

Solutions to Keep Agricultural Inputs Flowing in Crisis

Program Learning During COVID-19

THE NEED FOR AGRICULTURAL INPUTS DURING CRISIS

Even under normal circumstances, weak markets, long distances, difficult transportation, and products designed for large industrial farms rather than smallholder farmers are all obstacles facing women and men farmers who need to access quality seeds and other agricultural products (together, known as agro-inputs) to improve their production. CARE's experience points to massive market disruptions and food insecurity as a result of quarantine, restrictions on mobility, and a sudden diversion of additional resources into immediate pandemic response. These conditions make it even harder for women to access agricultural inputs given mobility and information challenges that are further complicated by socio-cultural norms that prohibit women from leaving their homes in some contexts. The global novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, has made these [obstacles](#) even more difficult to surmount, as quarantines and social distancing have severely impacted the lives of poor and vulnerable populations, particularly women, who are facing increased care burdens, reduced access to essential health and education services, and heightened risks of [gender-based violence](#) (including domestic violence and sexual exploitation and abuse).

Many smallholder farmers survive solely on what they can grow and harvest, and so shelter in place mandates effectively shut off access to food, water and work for vulnerable populations. Moreover, it is difficult (and often undignified) to enforce. More likely, community-level cordons, which allow for movement within communities but restrict outside access, will be used so that farmers can still access their fields, but visitors will not be allowed to enter communities (apart, ideally, from healthy value chain actors that move products in and out). Of course, the exact situation for markets and cordons will differ based on context, the strength of social safety nets, and government policy in each location. In many countries, farmers are still permitted to go to farms and agricultural



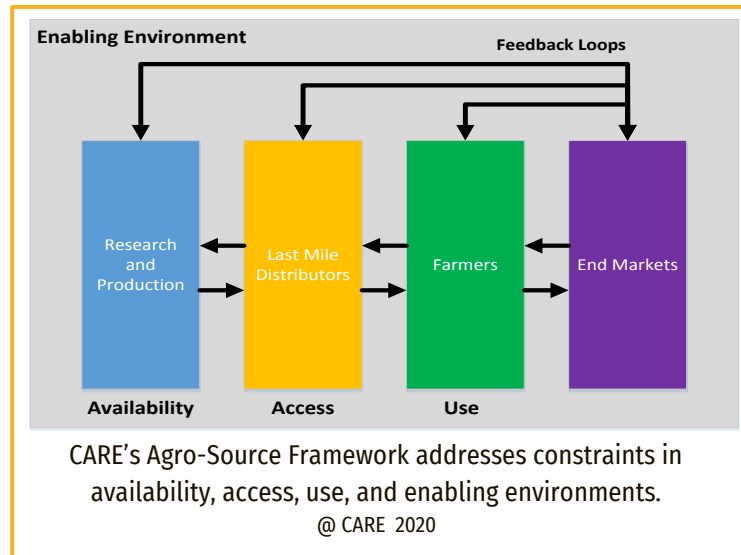
Seeds are collected at CARE's distribution center in Eastern Ethiopia. @ Josh Estey/CARE 2020

input retailers are open, as they are considered to be essential services. Globally, the general economic downturn will affect access to agro-inputs and productive resources, and agricultural production will be negatively impacted. Previous emergencies, such as the [Ebola crisis in West Africa](#), have underlined the importance of immediate access to quality agricultural inputs and services to prevent acute food shortages.

Women's access to inputs are even further strained in emergencies. Increases in gender-based violence, and inability to access healthcare, increase their vulnerability. CARE tailors its programs to meet the needs of women and communities using a [Rapid Gender Analysis](#) and context-specific climate, market, and agriculture approaches, which are variable by household, community, region and country. Community action and

determination drive market-based interventions to deliver agro-inputs, and women are empowered as leaders, participants, and decision-makers. CARE build on indigenous solutions and protects community dignity by recognizing that communities have often experienced significant hardships and built homegrown solidarity, autonomy and solutions. At the same time, CARE is drawing on its experience [strengthening and reinforcing markets](#) to help meet the demand for agro-inputs across the globe. This experience offers solutions that can be adapted for use during the COVID-19 response to keep value chains from breaking down while offering tailored support to vulnerable women and girls.

