How should African countries prepare in terms of capacity post COVID-19?

Five actions for the members of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa to adopt, from individual to national level.

Krishan Bheenick
Lead Specialist, Capacity Development and Coordinator TAAT CDTO

“We cannot go back to normal, because normal is what led us to the current situation”

In the wake of the ongoing pandemic, each country is having to deal with its strategies to contain the spread of the virus, including different forms of lockdown and physical distancing within the community. While the countries have to focus on public health, the withdrawal of people from the economic processes is having significant negative impact on the agricultural sector. While we are still in lockdown, there are opportunities for countries to learn from others about the impacts and the prospects for agricultural stakeholders to go back to work in a safe manner.

The Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa has not been insensitive to the situation. While being in lock down and working from home, staff of the FARA Secretariat have been brainstorming on means that can be put in place for collective reflection and knowledge sharing across African countries as a means of building our capacity to cope with the new situation.

There are several approaches and tools that can be used to help the process of learning from the experiences of others. Already, there are many experiences that are being documented about real life situations in the agricultural sector, for example, shortage of labour for specific labour-intensive agricultural practices or processes; reduced capacity of processing plants to operate and lack of processing facilities to preserve the produce, highly specialised dairy value chains failing due to a break in a link in the logistics, lack of organisation of the distribution chain of agricultural produce from production site to packaging and from packaging to the consumer.

Nevertheless, our communities have been adapting both in the agricultural sector and in society in general, as governments have ensured that the essential services such as the utilities, money transactions and access to food are maintained. One of these essential services that has kept society connected to each other is the internet, a system of communication that was designed not to fail, even in case of drastic worldwide calamities.
It has enabled many innovative ideas for ensuring access to health and food to be developed in the past month. Is it time for the agricultural system to take a few lessons from the design of the Internet to prepare for disaster situations in the future? But rather than plan for disaster scenarios in the future, we can already gain a lot by analysing our adaptation approaches that can shed insight on how we need to organise ourselves to be better prepared for the next food crisis situation. The preferred approach would be to build resilience within our agricultural systems.

How can members of the Forum play their role in strengthening the capacity of our agricultural innovation systems? The recent experience has shown the value of having an effective bottom-up approach, so here are five interventions for members of the Forum to consider, ranging from individual, to institutional to systems level outcomes:

TAAT CDTO workshop with Commodity compact Technology Transfer Officers and Extension specialists on Packaging of Outreach materials
1. **Observe, document and analyse to properly formulate the problem area:**

All agricultural stakeholders should consider the challenges they are facing at their level, make observations and document these challenges for the purpose of analysis. Your own documentation and analysis of the situation will help to make your experience explicit to others. Sharing such documented experiences allows a collective reflection amongst peers, whereby there is an agreed definition of the problem to be addressed. Documentation allows others in the future to revisit the context and assess the possible solutions that were proposed. Sound application of the principles of the scientific method are at the base of our learnings. A lot of the challenges we are currently facing revolve around the social sciences, and observations, documentation, sharing and discussions are the first steps in the process of learning. FARA is championing the Science Agenda for Agriculture in Africa, a programme in support of the African Union’s Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024, as a way of ensuring that Science, Technology and Innovation make their rightful contribution to the transformation of Agriculture in Africa.

2. **Identify promising practices as a means of evaluation and learning:**

In general, people want to share what they consider is a successful solution they have implemented but describe the problem in less detail. Thus, the previous section focused on describing the context of a proposed solution, so others can assess the merit and applicability of the solution. The documentation and sharing of solutions that have been applied and which seem to work in a particular context is the most commonly shared content. Nevertheless, documentation is necessary in the approach whereby promising practices can be identified. Promising practices can then be validated by others in their contexts and eventually lead to widespread good practices. FARA and the Young Professionals in ARD Network in Africa (YPARD-Africa) will be actively looking out for innovations in their communities in light of the COVID-19 to ensure that we capture the innovations at grass roots level, through the process of ‘Experience Capitalisation’, especially where the youth are involved.

