



## **Smallholder Farmers and COVID-19**



# From Response to Recovery and Resilience



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# Farming families need support in order to safeguard their incomes, food security, and health so that they emerge from the COVID-19 crisis in a position to participate in the economic recovery.

Much of the early focus on the impacts of COVID-19 has understandably been centered on densely populated urban areas, but the pandemic is also creating—and will continue to create—major disruptions in smallholder farming communities. As governments have issued restrictions on mobility and travel, and social distancing has become the norm, farming families have seen income streams disappear, faced difficulty in carrying out key agricultural activities, and found volatile prices for their crops. These impacts are not only affecting farming families, but are also disrupting food systems and food security in countries around the globe. Within this context, what can civil society organizations, governments, and the private sector do to support smallholder farmers?

In a crisis that is just a few months old, no one has definitive answers, and we are still learning how best to react. However, based on surveys of 22 of TechnoServe's agricultural programs in 13 countries across Latin America, Africa, and South Asia we have identified a set of common challenges to protecting rural incomes, nutrition and food security, and health, and we have worked with program leaders in countries around the world to develop approaches to help farmers overcome these obstacles. In many cases, these approaches will require programs to broaden and reprioritize their focus, because the impacts of this crisis are varied and far-reaching. While the specific actions we are taking—and plan to take—vary from country to country and sector to sector, we can categorize them in three phases:

- **Responding to the pandemic:** Redefining the objective of our support to helping women and men farmers withstand the immediate threats to their incomes, nutrition, and food security; aiding farming households to keep their agricultural businesses afloat during the crisis and in a position to participate in the recovery; and limiting the long-term consequences of the shock to agricultural value chains;
- **Recovering from the crisis:** Refocusing on growth, and helping farmers rebuild their agricultural businesses and return to profitability;
- **Building resilience for the future:** Helping to prepare farmers for future shocks

# I. The Challenge of COVID-19 for Smallholders

As governments around the developing world enact measures meant to contain the spread of the coronavirus, smallholder farmers are experiencing immediate shocks to their daily incomes. Smallholders rely on activities beyond their farms in order to boost their earnings and reduce the risks to their livelihoods. Estimates suggest that wage labor, non-agricultural trade, the sale of home-made goods, and transfers and remittances account for between 14% and 34% of smallholder incomes. Many of these revenue streams have been significantly disrupted by lockdowns, curfews, and quarantines. An estimated 500 million smallholders around the world live on less than \$2 per day, and losing such a significant share of their income threatens their ability to both weather the crisis and participate in the economic recovery.

Restrictions on mobility are causing serious supply chain disruptions, which have also made it difficult for smallholders to carry out a number of important farm tasks. Many farmers are having trouble accessing inputs, labor, transportation, markets, and technical assistance that they need to profitably grow and sell their cash crops. The restrictions are most seriously impacting smallholders currently trying to plant or harvest crops, and more farmers will be affected the longer the pandemic lasts. In a number of cases, agricultural businesses—such as pack houses, input suppliers, and food processors—that farmers count on are also facing operational and business challenges. Income losses and lack of predictability are likely to influence what and how much farmers plant next season, which also has implications to broader national and global food supply, impacting nutrition in both rural and urban households.

## IDENTIFYING FARMERS AT RISK

Currently, one of the most urgent tasks for organizations working in agriculture is diagnosing what farmers need in order to overcome immediate disruptions to their agricultural businesses. To that end, TechnoServe has developed a two-part framework to identify the types of disruptions that are most important and urgent to address for a given segment of farmers:

- **To what types of disruptions are farmers most vulnerable?**

For a given segment of farmers, given the nature of production and the nature of the market, how “at risk” are these individuals, and what types of disruptions are they least resilient to?

- **What types of disruptions are most relevant right now?**

Given where the farmers are in the crop cycle, what types of disruptions are most relevant today, and what types of disruptions pose the biggest threat in the next stage of the crop cycle?

This framework allows us to prioritize activities that will deliver the greatest impact in securing farmer livelihoods. Striving to answer these questions with sex-disaggregated data, as we are, we can understand the differential impacts of the pandemic on women and men farmers.



