

Africa's face of agriculture is female

Africa has a huge opportunity to make agriculture its economic driver. However, the potential for this is far from being made exhaustive use of, one reason being that women face considerable difficulties in their economic activities. The organisation AWAN Afrika seeks to change this state of affairs.

By Beatrice Gakuba

If you are driving along any major highway in Africa, you will not miss women crowding at bus stops, farm produce in their hands, seeking possible buyers for their wares. Unmistakably so, because women control a sizeable portion of trade in agricultural produce in Africa, be it in production, where, according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), 50 per cent of the entire agricultural labour force is made up of women, growing nearly 70 per cent of Africa's food and therefore contributing about 21 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

These statistics are a clear indication that women contribute to Africa's economic and food security. Yet policies in African countries continue to deny women the full rights over the land that they tend or even the earnings that they derive from their produce. According to the Center For Women's Land Rights, 65 per cent of land in Kenya is governed by customary law, which gives men precedence in land ownership over women and applies in various forms throughout Africa. It means that the women who tend to the land cannot use it as collateral should they need a bank loan.

Furthermore, women are denied a seat at the decision-making table that determines land rights as well as agricultural policies. Yet numerous research programmes have shown that if women had the same access to resources as men, then agricultural yields in Africa would increase by up to 4 per cent, reducing the number of hungry people by 17 per cent. Despite being endowed with more than 20 per cent of the world's arable land, Africa's food import bill stands at 35 billion US dollars and is expected to reach 110 billion by 2030. In this decade of action, Africa has a huge opportunity to make agriculture its economic driver.

Yet there are several barriers that hinder women's success in agribusiness, despite their representing 70 per cent of Africa's agricultural activities. Women lack access to capital, farming inputs as well as knowledge on new technologies on sustainable farming practices and local, regional and global market trends,



An AWAN Afrika B2B session during the organisation's Continental Conference 2019 in Kenya, Nairobi.

Photo: AWAN Afrika

just to mention a few restrictions. Value addition is still not fully exploited on the continent – most African countries continue to export their food, for example cocoa, tea and coffee, as raw materials and then import it as finished products. African markets are still stationary buildings which to access farmers must use a poor road network, where movement is weather-dependent, so that a lot of food does not reach the markets and will waste away in farms with poor infrastructure and poor storage facilities. While E-commerce is slowly gaining ground on the continent, it is still a preserve of a few tech savvy farmers especially the youth, who unfortunately have no access to land and capital to start businesses.

A tailwind for women and youth-owned agribusinesses

As a non-profit network limited by guarantee, the Africa Women Agribusiness Network (AWAN) Afrika was established with a vision to create a platform for African women and youth in agribusiness to access finance, markets, and trade information. The aim is to enable and accelerate their businesses by leverag-

ing opportunities available within the regional markets, and for them to tap into the newly created Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and global markets. It is a network that comprises individual members' businesses such as producers, processors, aggregators, export companies and input suppliers, among others, across 38 countries in Africa.

For agriculture to be profitable, we have to embrace technology. The organisation provides women-owned and youth-owned agribusinesses with an E-Hub, which is a repository of information on agriculture along value chains and supply chains and also facilitates access to new agricultural technologies. #AWANAfrikaUnder30 champions are African youth of either gender engaged in agribusiness. Since our establishment, we have registered 1,500 women- and youth-owned businesses and groups in our network in 42 countries, and we have impacted over one million women-owned small agribusiness enterprises (mama fish, mama mboga), which we do through regular coaching.

Some of the major obstacles to Africa's agribusiness that I mentioned above would be

solved if women and youth had access to finance and financial services, yet women and agriculture are still considered a risky business by most banks and lenders, who will not offer them loans for farming. At AWAN Afrika, we work with financial institutions advocating for innovative financing models for our members, be it digital loans or the use of facilities other than land as collateral. We also lobby governments to work on policy that makes it easier for governments to support lenders who prioritise women and youth in agribusiness.

Furthermore, we train our members on the need for market-driven agriculture, which ensures them ready markets for their produce. This ties in with our other two pillars of Technology and Trade facilitation – where we see to it that our members are keeping up to date on agricultural information via our E-hub repository for agricultural information, which informs them about trade, including agreements between trading blocs, as well as standards and certifications. It also provides them with the latest information on trading in different markets. At the moment, we are engaged in ensuring that our members are not left out of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which will offer a bigger market and a chance for Africans to trade more with each other.

We are in the process of finalising a platform that will connect our continental digital platform with the aim of linking women's agribusinesses with buyers, exporters, investors, Agritech companies and other value chain actors to facilitate inclusive participation in the continental and global markets.

Moving forward

We have but scratched the surface, and much more needs to be done if women are to benefit from their labour in agriculture. Working with development partners, African governments must deliberately introduce training on the whole agricultural value chain, targeting women and youth. It is clear that agriculture will be the next youth employer. But out of the eleven million youths entering the job market in Africa each year, only three million are able to get gainful employment. Governments and development partners should support initiatives like AWAN Afrika to scale up our activities in order to reach more women and youth.

What about COVID-19?

Finally, as Africa stares at its first recession in 25 years, owing to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, international solidarity with the continent is required to keep businesses afloat. The first victims of the sustained lockdowns and restriction of movement measures put in place to contain the spread of the Coronavirus are women smallholder farmers and young agripreneur start-ups. Women will be affected down to the household level due to additional work as a consequence of the lockdown.

Post-COVID-19, the international community has been left devastated, and traditional lenders will be dealing with their own domestic challenges. While big businesses will decry a lack of stimulus packages, for informal traders and smallholder farmers, these packages may

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AGRIBUSINESS

31 African countries have imposed full border closures – as governments battle to contain the spread of the virus, this means that in some areas, smallholder farmers, who make up 80 per cent of Africa's food producers, cannot farm.

There are fears that production will fall in the various sectors. Much of Africa's agricultural production is manual, and the ongoing lockdowns and restrictions in movement are likely to cut labour supply but also harvests and supplies. The disruptions have also affected the value chain, for those in agribusiness are not able to reach markets.

Unlike wealthy countries, African agribusiness players do not have the resources to cushion their businesses from the effects of prolonged closures and lockdowns. This therefore calls for urgent financial interventions to help them build resilience for their businesses and also recover from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

actually not be the solution. We need to seek solutions that will impact the lives of millions of vulnerable farming families.

AWAN Afrika is in the process of finalising a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on Small and Medium Enterprises. We aim to understand their coping mechanisms and what their businesses are going to look like eight months from now. Women will suffer a double blow, because now, in addition to losing income, they must take care of their children, who are at home as schools are closed, they lack labour to manage their farms, and domestic violence is on the rise.

We, the AWAN Afrika initiative appeal for the support of our project, which is based on a business model that seeks flexible funding to help our Small and Medium enterprises survive the economic shocks of COVID-19. Businesses need cash, and our women have no access to cash sources. As many of these women have told us, for them, hunger is closer and more dangerous than COVID-19.

Beatrice Gakuba is the Executive Director of Africa Women Agribusiness Network (AWAN) Afrika, a panafrikan non-profit organisation based in Kenya. Contact: beatrice@awanafrica.com



A common sight along Africa's roads. Women control a sizeable portion of trade in agricultural produce.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

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