

RUFORUM Webinar Series (2020)

Introductory Note for Webinar 9

Date: 31 August 2020

Time: 14.00-16.00 East African Standard Time

Delivering Agricultural Advisory Services in the COVID-19 era

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 not only from the health effects but from the related effects on poverty and food security and the severe impact on livelihoods¹ and national growth, income and budgets. Declining budgets could affect investment in agriculture and set off a vicious cycle. The containment restrictions have already severely disrupted agricultural commodity value chains and services and negatively affected farming—even though most countries have encouraged food production to continue. Globally farmers have been affected by a fall in demand² and restrictions on input purchases and exports. It is essential to mobilize all available instruments, institutions and stakeholders from both public and private sectors as well as civil society to ensure appropriate and timely response. Experience from the Ebola crisis has shown the importance of agricultural extension services to recovery and resilience building among smallholder farmers and agricultural value chains.

Agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS) systems play an indispensable role at the frontline of the response to the pandemic in rural areas providing timely information to farmers. They are in a good position to be part of the Frontline response, tracking and reporting COVID-19 incidence and impact and signaling changes in production and consumption patterns. Good Agricultural Advisory Services are essential to reduce the negative impacts on food security and rural livelihoods. But they need to rapidly speed up their change to a more pluralistic and participatory way of working, harnessing private, public and civil society to address needs along the full agricultural value chain. Certainly, Agricultural Advisory Services can foster an enabling environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, empowering farmers and rural communities to solve their own problems and repositioning themselves as facilitators rather than drivers of change. Innovation is key to economic growth and so is adaptability which is essential to survival and improved livelihoods. As such Agricultural Advisory Services urgently need to build facilitative and brokering skills to strengthen a pluralist and farming business approach. How will this be done amidst the 'new normal' posed by COVID-19? A neutral interface is needed to establish strong platforms of engagement open to all

¹ Estimates 26-58 million in Africa could fall below the extreme poverty line of \$1.9 per day (Jose Montes, Ani Silwal, David Newhouse, Frances Chen, Rachel Swindle, and Siwei Tian, World Bank Poverty and Equity Notes, [No.20, May 2020](#)).

² Reduced informal markets, consumer suspicions, restaurant closures, disrupted supply chains as well as changed food demand patterns under lockdown.

stakeholders. Universities can play this role – working together on tasks that reinforce relationships and clarify institutional niches for government, private and civil society actors.

Gains in agriculture are estimated to have five times greater return on investment when targeting poverty and hunger. Furthermore Africa’s Agenda 2063 looks to agriculture to stimulate economies to achieve massive growth - and most of this will be from small scale farms. Agricultural Advisory Services and farmers need to become much more adaptable to the disruptions created by the impacts of health pandemics, new technologies, global demand trends, government policies and climate change. A regional approach would enable the pooling of human, information and material resources contributing to improve the efficiency of interventions.

Small farm systems can now be more competitive with access to the economies of scale of digitisation allowing them to be better connected locally, nationally, regionally and globally. It also allows Agricultural Advisory Services to be more agile with responsive advisories, learning from farmers and communicating to research and policy, facilitating aggregation, traceability, market information, and better coordinating supply chains. Digitisation of EAS includes everything from the use of sms to interactive multimedia, drones and satellites. African youth have been at the forefront of locally relevant Apps for farming with over 33 million farmers using 400+ solutions (Dalberg Advisors, [CTA, 2019](#))³. Minimising the need for face-to-face interaction is important in the COVID-19 era and preliminary evidence from China shows the important role of Agricultural Advisory Services using smartphones. It is estimated that there is an untapped market in Africa worth more than two billion dollars for digital services to improve farmer livelihoods. There are internet access innovations that minimise data use and that can provide access in rural areas⁴. Much greater investment is needed to expand connectivity for women and rural areas, to support youth digipreneurs and also in strengthening Agricultural Advisory Service facilitation skills and multi-stakeholder platforms.

Robust farmer advisory services operate with clear, tailored learning opportunities within an innovation system that is collaborative producing synergies and that is able to capture data and share learning with farmers, researchers and the private sector. Universities could play a strong complementary role in the delivery of Agricultural Advisory Services and providing a platform for all stakeholders within a “safe” space. This webinar on delivering Agricultural Advisory Services in the COVID-19 era will focus its deliberations on: (i) Rural advisory services: challenges and opportunities in the pandemic era; ii) Responding to extension smallholder farmers in the ‘new normal’; iii) Extension and agricultural services innovate from within to ensure an effective and efficient response to COVID-19; and iv) Building robust and effective extension and agricultural services programs and innovations responsive to pandemics crisis moments.

Panelists:

1. **Dr. Carl Larsen**, Executive Secretary, Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services GFRAS, Switzerland

³ Kenya leads digitisation with Nigeria and Ghana. Others include Ethiopia’s “80-28” reaching 4 million with advice, EcoFarmer, Zimbabwe also with micro-insurance, myAgro Mali and Senegal inputs and savings, Farmers Lab, South Africa linking to markets,Uganda and many others. There are also educational initiatives using sms which could be well adapted to extension, e.g. ENEZA

⁴ E.g. HITCH is able to provide an internet hotspot with 1 TB data accessible off-line, reducing costs.

2. **Prof. Rose Mwonya**, Vice Chancellor, Egerton University, Kenya
3. **Mr. Ibrahima Coulibaly**, President, Farmers and Agricultural Producers Organisation West Africa (ROPPA)
4. **Dr. Silim M. Nahdy**, Executive Secretary, African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS), Kampala-Uganda
5. **Ms. Irene Akidi**, PhD Student, Egerton University, Njoro-Kenya
6. **Dr. Cliff Dlamini**, Executive Director, Centre for Coordination of Agriculture Research for Southern Africa (CCARDESA), Gabarone, Botswana

Moderator: **Dr. Hlami Ngwenya**, University of Free State, South Africa

Discussant: **Dr. Sokona Dagnoko Sissoko**, Country Director, Sasakawa Global 2000, Bamako-Mali

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