

CISANET COVID-19 Response

Issues Paper

Together for Vibrant Agriculture



Civil Society Agriculture Network

June 2020

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| CISANET | Civil Society Agriculture Network |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019 |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| CT | Cash Transfers |
| DAESS | District Agriculture Extension Services System |
| DNHA | Department of Nutrition and HIV&AIDS |
| DODMA | Department of Disaster Management |
| FUM | Farmers Union of Malawi |
| GBV | Gender Based Violence |
| MACRA | Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority |
| MoAFS | Ministry of Agriculture, and Food Security |
| NACDC | National Agriculture Content Development Committee |
| NASFAM | National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi |
| NCC | Nutrition Coordination Committee |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| NSA | Non-State Actors |
| TAMA | Tobacco Association of Malawi |
| UNRCO | United Nations Resident Coordinator Office |
| WASH | Water, Sanitation and Hygiene |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our appreciation to our esteemed CISANET members for their participation and input throughout the process of developing this paper including the rapid study and policy dialogue series. Special thanks to Driana Lwanda of African Institute of Corporate Citizenship, Esther Kawale of Agriculture Commodity Exchange Market, Hebert Chagona of Malawi Milk Producers, Stacia Nordin for leading the CISANET thematic groups to generate issues. We also recognize contributions by Dr. Sloans Chimatiro, and Mrs. Ndidza Chisanu of MwAPATA Institute along with Jephthah Maliro of Total Land Care for editing the paper. We would also like to acknowledge Lovemore Mtsitsi, Thokozani Guta and Pamela Kuwali from CISANET secretariat for facilitating their entire process of developing this paper. Special thanks to Food Agriculture Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANPARN) for providing space for the three dialogue sessions on “How does COVID affect the Agriculture Sector in Malawi”

Overview

Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET) facilitated an online dialogue on how Covid-19 affecting the Agriculture sector in Malawi. This paper highlights the main policy issues that were generated out of this dialogue. The policy issues were generated within three CISANET thematic areas listed as follows; Access to Markets, Livestock and Aquaculture Development and Resilient and Nutrition Friendly Agriculture.

Thematic Areas and Priority Issues

The following are the major priority issues identified under each thematic grouping:

Resilient and Nutrition Friendly Agriculture

- i. Sharing quality information on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.
- ii. Supporting production of diversified agriculture
- iii. Ensure food and cash transfers support all 6 food groups, not just staples
- iv. Support post-harvest management – food budgeting, food quality/safety

Livestock, Aquaculture and Dairy Development

- i. Availability of veterinary services and livestock drugs.
- ii. Continuity in dairy production and aquaculture

Access to markets

- i. Reduce Covid-19 damage.
- ii. Being future ready.
- iii. Building relationships between different players in the value chain.

The paper also highlights recommendations for action for the Malawi Government, CSOs, the Private Sector and Research Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has led the Malawi Government and CSOs to implement several mitigation measures to ease its effects on the Agriculture sector. While the efforts are commendable, it has become evident that there are critical policy gaps requiring a platform for systematic prioritization and engagement with the government and other key stakeholders including the private sector, development partners, the academia and others.

In this regard, Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET) facilitated a three-session online dialogue between 11 and 15 May, 2020 entitled “**How is Covid-19 affecting the Agriculture sector in Malawi?**” The objectives of the dialogue were to validate the outcomes of the *CISANET Rapid Study on CSO Covid-19 Response* (see Annex 1) and scope and prioritize the key policy issues in the Agriculture sector in relation to the pandemic. The policy issues were generated within three CISANET thematic areas as follows; Access to Markets, Livestock and Aquaculture Development and Resilient and Nutrition Friendly Agriculture. A total of 43 CISANET members participated in the dialogue.

This paper highlights the main policy issues that were generated out of the dialogue. Specifically, the analysis includes a description of the problem, who it is affecting, how it will impact the specific thematic areas and recommendations for action.

2. KEY COVID-19 POLICY ISSUES IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

2.1. Theme: Resilient and Nutrition Friendly Agriculture

2.1.1. Priority issue #1 - Sharing Quality Information on Resilient and Nutrition Friendly Agriculture.

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

On this aspect, three challenges were identified that are predominantly related to access and dissemination of information about the pandemic. The three challenges are circulation of inaccurate information ‘fake news’, myths and harmful cultural habits which are creating fear among communities, a lack of access to credible information sources on the pandemic and inconsistent messages about Covid-19, many of them related to food issues as possible cures.

