

TACKLING COVID-19 IN THE CONTEXT OF SMALLHOLDERS

BACKGROUND

Introduction

Smallholder farmers are key to the supply of food both locally and internationally. Many governments rely on them to feed into international supply chains and generate national revenue. COVID-19 threatens their very subsistence and it is essential for smallholders to have the capacity to adapt to the new realities that the virus COVID-19 brings. We call to all stakeholders to come together to support them to adapt, ensure their resilience and protect their livelihoods, in this difficult time.

As the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) states, “the spread of illness can devastate poor rural communities and small-scale food producers who already face challenges such as weak resilience, poor nutrition and limited access to resources and service.” Around 63% of the world’s poorest people work in agriculture, the overwhelming majority on small farms. Most of the poorest, hungriest and most marginalised people live in rural areas, and that is where the development community now needs to focus its efforts.

Key takeaway

- The extent of the crisis on smallholders goes beyond cane cultivation
- Negative impacts can be experienced on staple crops, families and local communities
- Special attention should be given to vulnerable groups such as women and migrant workers
- Providing food to the most vulnerable should be priority
- Support livelihood by guaranteed no redundancy and offering cash support
- Set-up online communication tools to keep contact, inform and train farmers
- Support farmers in re-organising their daily life in time of physical distancing and lockdown
- Boost local health care provision systems and ensure they are well stocked in essential material

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A variety of realities

'Smallholder' is a very generic term to describe a diverse group of farmers. It is critical to understand how to smallholders and their various situations can be supported. For example, evaluating whether poverty, hunger and/or starvation poses a threat. Special considerations should be given to the under-represented and marginalised groups. Women farmers, migrant workers and day labourers are especially at risk of being badly impacted by the crisis.

In the time of global pandemic and possible devastating mid to long term consequences, the general objective is solidarity.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recommends two sets of actions to take during the pandemic.

- **Meet the immediate food needs of their vulnerable populations:** ensure emergency food needs are met; adjust and expand social protection programmes; scale up nutritional support; support management and prevention of undernourishment; adjust school meal programs so as to continue delivering school meals even when schools are shut.
- **Boost your social protection programmes:** increasing transfer amounts to people already benefiting from social assistance through a one-off payment or ensure multiple payments to help families meet their basic needs. Providing complementary entitlements to offset loss of income by small-scale producers. Consider how local food banks can support provisions for those in need and encourage large scale fundraising. For workers/farmers that are paid by cash, discuss with local finance providers how to encourage mobile payment systems as cash payments and the ability to travel to the cash counters are likely to be disrupted due to lockdown.

Stay in contact with your local authorities and government as they may create adaptive measures.

Extended impact on livelihood

The crisis can have three impacts: economic, social and the direct impact of the virus itself. While the impact of COVID-19 on cultivating sugarcane could be dire, smallholders and their dependents (including workers and contracted workers) may also rely on other crops to sustain their livelihood. Lockdown and isolation could prevent them from working their land or bringing produce to markets and therefore cutting important source of revenue. When schools are shut, the need to provide food for children increases -creating additional pressure on the household finances.

Farmers and workers must be informed of the additional risks from the virus if they have any pre-existing health conditions.

Good hygiene protocols

Prevention against the spread of the virus requires access to sanitation and change of habit. The Bonsucro [WHO guidance on COVID-19](#) offers key advice.

Soap should be accessible as well as wash basins, if possible, operated by foot. Access to clean water might be a challenge in rural communities. Alternative sources of water could be devised in collaboration with the mill (e.g. tank deliveries of water) to ensure good hand hygiene.

Mills that produce ethanol should provide 70% alcohol hand sanitizer to the local communities. They can also support the task of educating and helping local authorities to disinfect public areas.

Education on good respiratory hygiene should take place. Tissue papers, closed bins and masks should be provided. Special consideration should be given to smoking (hand coming in contact the mouth) or spitting (spread of the virus).



Training and education should focus on good use of hand sanitizer, personal hygiene and good cleaning practices at home and on the farm, including cleaning frequently touched surfaces such as handrails and doors with appropriate detergent or disinfectant solutions. Posters in the local language can be given to communities.

