



DIGITAL INNOVATION IN CRISES

In Response to the joint COVID-19 Pandemic and Desert Locust Infestation Threats in Kenya

July 2020

Current Business Climate

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the complex fragility of many countries, highlighted most clearly in the interplay of public health, markets and food systems. Although East and Southern African countries initially reported a relatively low number of confirmed cases in comparison to other countries, the numbers continue rising to over 200,000 as of 12 June, as compared to epidemiological modelling that projected 450,000 new cases by mid-May 2020.

Concurrently, early warning signs emerged that the Continent is on the brink of an unprecedented food security crisis. In Kenya, where strategic reserves are low, disrupted food systems, logistics and evidence of food hoarding may exacerbate the largest Desert Locust invasion in 70 years. A second-generation of immature swarms are anticipated to form in northwest Kenya as of early July during which time there is a considerable threat to crops and pastures in the area.

This moment of crisis has also presented new opportunities to offer support far beyond the farm. Our government partners need alert systems to track their national food balance. Our satellite data partners need field-based validation of healthy food production from drones and other digital tools. And every citizen in every country needs good, reliable information – especially girls and women, who often bear the brunt of health and hunger crises. As COVID-19 propels all of us to break through stasis and silos, we are discovering that AgriFin and its partners can meet these emerging needs.

AgriFin's Approach

More than ever before, small-scale farmers need access to information, financing, insurance, quality seeds, and connections to buyers. In fact, demand for the solutions delivered by Agrifin's partners is skyrocketing. Transcending mobility challenges and systems failures, these digital pathways pull food systems together in the safe and efficient ways communities need now. We're working to ensure that our partner portfolio protects young innovative companies making a difference through this period of volatility, despite investor and market slowdown.

¹ Projection of early spread of COVID19 in Africa as of 25 March 2020, Pearson, Carl A.B., Van Schalkwyk, Cari, et al

To achieve the goals above, we're providing stimulus support for those breakthrough solution providers and drawing on the strength of larger, more established partners who can weather this storm. To ensure we can continue to reach women, who are statistically less likely to have access to mobile devices, AgriFin is tailoring content and using more accessible mediums like TV, radio and partner platforms with 40-50% women users. Our approach is based on three key programmatic areas:

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Digital Enablement & Partnerships to Drive Scale, Transparency, Efficiency and Ability to Bundle Services: We are supporting design, testing and scale of digital solutions for smallholder farmers through partnerships and service bundling, based on the hypothesis that no single actor can meet all the needs of smallholders alone and that the wide range of risk factors in agriculture can be addressed through combinations of services and innovative technology.

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Behavior Change Communication (BCC): We are supporting design, testing and scale of digital solutions for smallholder farmers through partnerships and service bundling, based on the hypothesis that no single actor can meet all the needs of smallholders alone and that the wide range of risk factors in agriculture can be addressed through combinations of services and innovative technology.

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Resilient Markets: We are supporting critical market actors to mitigate and adapt to the economic impact of the crisis and help scale solutions. We will drive an “end-to-end” food systems approach, supporting farmers, rural value chains supporting production and aggregation, as well as wholesale and retail markets in urban environments, who are all vital to sustaining production and delivery of food to their nations, and also critical drivers for employment and future recovery of each target country. This effort will leverage ongoing work in digitally-enabled logistics and food systems management to ensure more efficient and safe flow of goods to and from producers and consumers.

AgriFin Programming Elements within this context are:

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Supporting real-time monitoring of the Desert Locust and COVID-19 threats: Our WhatsApp for Business emergency reporting channels, supported by television, radio, SMS and other channels of communication help put Kenya's smallholder farmers on the frontline of reporting on Desert Locust, while these channels also help provide reliable ground intelligence to the public and to the Government on critical response.

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Supporting “End-to-End” markets for smallholders growing food for millions of Kenyans leveraging digital market partners that provide smallholders access to markets, inputs, financing, aggregation centers, storage and extension support but are now in dire need of support as markets begin to destabilize and investors pull back in an unprecedented risk environment.

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Supporting the Kenya Food Balance Sheet and Desert Locust response to partners in the Kenyan Government, including external innovators such as NASA, capitalizing on ongoing work streams to build the digital data center for agriculture across relevant actors, as well as deep Mercy Corps AgriFin engagement in the Government's Desert Locust response. We expect this work stream to support government famine early warning systems and to establish a stronger government data platform to respond to future crises.

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Supporting businesses to help spread appropriate hygiene messaging to combat COVID-19: Businesses are often seen as unbiased disseminators of factual information when trust in the Government is low. The development community should support businesses in the dissemination of accurate and timely information related to COVID-19.

Like climate change, COVID-19 is proving that it's impossible to build a program that anticipates every barrier and risk. But what we can do is build programs that are flexible and agile – and that's our essential fabric. For more stories emerging from AgriFin's Covid-19 response, please visit www.mercycorpsagrifin.org/agrifins-covid-response/