Primarily, this is affecting credible service providers like the government, NGOs and CSOs. If these practices are left unchecked, it may lead to distrusting and attacking these providers as well as sharing wrong information amongst organizations.

Inaccurate information is also affecting communities and households, particularly people who lack access to credible information (extension, internet, paper, TV, radio). This has led to a doubt in Covid-19 pandemic, inconsistent restrictions and non-adherence to preventive measures.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions sharing quality information:

| No. | Priority issue #1: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|------------|---|--|
| 1 | Multi-sectoral work is key for Resilience and Nutrition | DODMA, UNRCO, DNHA, all NSAs |
| 2 | At national level – all stakeholders should work under National Covid-19 plan and in coordination with the Cluster System; Nutrition, Food Security and Agriculture Clusters. | |
| 3 | At district level all stakeholders should work with District Agriculture Extension Services System (DAESS) to ensure decentralized, well-coordinated agriculture for quality access of services by all members of all farming households. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture Nutrition (AgNut) must link to NCCs (Nutrition Coordination Committees) e.g. Village Nutrition Coordination Committees, Area Nutrition Coordination Committees • Agriculture Resilience must link to Civil Protection Committees | |
| 4 | There is a need to choose methods that are risk-free like video, radio, phone etc. Print materials on the other hand could be a risk for Covid-19 and mobile vans draw crowd. | MoAFS, DAESS, NACDC, MACRA, NSAs: CSOs and Research entities |
| 5 | Reduce cost of accessing information for internet, phone and community radio stations – subsidize the cost of distributing the information. | |
| 6 | Implementation of a comprehensive awareness strategy endorsed and followed by all key leaders (government, donor, community, political parties, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of messages to prioritize: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Post-harvest, food budgeting, food handling. ○ Household water sanitation and hygiene | MoAFS, MoH DNHA, MoICECT, NSAs: Private Sector for post-harvest |

2.1.2. Priority issue #2 - Supporting production of diversified agriculture

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

Three key areas were identified as problem areas for this policy issue. In the event of a lockdown, there may be a lack of inputs such as seed and fertilizer. This will primarily affect production, and eventually affect sales at local and international markets.

Adding to this, there is are limited irrigation and water management services for farming households. These services lack of water would help to enhance diversified production.

And finally, the pandemic will likely lead to an increased work load/burden for women caring for infected household members. This will in turn affect rural households. Likely consequences include a lack of diversified diet, lack of income and malnutrition. Furthermore, urban households will also be affected as it may lead to possible purchase of low nutrient quality foods like sugary and salty ultra-processed foods. Furthermore, food prices may go up thereby affecting dietary diversification. There will also likely be a rise in transport costs to markets especially for small and medium fisheries business (in part caused by limits on numbers of passengers on buses).

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions on supporting production of diversified agriculture:

| No. | Priority issue #2: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|------------|--|---|
| 1. | Enhancing integrated homestead farming (gardens, livestock and orchards). The focus should first be on local resources. | MoAFS, NSAs CSOs, Private Sector, Research Institutions |
| 2. | Support for winter cropping. Focus should be on protecting the soil (mulching/composting not burning), using grey water (at borehole around homestead) and solar irrigation if possible. | |
| 3. | Sharing labour and tasks amongst all household members. Encourage adoption of household approach type methodologies adapted for COVID-19 | |
| 4. | Foster availability and access of inputs for rural and urban families. This will aid in safety of foods stored longer. | |
| 5. | Track the cost of urban and rural healthy food basket/diet | |

2.1.3. Priority issue #3 - Ensure food and cash transfers support all 6 food groups, not just staples

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

On this policy issue, four problem areas were identified relating to food aid, cash transfers (CT) and markets. Initially, nutritionists are mostly advocating foods that help boost immunity (fruits, vegetables, animal foods, and general diversity of staples and legumes), but food and cash transfers do not guarantee that.

Cash transfers are in the national plan, starting with urban areas, then scaling vertically and then horizontally but funding is limited. The challenge is that cash can be used for anything needed or perceived to be and most of it is used for starchy foods. In most households, males have access and control over resources and where Gender Based Violence (GBV) is prevalent, coupled with the various movement restrictions, this may accelerate it.

