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Covid-19 makes a strong case for urban farming

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Simon Wagura on the farm he manages in Ruiru on the outskirts of Nairobi. FILE PHOTO | NMG



Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, the disease has spread across the globe, infecting over four million people and claiming more than 300,000 lives.

Although loss of human life is the most devastating of all, the pandemic is already causing an economic meltdown globally. Its serious impacts are bound to be felt most in the already poor economies. Cities and town, where people live and work in close proximity, are among the worst hit in light of how the disease spreads

Lockdowns, enforced as one of the ways to curb the spread of the disease, have resulted in an economic downturn, with large numbers of people losing their jobs. In Kenya and Ethiopia, for example, thousands of people in the tourism sector are out of work: drivers, cleaners, tour guides, and security guards at resorts are suddenly not earning as much as before the pandemic.

Others who survive on daily incomes such as those who sell roast corn on the side of the road in Nairobi and street vendors in Addis Ababa are left with nothing to eat on the days they do not sell enough. While a significant number of salaried people have had to adjust to reduced pay, others who are lucky to be still on full salaries are suddenly spending more time at home due to restricted movement.

The urban dwellers are now faced with a looming food crisis as authorities disconnect cities from rural areas to contain the virus, and to protect elderly populations residing in the rural areas. Even with transportation of foodstuff from the rural areas allowed as a special service, there is an anticipated increase in prices.

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Restrictions on movement and in severe cases lockdowns, have further reduced transportation significantly. That means there is triple problem here; the virus causing death and havoc, a larger number of people sitting at home without work and a potential food crises in towns because little is being brought from the rural areas.

For countries in eastern Africa, they still have to grapple with the consequences of abnormal rainfall and floods last year which destroyed crops, followed by a locust outbreak which is predicted to come back stronger this growing season. How then do countries in the region deal with such multiple cascading hazards?

While the medical fraternity is doing their fight on the front line, supporting peri-urban farming is another area that would benefit from a plan to tackle the devastating effects outlined above.

A drive through cities such as Nairobi portrays a picture of crops growing everywhere (empty plots, sidewalks, backyards, etc.) and rearing of mostly poultry. However, this is under-utilised with only a small proportion of available land or opportunities utilised. Even then, it is mostly by the very poor or jobless urban dwellers (most have no rights to land) with a few from the middle and high-income class doing it as a hobby and a small group of others in real agri-business ventures.

Covid-19 is challenging this model by adding a large pool of people who are losing jobs and yet they had started establishing themselves as permanent city dwellers through land ownership and settlement. Chances are that a large proportion of this group will be adamant and stay put in the sprawling city suburbs as opposed to moving back to the rural environments.

With proper implementation, peri-urban farming could be a major avenue to bridge some of the food gaps and contribute to the much-needed employment creation, potentially absorbing a large section of those now completely or partially jobless, or just have more time being at home.

Another benefit would be the reduction of the current heavy urban waste burden, as these become nutrient sources for urban farming. In a way, the hundreds of thousands distributed across the cityscape provide a sort of crowdsourcing, not of data but of food and waste management.

There are very good examples of successful urban and peri-urban farming with some groups even operating farmer networks. However, these are only in isolated places and their overall impact is still small.

A reinvigoration of urban and peri-urban farming must now take place. Supporting existing networks to expand their reach and exporting their decades of experiences to other parts of urban areas will increase impact. Besides, putting together the currently scattered knowledge will allow for easier access and utilisation.

An example is starting a peri-urban virtual hub where urban dwellers can access and learn about technologies available for farming in small spaces. This should include waste management so that household organic remains are composted and used in production.

Establishing an immediate seed systems would ensure every neighbourhood has nurseries or vendors producing and selling seedlings because clearly not everyone should produce their own seedlings for small spaces.

CGIAR centres and their partners can also support application of advanced hyper-resolution earth observation systems to map, characterise and recommend suitability of pockets of areas for urban or peri-urban farming.

This is key to sensitisation about the potential of urban agriculture and guiding government investment through all stages such as identification of suitable sites, seed and other input supply, and related value chains through geospatial analytics. This will not only allow us to understand the supply, but also define demand and market sources.

Time is ripe for an urban and peri-urban agricultural economy to be re-engineered to create multifunctional cities that provide multiple benefits. Ultimately, we can create healthy population from dirty towns! In relation to human health, people with low immune system are highly susceptible to Covid-19 and similar diseases. Fortunately, the focus of urban agriculture has largely been on high value (nutrient) vegetables, which is good for human health and boosting the immune system.

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