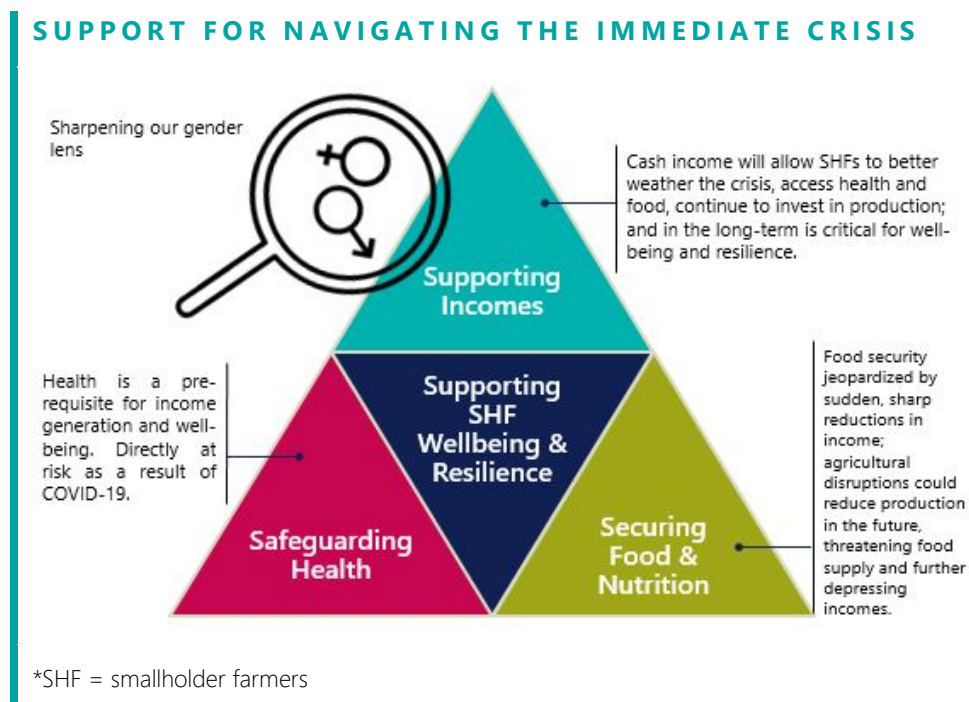
Farmers will also feel COVID-19’s macroeconomic impacts. The consensus is that the pandemic will cause a global recession, with the World Bank estimating that an additional 40-60 million people—primarily located in Africa and South Asia—will be pushed into extreme poverty. The economic crisis will put pressure on food and agricultural systems in developing countries, with direct implications for the incomes of women and men smallholders—for example, demand for many crops will shift, and the prices paid to farmers will be volatile.

The burden of these impacts are likely to fall disproportionately on women in rural households, who will confront added economic, health, and nutritional challenges. Our experience suggests underlying gender inequalities in access to productive resources will be exacerbated by the crisis, leaving women economically vulnerable in the short term and challenging their ability to recover quickly. Complex, and often unequal, intra-household dynamics will have significant and negative impacts on the nutrition and health of women. Furthermore, the critical role women hold in agricultural production and household well-being is often ignored, missing opportunities to increase agricultural output, reduce poverty, and secure the health of families and communities.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate existing challenges, such as the locust infestation in East Africa, while heightening the risks to farmers from future crises. If farmers sell off assets, use their savings, and are unable to make investments in their farms due to the economic shock from the current crisis, it will be difficult for them to confront market slumps, crop diseases, erratic weather patterns, and natural disasters—which are only becoming more common due to climate change—in the future.

## II. Responding to the Pandemic: Helping Farmers Navigate the Immediate Crisis

We must move quickly to address these challenges. During the immediate health crisis, while lockdowns, business closures, and other restrictions are in place, we must ensure that farmers are able to withstand shocks to their incomes, food security, and safety, and take actions to limit longer term consequences of these shocks to their productive capacity and resilience.



### *Preserving incomes*

A number of disruptions are making it difficult for women and men farmers to carry out essential farm tasks and other income-generating activities, jeopardizing both current and future earnings. Immediate action is needed to support farmers facing these circumstances.

Our agricultural programs are rapidly pivoting to support farmers to overcome disruptions to their farming activities. For example, for farmers that rely on purchased inputs, services and non-family labor, restrictions on travel and transportation are making it hard to access these critical inputs and services. In these cases, our teams are focused on coordinating with government authorities, private-sector stakeholders, and farmer producer organizations to ensure that these resources are exempted from the restrictions, or we identify alternative arrangements and channels through which they can be accessed.