Currently, there is need to ready the market to supply nutritious foods that could be used for all forms of aid. It is much easier to have contractual agreements with urban areas than in rural areas. Although this is also the case under normal circumstances, it could be enhanced with reduced movements, transportation and marketing.

This policy issue has affected markets, communities and households. On markets, suppliers and sellers providing items to the market have a reduced market and income. If food aid is procured from local suppliers, they could be affected positively. For instance, some nutrient-rich imported foods like baby foods can be locally sourced (for example fish powder added which can be added to porridge). However, there is need to ensure that local capacity is strengthened in this aspect. Some prices on products have increased taking advantage of the situation. This will also impact the nutrition status of communities and households are likely to suffer. Additionally, GBV on women and children is likely to increase because they have less access and control over the money.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions on food and cash transfers support all 6 food groups:

| No. | Priority issue #3: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|------------|--|---|
| 1. | Mainstream nutrition messages that promote using such cash to secure immunity-boosting foods | Government, CSOs: Research, Private Sector: |
| 2. | Foods for food aid should be purchased as close to the target audience as possible – explore use of use coupons/vouchers to get packaged food items – animal food group, and other perishables | |
| 3. | Distribution should be mindful of vulnerable population. | |
| 4. | Government should set market prices with monitoring systems to ensure that nutritious food is available and accessible. | |

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| 5. | Where districts are unable to supply, they could link up with their neighbors or major suppliers which are in almost each and every district – public private partnership for diverse, healthy food systems. | |
|----|--|--|

2.1.4. Priority issue #4 - Support post-harvest management – food budgeting, food quality/safety

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

There are four problem areas identified under this policy issue. To begin with, foods are less in demand in markets and need to be kept longer in homes. This is likely leading to high wastage. Additionally, this is also exacerbated by farmers being unable to purchase storage sacs due to their inability to sell their produce to get some income.

On food safety, knowledge and access to technologies (due to high costs) for food preservation is limited in rural areas unlike in urban areas where people have access to fridges and safer storage.

Food handling (at household and market level) is generally poor. So in the context of Covid-19 there will be a need to improve hygienic practices to ensure it is safe for households and markets.

Labor and social distancing have also affected harvesting and processing tasks. Adding to this, marketing and storage spaces have also been limited with restricted movement.

This issue has mostly affected households as it has increased cost of postharvest management

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions to support post-harvest management:

| No. | Priority issue #4: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|-----|---|---|
| 1. | Partners should provide households with knowledge and skills (see priority 1) and access to technologies for food preservation (such as providing or subsidizing costs of solar dryers, PICS-type bags and other similar products, preparation of shelf-stable animal-based nutritious foods, such as chambiko or fish-powder). | Government, CSOs, Research, Private Sector |
| 2. | Integrate WASH messages, facilities and practices in markets and households | |
| 3. | There is need to put in pricing mechanisms to cushion from increasing prices | |

2.2. Thematic Area: Livestock, Aquaculture and Dairy Development

2.2.1. Priority issue #1 - Availability of veterinary services and livestock drugs.

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

Veterinary services are available to farmers at a cost and there is no subsidy mechanisms in place for them. The impact of Covid-19 is likely to affect farmers' ability to access veterinary services and drugs as their income reduces. The Covid-19 lock downs will also affect the importation of livestock drugs, reducing their supply while increasing their demand and pushing their prices beyond ability of most farmers.

Livestock farmers and service providers such as veterinary services are likely to be affected the most.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions for continued availability of veterinary services and livestock drugs:

| No. | Priority issue #1: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|------------|---|--|
| 1. | Ministry of Agriculture, through the Department of Animal Health and Livestock Development should ensure dairy and veterinary services are included on the list of essential services so they are accessible throughout the period of Coronavirus pandemic. | Government, CSOs, Research Institutions |
| 2. | Ministry of Health should help to dispel myths linking reared animals with Coronavirus as there is no research findings so far that back up these myths. This has resulted in sharp decline in demand for livestock products. | |
| 3. | Information dissemination i.e. use of electronic and print media should be promoted | |
| 4. | Mainstreaming Covid-19 issues in all areas of dairy and livestock production (The same way HIV and AIDS were handled) | |

2.2.2. Priority issue #2 - Dairy production and Aquaculture

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

The restrictions under Covid-19 are affecting bulking group meetings due to social distancing. This is affecting milk collection in bulking groups on daily basis. Any increased restrictions on Covid-19 such as lockdowns will greatly affect the selling and collection of milk from bulking groups, leading to wastage of milk and monetary losses to dairy farmers.