Photo credit: Nawsheen Hosenally

Continental Youth Engagement Workshop: Strategic Engagement and Capacity Development of Youth in Agri-Entrepreneurship for Technology Adoption, organised by FARA
In the past month, actors along agricultural value chains have had to improvise, innovate and re-invent their roles. The web and social media have been able to step in where coordination and logistical arrangements had to be improvised, social linkages and trust relationships along the value chains had to be reinforced through ICTs. We are all still in the process of innovation within the context of the evolving situation and may have to keep at it in the medium term. For example, stakeholders had to resort to online orders, formulate pre-packaging of essential items for sale or for distribution, rely on retailers’ intelligence on packages for the elderly, families with babies etc., rely on community leader’s knowledge of vulnerable community members and organise community-oriented help. These conditions have highlighted the need for proximity distribution points, local community knowledge and social organisation to ensure safety within cordoned off communities. The capacity for innovation under such circumstances calls for organisational flexibility of the agricultural enterprises and innovative approaches to social or community organisation, in order to be able to repair the disturbed value chains. While organisations such as FAO, GIZ and ILO have invested in creating guidelines on the management of value chains in Africa, FARA is focussing its attention on the social dynamics at play within value chains. A lot of insight on the importance of social and trust relationships within existing value chains may come out of the current situation.

Discuss these scenarios within the context of Value Chain Analysis:

Incorporate the lessons and insights into the new normal practice through Innovation Platforms:

While a lot of improvisation has been required and new insights obtained, the pause in global economic activities has also brought to light a lot of issues on the need for collaboration and cooperation to address common problems, the impact of mankind on the environment and the need to prioritise sustainable use of the earth’s resources. Furthermore, there are also calls for reversing globalisation, reshoring of production, self-sufficiency and less reliance on external sources of supply and external clients. However, these are all elements that are needed to inform a more sensitised population as we move forward. Improved dialogue should take place amongst multi-stakeholder groups and partnerships, and these are best carried out in the context of innovation platforms, whether at operational level or strategic level. For over a decade, FARA has been promoting the concept of Innovation Platforms at the heart of the Integrated Agricultural Research for Development (IAR4D) approach in Africa.

It is high time for national agricultural innovation systems to capitalise on the knowledge and insights gained on the performance of the technical aspects of the system during this pandemic and compare lessons with other countries. Already, AFAAS, CCARDESA, ASARECA and CORAF are engaged, together with the FARA Secretariat to facilitate online sessions to share the above lessons and to discuss systemic improvements.
While the pandemic has put us all in a crisis-management mode, it does not hinder us from re-evaluating our systems in the light of our current performance. There are going to be failures and successes, occasions where one solution does not work elsewhere, and where models will fail. But as long as we are able to learn from our observations and our tactical interventions, we will continue to innovate. FARA has been at the forefront of analysis of the capacity for innovation within National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), especially after having adopted an inclusive definition of the NARS in the context of its interventions within the CAADP programme. More recently, FARA has joined numerous international partners, within the Tropical Agriculture Platform, in developing and promoting the Common Framework for Capacity Development of the Agricultural Innovation Systems.

The framework provides useful concepts by which the capacities of an Agricultural Innovation System can be assessed, comprising of 4 core functional capacities and one overarching capacity for innovation (Figure 1). These four core capacities can easily be related to the above points, namely the capacity to reflect and learn, the capacity to navigate complexity, the capacity to collaborate and the capacity to engage in strategic and political processes. As part of its strategy to facilitate the application of the TAP common framework, FARA and its sub-regional constituents are collaborating with FAO to roll out national assessments of the Agricultural Innovation Systems. In some cases, the capacity audits will focus on specific value chains and their actors (e.g. in the context of the Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation programme, funded by the AfDB) while in other cases, the country may request for assistance to assess the National Agricultural Innovation System as a whole.

'We need to revisit the capacity of our National Agricultural Innovation Systems to innovate in the face of this new challenge and learn from the lessons'

Figure 1. Functional capacities essential for Agricultural Innovation Systems
#FARAonCOVID19