*This three-part series addresses the question of women and youth in Africa’s agriculture and food security*

Issues of scale, land ownership and market failures

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COVID-19 has accelerated African countries’ vulnerabilities to the vagaries of agricultural production and supply shortages in times of crisis. For instance rice exports from Vietnam to Africa were halted in [March 2020](https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-vietnam-rice-idUSL4N2BI2MT) due to COVID-19 concerns, putting millions relying on this staple food in a precarious situation. COVID-19 restrictions also led to supply chain bottlenecks that affected movement of imported food from the ports to the hinterland and, internally, from farms to markets within and between African [countries](https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-is-another-blow-for-kenyas-food-security-135567). The ensuing economic lockdowns pushed many urban dwellers into smallholder farming for [survival](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/23/the-race-to-feed-africa-during-a-pandemic).

How do African women and youth fit into the accelerated problems brought about by COVID-19 in relation to agriculture and food security?

With a population expected to hit [2 billion by 2050](https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/population/index.html), most of it youthful, Africa has to realize her potential in agriculture to feed the additional people. Regarding women, any factors that impede their participation in agricultural economies on the continent will have dire consequences on food security. As a case in point, the [World Bank](https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-myths-and-facts) report titled [*Agriculture in Africa: Telling Facts*](https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-myths-and-facts#:~:text=) *from Myths* shows that women contribute 40% of labor to agriculture in spite of being about 50% of the population.

Our thesis is that for Africa to feed the ballooning population, the involvement of women and the youth is vital. The pertinent issue is the identification and resolution of the barriers that result in the low levels of participation in agriculture by these two groups.

To feed the meteorically rising population while ensuring a robust participation by its women, Africa must address three interrelated factors, namely, scale, market failures, land tenure system.

First, in terms of scale, it needs to be borne in mind that the bulk of African youth and women are in the small-scale farming category for reasons that will be apparent in this and follow articles. Except for South Africa, the rest of the continent is dominated by smallholder farming, defined as farming practices on less than 2 hectares of land. A study by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security (HLPE) estimates that 73% of farms in Africa are less than one hectare, while 85% are less than 2 hectares, accounting for 25% of the agricultural [land](https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-myths-and-facts#:~:text=) The [World Bank](https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-myths-and-facts#:~:text=) reports that among smallholder farmers in Africa, two thirds report not using inorganic fertilizer. Use of organic fertilizer varies from a high of 77% in Malawi to a low of 41% in Nigeria. For smallholder farmers, owning machinery such as a tractor would be costly, and many opt for shared schemes. A dismal 3% of smallholder farms adopt irrigation.

Moreover, if returns to agriculture do not improve, it follows that women and youth would not be attracted to farming and, instead, a scramble for the few opportunities in the services and industrial sectors. Yet, it is apparent that smallholder farmers encounter difficulties that would dissuade them considering agriculture as an employment or income generating engagement. These problems include negotiating favorable prices with buyers, turning many small-scale farmers into price takers rather than price givers. Equally pertinent is the fact that lack of adequate collateral limits capital acquisition, a problem that particularly afflicts youth and women. Hence, smallholders in Africa have not adopted modern farming techniques as a rational choice coupled with lack of alternatives and low awareness of farming options. Researchers, project that for the next decades, as Africa’s population rises amid a low industrial base, capital per farm worker will drop simultaneously with the shrinkage of average land size, limiting the use of land-intensive, labor-saving techniques and modern equipment. Again, declining farming area has sparked clashes between sedentary crop farmers and pastoralists in places like [Northern Nigeria](https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234681356.pdf). As a result, some researchers hold the view that smallholder farmers cannot “farm their way out of poverty” due to the low scale of operations unless they supplement farm income with alternative [sources.](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0030727019888513)

The second factor, related to matters of scale, is land ownership. Gendered land ownership system in Africa favors men, arising out of their traditional role as heads of the family units. In pastoral communities, much of the land is communal, leading to unsustainable overgrazing and conflict over pasture and water. The land question directly emanates from a lingering issue of the ease of doing business in Africa, the quality of institutions, and property rights. For [women](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2277976016658738?casa_token=ME8A0IllyVEAAAAA%3ArcNi_khUpK3SU-PCt3OshpnR4b_m4G0dkieOcAzPRPihxDqfmxc19zaiR9lZiViLl1c86C1DvinjEm4) and the youth, the skewed land ownership and lack of property rights limits their capacity to raise capital as land is an attractive form of collateral for financial institutions.

Besides ownership bottlenecks, little of the land in Africa has formal documentation, making it hard to establish proof of ownership and hence limiting long term planning. This is particularly the case for women and youth, although the problem also affects older men. Research shows that land tenure security is essential for pro-poor land use that would ultimately ensure national and continental [food security](http://www.mekonglandforum.org/node/2428).

Rwanda offers an example that it is possible to have almost universal land tenure regularization. In 2012/13, the country undertook and completed a countrywide land tenure regularization, issuing documentation to many smallholder [farmers](https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/1813-9450-7705). The process has shown promising results with US$ 2.6 billion worth of mortgages secured against land and property. Also, the program enhanced land access for legally married women - about 76% of married couples – allowing better recording of inheritance rights without gender bias. Moreover, the program had positive impact on investment and maintenance of [soil conservation measures](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304387813001818). In other African countries, the process of land regularization is still at its infancy if it exists at all.

The third factor is market failures, which are a common and enduring feature of in Africa’s agriculture. For instance, during periods of glut in production, when farmers flood the market with a given product, each farmer is acting to further their individual goal of sourcing income. On the downside, too many goods lead to inadequate demand, low prices, and spoilt goods. In pastoral communities in Africa where land is communal, uncontrolled numbers of livestock lead to land degradation and ultimately inadequate pasture and water for the herds.

A chief source of market failure in agriculture is information asymmetry. While farmers struggle with excess produce in local markets, consumers in another part of the country or the continent and the world could be suffering from a shortage of the commodity. But neither the farmer nor the consumer is aware of this due to communication failures. The solutions to market failures are a mix of state interventions and market solutions, especially using information technology. The idea is to use technology to link farmers to potential customers thereby expanding the geographical scope of the market. State interventions would include policies and institutions that promote economic inclusion and [market access](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/AFR-08-2018-0062/full/html).

*In the next installment, we shall discuss value chains and policies*