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Welcome Remarks: Universities and Research Institutions Supporting Family Farmers During and Post COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa

Let me join Professor Adipala Ekwamu in welcoming you all to the webinar on Universities and Research Institutions Supporting Family Farmers During and Post COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa, co-organized by FAO and the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM).

In relation to the topic, I highlight three key features and challenges faced by Family Farmers:

- Family farms are managed and operated by a family and primarily reliant on the family labour of both women and men. They are crucial to achieve the SDGs and the progressive exercise of the right to adequate food. Family farmers provide most of the world's food in value terms, are the main investors in agriculture and constitute the backbone of food

systems and the rural economic structure.

- In Africa family farmers include peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, pastoralists, fishers, mountain farmers, and many other groups of food producers. They account for two-thirds of the population and work 62 percent of the land.
- Despite their important contributions, many family farmers lack adequate income and are poor, often suffer from food insecurity, and are vulnerable to shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic is already impacting on their livelihoods.

COVID-19

- Family farmers' vulnerability in Africa is being amplified by the current COVID-19 pandemic, since small-scale family farmers are particularly exposed to its effects. The challenge is further exacerbated by the outbreak of desert locusts, fall armyworm, droughts and conflict, resulting in growing food insecurity.
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- Family farmers need immediate support from both governments and non-State actors, including universities, research institutions and development partners to build their resilience to shocks and play a proactive role in ensuring food and nutrition security and revamping rural economies.

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RUFORUM THOUGHT PIECE ON COVID-19

- On 16 April 2020, in a joint declaration on Food Security and Nutrition during the COVID-19 pandemic, FAO and the African Union Commission committed to, among others, support access to food and nutrition for Africa's most vulnerable groups, including family farmers.
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- The UNDF Global Action Plan, launched in December 2017, is a valid framework to address structural vulnerabilities as well as specific challenges arisen from the spread of COVID-19 through strengthening the economic, ecological and social resilience of family farmers facing the crisis, as well as measures to revamp rural economies in the recovery phase.
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- FAO has just launched its COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. It encompasses a Humanitarian Response Plan and a Development, Resilience and Recovery Plan. Supporting smallholder family farmers is at the heart of the proposed areas of work, particularly in relation to Poverty Reduction, Economic Inclusion and Social Protection and Boosting the Resilience of Smallholder for Covid-19 Recovery.
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- The COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme call for partnerships and cooperation at all levels. We will work 'Hand in Hand' with multi-stakeholders and invite a broad range of partners, including both new and renewed partnerships with FAO Members, the private sector, civil society, academia and cooperatives.

This Webinar

- Indeed, to achieve the ambitious objectives of the SDG agenda we need involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, to scale-up existing reliable solutions through international cooperation and multi-actor engagement and create an environment that unlocks the potential of innovation in agriculture and makes it more accessible to those who are mostly in need of them.
- Universities and research institutions are the bedrock for science, technology, and innovation. They have an important role in supporting family farmers, to help them to contribute to the attainment of the SDGs, Agenda 2063 and CAADP.
- FAO welcomes new sustainable agricultural technologies that can contribute to the transition of smallholders from subsistence farming to innovative, commercial production, helping them to increase their own food security.
- Therefore, I am very pleased that FAO and RUFORUM are co-organizing this webinar to discuss and reflect on how universities and research institutions in Africa can support

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family framers during and post COVID-19 pandemic. The composition of the members of the panel shows the importance of the topic of the event.

FAO Partnership with RUFORUM

In fact, this webinar is part of a longstanding cooperation between FAO and RUFORUM. In October 2017, FAO and RUFORUM established a formal partnership through a memorandum of understanding. This webinar falls under the framework of our partnership, based on common work to develop capacities of young family farmers and graduate students in agriculture from universities in Eastern and Southern Africa, focusing on access to agricultural innovations, use of digital technologies in agriculture, and enhancing business and entrepreneur skills. In addition to working with RUFORUM, we are also looking to developing strategic partnerships with other academic and research institutions in Africa. FAO Regional Office for Africa is in discussion with the Forum for Agriculture Research in Africa (FARA) with a view of entering into partnership.

Conclusion

I believe that this webinar will provide FAO and RUFORUM a good opportunity to strengthen our cooperation, based on the insights to be provided by the distinguished panelists and the participants. I am looking forward with keen interest to the outcomes of this webinar which I am confident will contribute to shaping the focus of our collaboration with academia and research institutions in Africa.

This is our Twenty-second issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. It is based on the author's opening remarks and some of the emerging issues during the sixth RUFORUM Webinar on 31st July 2020 focusing on "Universities and Research Institutions Supporting Family Farmers During and Post COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa". 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.agen@ruforum.org

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About the Author

Ms. Bechdol is the Deputy Director-General at the Food and Agriculture Organization. Before joining FAO, she was President and CEO of AgriNovus Indiana, the Midwestern State's economic development initiative. She also served as Director of agribusiness strategies at Indianapolis-based law firm Ice Miller LLP.

Ms. Beth was the first female Vice President at the Washington office of Informa Economics, and served in several international development projects in Egypt, the Republic of North Macedonia and Ukraine.

She has played significant roles on boards and commissions, including the National FFA Board of Trustees, the Purdue Research Foundation and the Farm Foundation Round Table.