This policy issue is affecting dairy in terms of their access to markets and inputs respectively. Currently the movement restrictions especially bans on markets are not allowing producers to take milk to bulking groups on daily basis as previously. This has also hindered milk processors who collected the milk from bulking centers. There is evidence that fish farmers (aquaculture) has been affected because farmers are unable to access quality feeds because these are imported from Zambia, and Zambia has banned exports in order to take care of her own aquaculture industry.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions for continued dairy production:

| No. | Priority issue #2: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|-----|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. | Ensure farmers have access to milk bulking group and markets for livestock and animal feed: With the ban on large gatherings and restrictions on markets. | Government, CSOs, Private Sector |
| 2. | Private sector should continue to provide marketing services to bulking groups and ensure fair prices to dairy farmers. | |

2.3. Thematic Area: Access to markets

2.3.1. Priority issue #1 - Reduce Covid-19 damage.

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on access to markets

The Malawi Government through the Ministry of Health has put in measures to limit movements. This has reduced access to markets for farmers and traders.

This policy issue will likely affect farmers as well as traders. Farmers may end up selling their commodities at low prices. The uncertainties as well are forcing farmers to sell at whatever price they are offered even if it below the minimum government prices. Traders buying from farmers will have challenges transporting the commodity and with limited storage facilities, post-harvest loss percent may negatively be affected this year.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The following table summarizes the proposed actions to reduce Covid-19 damage:

| No. | Priority issue #1: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|-----|---|---|
| 1. | Government should facilitate availability of warehouses for farmers to use | Government, CSOs, Research Institutions |
| 2. | Government should provide mechanisms for post-harvest handling to minimize human contact. | |

2.3.2. Priority issue #2 – Being future ready.

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought uncertainties on the short to medium term trade linkages and functionality of agriculture value chains due to national and global restrictions on movement of people and goods. The private sector will need to be clear on their medium to long term easiness of doing business under Covid-19, and support the national government. This will likely ensure sustainability of their business. Temporary policy restrictions as a result of Covid-19 are likely to hurt businesses, leading to losses. The private sector may end up pushing the losses to small scale farmers thus increasing their vulnerability. The availability of farm inputs for the coming growing season will have to be ensured, as is the regional and national markets for farmers produce.

The Private sector will be affected by the Covid-19 restrictions, eventually affecting farmers as well. Importation of seed and fertilizer under Covid-19 will likely take longer than before. Transportation costs for imports are likely to increase, directly affecting agriculture input prices limiting access for farmers.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The table below summarizes the proposed actions on being future ready:

| No. | Priority issue #2: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|-----|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. | The government needs to provide clarity in the policy document so that all stakeholders are aware of details and procedures in the document | Government, CSOs, Private Sector |
| 2. | The government needs to come up with clear lockdown measures. | |
| 3. | There is also need to clear the additional transactional costs for mobile money transfers | |

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| 4. | There is need to have clear access to accurate information as fake news is affecting farmers a lot and therefore not taking Covid-19 seriously | |
| 5. | Government should ensure that importation of production inputs such as fertilizer and chemicals are being monitored to avert the impending production catastrophe that might arise | |
| 6. | Private sector needs to be clear on where to seek what support for the response | |
| 7. | Malawi Bureau of Standards needs to provide the standards for the Covid-19 preventative products e.g. sanitizers and masks | |
| 8. | Institutions that process permits for importation of agricultural inputs should raise red flags if the trend shows inputs are not being imported. | |

2.3.3. Priority issue #3 – Building relationships between different players in the value chain.

a. Problem description, affected groups and likely impact on resilient and nutrition friendly agriculture.

Movement restrictions and bans on mobile markets to mitigate spread of the coronavirus mean that farmers have limited access to markets. This creates a demand problem on the part of farmers as they are not able to sell their produce at the markets. Moreover, their income is also likely to be affected therefore drastically reducing household income.