COVID-19 restrictions have also made it difficult for program staff, government extension officers, and other support personnel to deliver in-person training and advising. For segments of farmers engaged in production of crops where this type of technical assistance is critically needed, disruption to the delivery of these services can have a significant negative impact on productivity and crop quality. As detailed on the following page, our teams in these cases are focused on developing a remote advisory strategy that takes into account the type of technology women and men farmers are able to access.

It's also important to help farmers overcome disruptions to their other income-generating activities, as these often constitute a significant portion of household incomes. For example, programs can leverage their networks to help farmers identify and reach alternative markets for their secondary crops and provide remote technical assistance to help farmers adapt their micro-enterprises to current conditions.

We must also help to address the disruptions to the small businesses that farmers depend on to get their crops to market. Farmers are impacted when aggregators, food processors, and exporters face business and operational challenges. For that reason, it's important to provide support to these businesses and offer them advice about how to adapt to the changing circumstances.

In Zimbabwe, farmers in a horticulture program are critically reliant on the capability of pack-houses to quickly package and export perishable produce. Social distancing regulations mean that packhouses can only have 20-25% of their staff working at any given time. Our team in Zimbabwe is working with the private sector pack house operator to adapt, operate in shifts over 24 hours, and set up temporary pack house facilities near farmers' fields to alleviate this bottleneck.

In some cases, farmers may need emergency financial support or other assistance to weather the crisis. Projects can be important conduits for information, helping to inform governments and civil society about the situation on the ground in farming communities and connecting farmers to any assistance that is made available to them.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that while some gains have been made in closing gender gaps between women and men, significant underlying inequalities still exist. Applying a gender lens to our response means focusing on strategies that will secure women's ability to earn an income and strengthen their control over economic decisions through the crisis and beyond. We must address women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare, cooking, and cleaning, to enable them to dedicate time to grow, process, and sell crops.

This means being proactive about designing adaptive and appropriate training programs that respond to digital, literacy, and time constraints. We must also strengthen women's access to financial tools that allow them to save and secure their income and assets and facilitate their economic recovery. Finally, to facilitate these changes and ensure that they are sustained, we must take this opportunity to encourage men to take a greater role in household activities.

## ACCESSING ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT IN INDIA

In India, we work with farmers in the state of Uttar Pradesh who rely on combines to harvest their wheat. These machines are typically brought in for the harvest season from another state, but the national lockdown made that impossible this year. To respond to the crisis, our program worked with the Indian government and a private equipment company to identify alternative sources for the equipment.



### *Safeguarding health*

While the virus is spreading in the countries and communities where we work, programs have an important role to play in ensuring that farmers are able to stay safe and healthy. Even organizations like TechnoServe that focus on economic development can incorporate messaging about healthy behaviors in their training sessions and distribute reference materials like posters. Programs can also serve as a source of reliable information for farmers who are exposed to a great deal of false information and rumors.

Programs should also develop and share new protocols and systems that allow farmers to carry out their agricultural and non-agricultural work safely.

### *Protecting food security & nutrition*

In times of upheaval and crisis, food security and nutrition frequently suffer, so programs should take steps to ensure that farmers are able to access and consume safe, nutritious food. Many farmers may be tempted to sell their food reserves in order to access cash, or in the case of women, forgo eating themselves to ensure others have food. However, programs can provide advisory support to help farmers identify other ways to balance their household budgets. Programs can also advise farmers on steps to increase the consumption of nutritious food at the household level, such as planting kitchen gardens.

### *Delivering support in times of crisis*

One key element in this period is finding the right channels to provide information, since it may be difficult or impossible to deliver in-person training and advisory services. Programs need to understand which communication channels women and men can access, as there is a significant gender gap in access to the internet and other technologies.

With that information, programs can design outreach strategies around these existing channels to ensure women and men farmers continue to access expert agricultural advice. Our programs are using a variety of methods, including WhatsApp videos, text messages, phone calls, radio programs, and community-based intermediaries, among others. In all of these cases, it's important to keep the content and messaging even clearer and simpler than it would be if it was delivered in person.

Programs must be creative about overcoming obstacles to delivering support. Among women participating in an agricultural program in northern Nigeria, for example, just 2% have access to phones. In contrast, most men in the community have access to phones, some of which are smartphones. The program has enlisted the help of 10 male gender champions to act as conduits for training, while gatherings are banned, by relaying information on specific lessons to women farmers.

