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How to cushion country from food poverty

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Farmers transporting fertiliser using donkeys at the Mwea Rice scheme in Kirinyaga County. PHOTO | EVANS HABIL

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Fear of Covid-19 pandemic has increased the rate of food poverty in rural Kenya, where most residents have already suffered from one or more natural hazards, including desert locust outbreak, too much and sometimes untimely rains and lately floods.

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These factors, in addition to structural problems of land degradation, declining farm size and climate change have reduced their productivity and increased vulnerability to food insecurity, a fresh United Nation's policy brief

indicates, even as it recommends drastic measures to cushion against food and nutritional challenges.

The UN-Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) policy brief released last month indicates that food poverty -the inability to afford or to have access to food for a healthy diet- in rural areas is estimated at 35.9 percent, compared to 28.9 percent in peri-urban and 24.4 percent in core urban areas.

The report also shows that rates of rural food poverty are quite high mostly in arid and semi-arid (ASAL) counties, including Turkana (66.1 percent) followed by Mandera (61.9 percent), Samburu (60.1 percent), Busia (59.5 percent), West Pokot (57.3 percent), Marsabit (55.6 percent) and Tana River (55.4 percent). Only one of the seven (Busia) is a non-ASAL county.

To mitigate these, the report recommends mobilisation of significant amount of resources to allow national and country governments as well as humanitarian organisations to focus on identifying and providing adequate support to people who lost their jobs or businesses and those whose income fell below poverty levels using twin track approach including social protection and development support to ensure the financial support is adequate to meet nutritional requirements and basic needs of the family with a focus on children and mothers.

It pushes for assistance for people to resume working in informal and small business sector by adopting safe business practices and intensifying monitoring of food availability and prices in major regional/ county markets on a regular basis for early detection of problems in the value chain and timely response.

The report urges authorities to finalise and release the protocols and guidelines to facilitate operations within the food supply chain, and develop guidelines to support and promote online marketing that strengthens healthy food production and consumption.

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“Support farmers, including those engaged in urban farming, to become resilient and expand production by monitoring inputs , FAO said. It also called for “facilitation of supply of inputs, credit, advisory services to farmers and

supporting transportation, distribution and marketing of food supplies to avert food crises. Intensify financial support to farmers (small and commercial) affected by Covid-19, desert locust, flood and other disasters to become resilient and resume production – rescue plan.”

The report also recommends promotion and adoption of urban farming especially among the youths and women and promotion of online marketing of agricultural products and inputs and further develop and implement a plan to rescue and revitalise formal and informal businesses.

Many countries, including Kenya have introduced major emergency economic stimulus packages to prevent Covid-19 from destroying their economies, including significant sum of public money and combines monetary and fiscal

measures, prioritising cash injection into the economy, rescuing vulnerable businesses, and providing support to the unemployed.

“In a typical Keynesian style economics, increased government expenditure (often financed through new borrowing) is combined with lower taxes to stimulate demand and pull the economy out of the crisis or prevent plunging into recession.”

According to the Nairobi-based UN body, pastoralists are specifically facing difficulty selling their livestock because of the slowdown and the restrictions because farmers and consumers are scared of going to crowded marketplaces and selling fresh produces has not been easy.”

Also, the loss of income and challenges of accessing inputs may result in declining agricultural production for the next season and reduced investment in agriculture due to fear and anxiety of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Seed vendors as well as fertiliser, pesticides and tractor service providers have been impacted by the lockdown. Fishers along the Kenyan coast reported that their seafood trade to Europe and China has declined by 80 percent.

FAO admits that it is difficult to monitor food prices in Kenya as markets have become more fragmented and volatile.

In the case of key staple commodities, prices were high before the pandemic as cost of food increased 11.85 percent in March of 2020 over the same month in the previous year.

However, prices have not shown significant increases due to Covid-19 but panic buying and hoarding by traders, have spiked possible disruptions along the food value chain.

Assuming that some 50 percent of the Kenyan population is below 19 years old and some four percent (two million) are in retirement age, the number of small-scale farmers, pastoralists and fisher folks that do not participate in formal or informal employment is estimated at five million (10 percent), FAO said.

Food and nutrition security in Kenya is also threatened by the changing rainfall patterns, the invasion of quelea birds, pest and diseases, among others.

It is among six East African countries worst affected by desert locust, leaving nearly two million people facing acute food insecurity.

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