This will mostly affect farmers and traders as there is little trust between different players in the value chain. Farmers are ending up selling to the first available buyer they meet regardless on the prices being offered and not wait for well-established markets.

b. Recommended actions for Malawi Government, CSOs and Research Institutions

The table below summarizes the proposed actions on building relationships between different players in the value chain:

| No. | Priority issue #3: Recommended Actions | Organizations |
|-----|---|--|
| 1. | To improve the extension services - Extension workers need to be supported with protective measures | Government, CSOs, Research Institutions |
| 2. | To build platforms for developing linkages remotely. | |
| 3. | CSOs could aid/facilitating trade by developing linkages between the farmers and off-takers. | |

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 4. | CSOs could support farmers groups to access market information digitally | |
| 5. | Research institutions could explore/develop best digital platforms of providing trade between farmer organisations and off-takers | |
| 6. | Increased representation of and feedback to farmers in terms of in terms of market access especially in the tobacco sector as they no longer being allowed to witness tobacco sales at the auction floors. This means farmer organizations like NASFAM, FUM and TAMA should | |

3. ANNEX: CSO'S COVID-19 RESPONSE RAPID STUDY REPORT

CSO's COVID19 RESPONSE

1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In the midst of the COVID 19 Pandemic, CISANET secretariat conducted a rapid study to take stock of the response mechanisms that are being implemented by its members in the fight against the pandemic. This was done through a short online survey that was administered among its members. Specifically, the study sought to generate key information on the COVID 19 response interventions that are being implemented by CISANET members in Malawi. The outcomes of the study are expected to enhance coordination of the CSO COVID 19 response among the Network members. The information is also expected to promote complementarities among the members in order to avoid duplication of efforts and enhanced impacts.

In mid-April, CISANET developed an unstructured questionnaire which was circulated to its member through an online platform. The questionnaire was circulated using the updated membership database which currently comprises 38 members. Out of these, 27 responded representing a 71% response rate. The study collected qualitative data which was analyzed based on the themes that were coming out in relation to the objectives of the study.

A comparative analysis was conducted to ascertain alignment of the interventions to the cluster objectives and capacity gaps identified in the National COVID 19 Preparedness and Response Plan (NCPRP) developed by the Government of Malawi. Descriptive statistics were used to explain the geographical coverage of the response interventions. This report serves to provide a summary of the findings and recommendations from the study.

2. KEY FINDINGS

2.1. Key COVID 19 response interventions

Study findings suggest that, for a moment, CISANET members and partners have deviated from their usual agricultural related work to join the fight against the COVID 19 pandemic with the objective of minimizing its impact in the agriculture sector. The findings show that the key interventions being implemented by the Network members address both the preparedness and response aspects of the fight. The key interventions that the majority of the Network members are implementing include but are not limited to: provision of coronavirus materials including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers, development of Capacity for Coronavirus case management and awareness creation on COVID 19 among specified target groups and the general public.

2.2. Geographic Coverage

Figure 1 below demonstrated the geographical coverage of the CISANET COVID

19 response interventions. While 25% of the interventions are being implemented nationwide, 75% of the interventions are split among the 3 regions of the country. At 36% and 32%, the Central and Southern regions respectively claim the lion's share in terms of the interventions. This trend coincides with the trend in case confirmation where Lilongwe (Central region) and Blantyre (Southern Region) are the current epicenters of the disease spread in the country.

