard, Sub Regional Organisations (SROs) such as CCARDESA have a role to play in fostering such linkages, building the capacity for information packaging, development of digital tools for the extension service and farmers, and spearheading joint planning between extension and

research, and providing support for technology dissemination. Through strong partnerships with universities, Agricultural Advisory Services can also support the updating of curricula especially in courses on digital tools and programmes on foresight.

Psychological counselling and support to farmers to address the emotional impact of COVID-19 on farmers needs to be incorporated in the provision of extension services. Additionally, extension can support smallholder farmers in the new normal through identifying and tracking farmer needs using social media, promoting farmer producer organisations, remote capacity building of lead farmers, linking farmers to markets especially identifying markets through farmers themselves, and building partnerships.

Taking a leaf from the rapid assessment surveys conducted by SASAKAWA Global 2000, all the above mentioned interventions can be informed by current data on the actual impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the agri-food systems

As a Network, RUFORUM should remain committed to strengthening the livelihoods of smallholder farmers through its various Research for Development (R4D) initiatives and supporting the acceleration of digital revolution through training, provision of extension and advisory services, and community engagement activities. Additionally, RUFORUM should be at the forefront of strengthening university-community linkages to meet the needs of smallholder farmers as per its Mission. The Students Extension delivery model piloted in Gulu and Egerton Universities need to be expanded across Africa. Importantly AFAAS needs to expand its national Forums to allow for greater interaction amongst different actors along the agrifood system value chains including farmer groups, private sector, universities and policies. To achieve desired results will require strong political commitment and sound accountability. Also advocacy efforts by AFAAS and the Global Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (GFRAS) will be key in galvanizing international and Africa-wide actions to deliver more effective advisory services responding to the 'new normal'.

RUFORUM Secretariat- 31 August, 2020