Families can be encouraged to produce their own non-medical masks. This is an economical way to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) for personal use only. This could mitigate a potential local shortage of masks.

Farm activities under physical distancing / isolation

As physical distancing is an efficient barrier to reduce the risk of spreading of the virus, it is important to highlight the need for local communities to use this principle, its reasons and how to achieve it.

Cane extension officers can organise seed and fertilizers requirements remotely or organise meetings in the villages rather than at cane offices. Strict planning of visits/calls should be implemented. For the same reasons, deliveries of input should be done on farmers' doorsteps.

The same applies for the maintenance of machinery. Whilst engineers and technicians might not be able to visit farms to support repairs, online support should be developed supported by tech such as WhatsApp/Line/WeChat.

Community leaders and lead farmers have a critical role to play in disseminating the messages. They can make decisions such as preventing gatherings and helping local authorities to enforce any lockdown rules to ensure physical distancing is maintained.

If transport for workers is provided or organised by the farmers, it should be done respecting physical distancing by reducing the number of workers transported at each given time. Workers should be provided with a mask and clean hands before and after the journey. Thorough cleaning of the vehicle is needed to prevent the virus living on surfaces. Workers should wash their hands at the end of the shift and when arriving at home.

Shifts can be divided in the smaller groups to respect physical distancing, reduce the risk of contagion and risk of disruption if one group members fall ill. If one member becomes ill, the whole group should then isolate as a preventive measure. This might impact productivity which should be taken into account in planning.



If a worker falls ill at the farm, they should remain at the farm and be isolated. Farmers should be given guidance on how what to do in such a case, including on how the local health care centre plans to handle COVID-19 victims.

Agricultural workers often work, eat, and sometimes live in close proximity to each other. The farmers and the workers could be considered as a household and would therefore not require physical distancing. However, it requires that the household remains together and travel to and from is kept to minimum and followed by strict hand washing. If a farmer needs to travel for a delivery or pickup, good practice would be for the farmer to remain in their vehicle and ground staff to operate loading/unloading. This would minimise the risk of spreading the virus.

To help farmers understand the principles, farm extension officers can demonstrate how physical distancing can be achieved in field when work is performed – planting, irrigation, fertilization, harvest, collection of cane. This can also be achieved by sharing videos on social media or handing over flyers.

If, for safety reasons, a job requires that workers are within 2 metres from each other, they should wear masks and wash their hands before and after physical contact.

Access to healthcare

For the those that are vulnerable or have pre-existing health conditions, the virus can be life-threatening. Older family members are most at risk and should be required to stay at home. Visitors should ensure good hand and respiratory hygiene to reduce the risk of contamination and maintain physical distancing.

Farmers who live with workers on their premises should check for symptoms at beginning and end of the day by an open discussion.

Mills and farmers often support local health care providers in their missions. As COVID-19 can have serious health impacts, millers and others should work with local hospitals and dispensaries to ensure they are well stocked with PPE (including gloves, masks), hand gel, soap, tissues, bins, medicines and have isolation rooms ready.

Local health care should have clear guideline on how they will handle COVID-19 victims, how to report a case and how to request help when the health of a person is deteriorating, including provision for their transport. Farmers should not abandon their workers until local health authorities have taken them in. Equal treatment should be offered to all permanent, local, temporary, seasonal, contractual or migrant workers.

Securing livelihood

If isolation is required (symptoms or per government guidelines), ensure access to food is possible with deliveries to households or if necessary, to a food bank.

Staff should not be dismissed. Fear of losing livelihood encourages workers to hide their symptoms and therefore become a risk of contagion. This would be the worst possibility. If farmers have the capacity to do so, they should maintain cash payments to their workers or provide equivalent food (grain and others) and toiletries supply during lockdown/sickness. Ill workers should be provided safe accommodation to isolate.

Case of migrant workers

If required to stay away from home because of government requirements, millers and farmers must ensure migrant workers have access to accommodation, toiletries and food for the household that depends on them. Language and lack of local knowledge may make them vulnerable. Workers should not be stranded without a livelihood. Special efforts should be taken to reach out to migrant workers who might be accommodated in workers shelters. Such shelters should be adapted and training should be provided to their residents.