### **CONNECTING FARMERS IN CRISIS IN ZIMBABWE**

When Zimbabwe entered a lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis, it couldn't have been worse timing for the farmers participating in an Anglo American-TechnoServe collaboration. They were about to plant mange tout peas for the first time, and at a moment when they critically needed information and training from their advisers, in-person meetings were banned.

The program responded by developing a strategy for providing remote support. It created a WhatsApp group that included program staff, local extension agents, lead farmers, and training participants, and in the case of farmers who don't have phones with access to WhatsApp, the program enlisted family members to serve as intermediaries. The program has shared training material, market information, and other useful information with the farmers, but the group has also become a network in which farmers are able to sell their other crops and products among themselves.



### III. Recovering from the Crisis: Helping Farmers Back to Growth and Profitability

As the immediate health crisis recedes and economies reopen, farmers (and organizations that support them) can return their focus to growth. But the income shocks in the initial months of the crisis, and the lingering impacts on the global economy, will continue to present a challenge. For that reason, it's important to provide timely and well-targeted support.

#### ***Restoring livelihoods***

When restrictions are rolled back, programs can support farmers to resume or continue engaging in profitable agricultural opportunities. Staff will be able to provide in-person advisory aimed at improving quality, productivity, and access to markets. Programs should also analyze shifting market demands and dynamics to make sure that specific crops and systems of production and sales continue to make financial sense for farmers, and if not, help them identify profitable alternatives.

In many cases, farmers will have depleted their savings while weathering the most acute phase of the crisis, and it will be difficult for these farmers to make needed investments in their farms to improve production. As a result, it's important to engage exporters, financial institutions, and other ecosystems actors to increase farmers' access to finance. We must also understand how women are impacted differently by these shocks and ensure that our support helps them recover at the same rate as men.

It's also important to continue providing advisory services to aggregators and food processors as they themselves recover from the crisis, because these firms will serve as a vital market for farmers. Similarly, we should continue to engage and support businesses that provide other key services to farmers.

#### ***Boosting food security and nutrition***

Because economies and food systems are likely to be disrupted for a period of time after the initial health crisis passes, farming families will continue to face risks to their food security and nutrition. Rising incomes from high-margin crops will enable farmers to purchase more food, and agricultural support and advice should also complement efforts to boost the nutrition of farming families. For example, agronomy training should advise farmers on how to allocate their land, labor, and inputs in a manner that secures access to food, and information about good nutrition should be added to the curriculum.

## IV. Building Resilience for the Future: Preparing Farmers to Face New Crises

Even as they recover from the impacts of COVID-19, farmers face risks associated with markets, changing climate and weather, crop disease, and other causes. So it's important to help farmers build back in a more resilient way. Support and training programs can emphasize a number of strategies that will allow farmers to better weather future shocks, such as:

- Developing diversified revenue streams (where applicable);
- Implementing climate-smart agricultural practices;
- Improving access to financial products such as bank accounts and crop insurance;
- Expanding access to weather, climate, and market information; and
- Closing gender gaps in access to information, productive resources, and markets and strengthening women's economic empowerment

But we don't just need to think about resilient farms; we also need resilient food systems. That means increased investment in agricultural businesses and an expanded role for the food processing sector. We need to harness technology to link actors in value chains that are more efficient and transparent. We must also support research and innovation in the sector to improve the range of products and services offered to smallholders and agricultural supply chains.

COVID-19 and its impacts are rapidly evolving, and aided by data collection and analysis, we will continue to learn how best to support smallholders in the weeks and months ahead. However, by making smart investments and carrying out well-targeted interventions, we can help farming communities respond to the immediate crisis, recover their growth, and build their resilience to future challenges.

## ABOUT TECHNOSEERVE'S WORK IN AGRICULTURE

TechnoServe helps farmers growing high-value (or cash) crops to earn greater incomes by improving the quality and quantity of their crops; accessing finance and supplies; and selling to better buyers, such as food and beverage companies, which pay higher prices and provide farmers with a reliable, long-term market.

In order to achieve this, TechnoServe works to strengthen market systems. We focus on markets that have:

- A clear opportunity – an unmet demand for a product or service
- The potential for inclusive growth that benefits poor people in their roles as producers, entrepreneurs, employees, or consumers
- The potential for scale – impacting significant numbers of families

This approach has enabled TechnoServe to improve the lives and livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers and their families.

For more information, please reach out to Nupur Parikh, Director, Strategic Initiatives at [nparikh@tns.org](mailto:nparikh@tns.org).

