ENSURING THAT HUNGER DOES NOT KILL MORE PEOPLE THAN COVID-19 IN AFRICA

With the global spread of the COVID-19, and gradual lock downs in cities and countries across Africa, I have new fears - that starvation and hunger may kill more people than the virus. These fears are hinged on the realization that it is planting season in most parts of the Continent, and yet farmers are being asked to sit at home, the movement of seasonal workers is restricted, research institutes that provide seeds, fertilizer blending companies and agro-dealers, processors and markets are all being shut down.

Our regional and national borders are closed, and trading is being restricted. These realities, if pro-longed and not urgently addressed, will lead to short term consequences of food shortages, price hikes, and medium to long term consequences of under-nutrition, mass starvation and eventually death, especially among our most vulnerable populations.

While I understand the urgent need to stem the virus through social distancing and lock downs, we have failed to recognize that workers in the food industry, just like our health care workers, are essential to the fight against the pandemic and desperately need to be protected and supported. Indeed, without nutritious food, the sick cannot recover, and the healthy will eventually become unwell.

My fears are shared by a few stakeholders in Europe and North America. The EU Farmer’s organization - COPA-COGECA earlier this week actively advocated for support to ensure minimal disruptions to the food supply chain, worker protection and contingency plans. The United Kingdom and the United States have already outlined comprehensive plans to provide intervention grants, loans, and tax holidays, for stakeholders in the food industry, including restaurant owners and retailers affected by
the economic fallout of the pandemic. In Mexico, farmers who continue to plough their fields are being celebrated as heroes.

Sadly, unlike our counterparts in Europe and North America, there has been no coordinated action from industry groups, the private sector, civil society, or the public sector to raise awareness about the looming food crises on the African Continent, linked to COVID-19.

Thankfully, it is not too late to act! We must take decisive and proactive steps to ensure that our people have access to affordable nutritious food in both our urban and rural communities. This will require that:

- Our governments at the federal, state, and local levels recognize key stakeholders in the food and agricultural landscape as essential workers and provide them with the protection and support that they need to continue to work, following pre-stipulated safety and health protocols. We must keep food markets and factories open, with clear guidelines around limiting crowds, and widely publicized schedules for who can enter during what periods of time. We can also learn from China’s example over the last few months, where government officials, especially the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) and Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and National Health Commission repeatedly issued comprehensive notes to farmers on the control and prevention of the virus in rural areas, as well recommendations and protocols for preparing for their planting season and sustaining the livestock and poultry sectors.
Beyond guidance and protocols, our governments must urgently partner with the financial services sector to develop comprehensive loan packages for farmers, and entrepreneurs who are committed to working during the crises and can demonstrate their capacity to fill critical gaps in the food ecosystem. These interventions must actively engage women, who play a critical role in the sector. In addition, our governments must assess the national strategic and emergency grain reserves to gauge what is available and how to effectively manage and deploy these reserves in a transparent and accountable manner to minimize price hikes and widespread shortages.

- Our industry associations, fast moving consumer goods companies, international trading companies, aggregators, wholesalers, and retailers must work together seamlessly to ensure the efficient and effective provision of affordable food to the masses of people. Leveraging technology, raw material suppliers and processors can actively partner with logistics providers and retailers to ensure that food is moved to where it is needed most, and no community is left behind.

This is not a period for hoarding and price gouging, with a focus on profits and growth at all costs. Companies must rise to the higher ideal of shared corporate values, where they put the needs of their customers and the African people ahead of their own requirements for profits and shareholder value. To ensure that this occurs, consumer protection and anti-competition agencies must closely monitor the activities of the largest actors in the food industry to ensure a level playing field.
In addition, the private sector can facilitate the introduction of drones, sensors and other precision agriculture and innovative technology solutions, which will allow for active monitoring of commercial farm activity from a distance. Companies such as Atlas AI have demonstrated the power of technology to manage farms and assess impact, without direct human contact.

Our nonprofit organizations and media organizations must provide thought-leadership, monitoring and guidance to the entire ecosystem. Organizations such as GAIN are already providing critical guidance during this period.

- Finally, average citizens must invest in their own backyard and community gardens, while ensuring social distancing, manage their food budgets judiciously and share with their neighbors. We must rebuild trust in our communities by caring for the most vulnerable at this exceedingly challenging time in our history as humanity! As an eternal optimist, I am hopeful that as a people we will survive the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging with some critical lessons and a more resilient, united, and efficient food ecosystem. Now is the time for governments, stakeholders in the food ecosystem and citizens to act! Every minute counts!