If workers would normally crop their own land, provide compensation for loss of production or alternative subsistence needed to cover for the loss. If possible, evaluate whether unused land can be allocated to those in need for their own production.

If a quarantine is in place, farmers might struggle to access a work force. In such cases, farmers should be supported to find alternative solutions (local workers, volunteers) or facilitate the transport of workers who are willing/in need of work. Local authorities should be consulted to ensure a safe, compliant process.

With an international workforce, farmers and contractors have responsibilities to ensure they are updated on the situation in their country of residence and their country of origin. If local and national authorities offer repatriation travel, and should the workers intend to return to their countries, travel should be facilitated that respects with health advice the country of origin and destination.



Education/Awareness/Training

It is important to train workers to recognise symptoms and encourage them to disclose them immediately. They should also report if a family member falls ill. Encourage workers to comply with local regulation which should be clearly explained.

Literacy of rural communities is often low, making it difficult to interpret technical information. Social networks are often more effective than other media. It is essential to liaise with local representatives/leaders and adhere to local practices (including language) before delivering training on COVID-19.

Use posters to inform farmers and workers of the danger of the coronavirus, its spread and the steps to prevent it. Demonstrate how social distancing works in practice where people may need to gather. Marks can be drawn on the floor to ensure people implement it.

Person to person awareness has proven to be very efficient. If possible and safe to do so, regularly visit farms to explain and repeat the messages – extension workers must keep physical distancing (>2 m) with farmers and workers. Wearing a mask demonstrates the existence of a threat.

As extension officers visit many farms, they are at risk of spreading the virus. Therefore, good hygiene practices are required, physical distance must be maintained, and a precise log of people met should be maintained. If one officer becomes ill, the log would allow to quickly identify who might have been contaminated.



Many operators have invested in digital solutions to keep in contact with supplying smallholder farmers. These tools can be used to disseminate, repeat and reinforce the important health practices. Online videos, SMS/text messages/, picture/poster sharing (WhatsApp, Line, Facebook, internal digital tool). Your IT team can adapt your own tool and create dedicated COVID-19 pages and ensure they are available in the local language.

Local government may have created apps encouraging people to self-declare their symptoms and give alarms when cases are registered in nearby communities.

Financial support

It might be necessary to help smallholder restart their production. If they have been seriously impacted, they might not have the financial capacity to purchase input or seeds needed to start the season. Financial support should be provided. Temporary cash handouts for poor farmers are essential, as well as grants to restart production. Mills could facilitate discussion with banks and financial institutions so fees on farmers' loans could be waived and extend payment deadlines. If smallholders have accumulated debts with the mill (e.g. purchase of input), the mill should be encouraged to delay repayment to reduce pressure on smallholders.

With data collected through farm diaries, cane extension teams can evaluate the cost of cultivation and help financing planning for their supplying farmers.

Prepare for post-pandemic now

Smallholder farmer productivity might be affected by the crisis. Supply chains of input could become disrupted, especially if they rely on import.

Restart plans should be developed in collaboration with smallholders, their representatives, communities and authorities. The plan should be adaptable. In extreme cases, smallholder farmers may prioritise production of short cycle crops to mitigate immediate food security impacts. Consequently, they could reduce their sugarcane production. In turn, the mill should adapt its production plans to mitigate any shortfall in cane input.

As the crisis fades, an assessment of the vulnerability of smallholder should be carried out to prioritise efforts to support the most affected smallholder farmers.

Investments in agricultural programmes can help people become more self-reliant, increase rural prosperity, ensure more sustainable food systems and food security, and create greater resilience in fragile states.

As an economic crisis is looming post COVID-19, it is critical to ensure human rights and the environment are safeguarded to prevent marginalisation of the most vulnerable population. Local, regional and international organisations are repurposing their work to provide support to the worst hit areas. If the situation becomes critical and early signs of long-term crises are identified, operators should engage with these organisations to prepare a recovery plan and act as soon as possible.