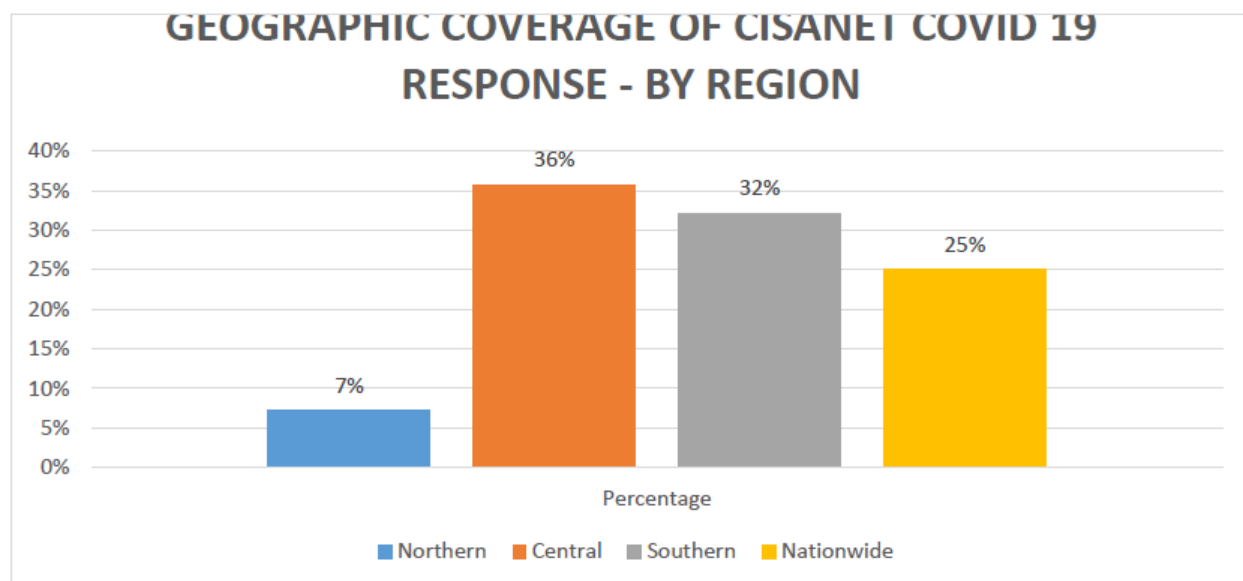


Figure 1: Geographical coverage of CISANET COVID 19 response

2.3. Total CISANET investment budget

The NCPRP earmarks an investment requirement in the region of MK157 billion (USD\$215 million) to combat the COVID 19 outbreak. The CISANET members' interventions are costed to the tune of MK2 billion (USD\$3 million). Computed as a share of the national level investment requirement, CISANET has currently earmarked an investment contribution of around 1.4% of the NCPRP budget.

2.4. Proposed Policy Priority Areas

As part of the survey, CISANET sought its member input on the perceived policy priority areas that the Government needs to focus on in order to mitigate the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic. The information was sought around 6 areas including: agriculture production and productivity; post-harvest management; household nutrition and resilience; access to reliable extension services; access to markets and finance; and livestock, dairy and aquaculture production. Information collected from the survey was categorized in these categories and

Table 1 below presents these findings.

Table 1: Suggested Policy Priority Areas

| NO. | AREA FOR CONSIDERATION | SUGGESTED PRIORITY AREAS |
|-----|---|--|
| 1 | Agriculture production and productivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support farmers with solar irrigation • Supporting farmers to access inputs such as seeds • Supporting farmers in intensifying winter irrigation |
| 2 | Post-harvest management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interventions activities aimed at ensuring harvesting of different crops • Enabling farmers to have access to packaging materials as well as chemicals like Actellic. |
| 3 | Household nutrition and resilience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be provision of safety nets, which can be support packages to sustain livelihoods of farmers, women and youth. • These can also be in form of cash transfers to ensure that they are able to maintain a livelihood |
| 4 | Access to reliable extension services; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be use of Radio Programmes; Call Centre, toll free on both Airtel and TNM, SMS Platforms and ICT Hubs in sending out agriculture messages and also agriculture extension advisory services in the Covid-19 context • Support extension service programs to reach the most vulnerable farmers in the wake of Covid-19 |
| 5 | Access to markets and finance; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support farmers markets in the face of COVID 19 (mostly Horticultural Products which uses food stalls) • Support access to alternative financial services (with VSLAs not being recommended as part of community savings). |

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the findings from the study, CISANET recommends the following:

1. *Lobbying for agriculture to be considered as an essential service*: in order to keep supply chains functioning at relatively optimum levels in the wake of the pandemic, there needs to be an exemption for those that deal with inputs and extension services to support farmers even in times when there are movement restrictions in the country.
2. *Promotion of diversified production amongst smallholder farmers*: COVID 19 presents an opportunity for the sector players to promote diversified agricultural production amongst smallholder farmers.
3. *Increased accessibility to agricultural inputs and social safety net programs*: the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic limits farmers' opportunities to sell their produce. Therefore, there is a need to support in terms of inputs and cash transfers for their survival during the pandemic period.
4. *Coordinate efforts around COVID-19 impact assessments* and the short and long-term measures dealing with the pandemic amongst all stakeholders. Engaging in import substitution activities more especially for horticultural products like vegetables. This is in the wake of various border movement restrictions that are in place thereby interrupting imports.

5. *Promotion of business continuity via virtual platforms*: the onset of Covid-19 has brought an opportunity to scale up on use of online platform to ensure continuity of crucial activities in the sector. Therefore, there is need for CISANET members to strategize on the best approaches possible to reach out to affected stakeholders.