Africa’s most vulnerable are called to bear the brunt of a pandemic - By Agathe Diama

...Securing Farming Communities Through And After COVID-19 Is A Priority

One of world’s harshest terrains for farming threatens to crumble under COVID-19. West Africa’s farmer collectives, small businesses and other stakeholders in agriculture reveal their plight as rains approach and call out for support through logistics facilitation, digital extension, awareness creation and financial backstopping to prevent food, nutrition security and livelihoods going downhill.

“It is real” – the need for awareness

“Farmers have varying perceptions about the pandemic. While some believe it is real, others believe it is a doing of governments. However, they all agree on one thing: the response to the pandemic has affected everybody because all activities have slowed down,” notes Yalaly Traore, a member of Local Union of Cereal Producers in Dioila, Mali.

“We initiated awareness campaigns for preventive measures because we noticed that our producers were not informed adequately,” says Nasser Aichatou Salifou of Ainoma Seed Farm in Niger. “Currently, farmers’ concern is whether they can go to the field when the rains come. Awareness campaigns should be increased to educate farmers are they are not adequately informed and then those who have access to social media have wrong information.”

Logistics – the seed of hardship

Farmer cooperatives are among the worst hit as they are unable to dispose of their seed stock, which they produced with borrowed capital.

“We cannot go to market to sell our seeds and it is difficult to reach our farmers. Also, because of social distancing, we cannot engage sufficiently big workforce for weeding or applying fertilizers. If this continues, we may have to decrease our acreage in production,” says a worried El Hadj Abdul Razak of Heritage Seeds Company, a farmer-centric organization in Ghana.

Suddenly, without flights, orders for inputs including seeds, sprayers and pesticides that are usually imported to countries like Mali are now not possible. Restrictions in transport makes any local procurement of inputs difficult. “Rising cost of haulage and cost of inputs have doubled due to non-availability of labor. We are trying to create an online presence for sales and increase machines to reduce human labor. It takes almost two weeks to move goods from Kano to Ibadan in Nigeria due to interstate issues and bad vehicles,” Stella Thomas of Techni Seeds Limited in Nigeria points out.

Among the implications are a costly delay in certification of seeds, explains Coulibaly Maimouna Sidibe of Faso Kaba Seed Company, a predominantly women-run seed organization in Mali. “This will lead to a lack of availability of seed for the production of certified seeds by individual farmers, associations and cooperatives,” she adds. Any dip in quality of seeds entering farms can jeopardize incomes and food security.

The pandemic has also hit seed systems in Senegal, according to El Hadj Ibrahima Diouf of Jambar, an economic interest group or Groupe d’Interet Economique. “The seeds we produced last year still need to Read more..