CARE is responding to the urgent needs resulting from COVID-19 using its agro-source framework that addresses four key domains of systemic constraints, namely, **availability, access, use and enabling environments**. CARE is adapting programs to address supply and demand shortages across agricultural input markets, using models from its previous programming that address these constraints.



AVAILABILITY

To promote availability of inputs and services, CARE partners with a range of both national and international research and academic institutions; public extension and meteorological systems and private sector actors (importers, multipliers, manufacturers, distributors, etc.). Through these partnerships, CARE seeks to ensure the appropriateness of inputs available through **last mile distribution systems**, to ensure that they are supportive of CARE's [SuPER](#) approach to agriculture. The organization advocates with authorities for market-based gender-focused strategies that address (agricultural) supply chain disruptions. These include import and supply routes, presence and availability of large storage facilities, bulk transportation and other logistical operations that ensure continued supply of agricultural inputs.

Staff members work directly with last-mile suppliers to be responsive to the needs of women, which is key to ensuring that products are available to women. This includes packaging of inputs in smaller packs that women can afford, and working around cashless payment methods. To increase seed availability, CARE supports community seed systems, local seed growers and seed banks to increase availability through agro-input fairs and working directly with [savings groups](#) such as those used in [CARE Ghana's Pathways program](#). To observe social distancing guidelines during these fairs and trainings, participants are sensitized on the coronavirus, social distance markers are drawn out, touchless payment boxes and electronic payment methods are used, and face coverings are worn. CARE is keeping women's groups going by maintaining social distance during group meetings.



Women meet together while maintaining social distance. @ CARE 2020

ACCESS

When promoting access to inputs and services, CARE focuses on ensuring small scale farmers, particularly women and other disadvantaged groups, are able to save and purchase **quality** inputs at **reasonable and affordable prices**, when they need them, **within reasonable proximity** to their farms, and have a **range of available options** from which to choose. Rather than choosing one specific business model to promote access to inputs, CARE identifies various inter-related business models across a continuum of access depending on the level of access of targeted farmers to inputs and the sophistication of current input and service systems.

CARE encourages the use of [cash and voucher](#) programming, where feasible, to protect and strengthen local markets. Community quarantines and social distancing can lead to operational difficulties in environments that may be suddenly difficult or unsafe to reach. [CARE Mali's Harande](#) program, funded by USAID and in partnership with Save the Children, Helen Keller International, SAHEL ECO, and YA-G-TU, has been using an electronic financial service that makes **digital voucher payment** possible, even in difficult to access areas that are not covered by mobile networks. The system, used to provide food assistance to displaced and flood-affected households in 2018/19, is efficient, transparent, focuses on women, and develops local markets.

Immediate access to agro-inputs is an urgent critical need and [CARE Ghana's Agro-Source Project](#) and [CARE Ethiopia's SPIR Program](#), a USAID funded consortium led by World Vision in partnership with CARE and ORDA, focus on access to quality agricultural inputs – especially seeds and fertilizers – for farmers. SPIR has identified, trained and supplied select women and men as agro-dealers. To get closer to reaching the last mile, SPIR introduced **mobile farm shops** with which agro-dealers can move from their permanent shop into central and community marketplaces and to deliver inputs for farmers. Proper sterilization and virus transmission education is necessary for mobile agro-dealers, as is negotiating with authorities for continued access, but this approach offers promise.



A trained agro-input dealer, Dorcas Ayers, in her shop in Bawku District @ CARE Ghana, 2020

Similarly, [CARE's Rapid Ebola Social Safety Net and Economic Recovery Project](#) kept markets functioning and jump-started local businesses by using community **seed vouchers and organized fairs** that promoted local seed varieties and vendors so farmers could spend their money in local markets and get high-quality products. Following the Ebola crisis in 2015, after the Sierra Leonean government lifted the state of emergency, 60% of people had eaten their entire seed reserve they had kept for the agricultural season and had planted no crops for that year. Engaging local farmers, particularly smallholder women farmers, as seed growers can help boost production and save families from eating stock seeds for sustenance. [CARE Ethiopia's Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development \(GRAD\) Program](#), which is a predecessor to CARE's current Feed the Future funded [Livelihoods for Resilience program](#), **trained farmers on improved seed multiplication**, including improved production techniques. These farmers receive premium prices for the higher quality seeds they bring to the market which increase agricultural yields and make communities more resilient to shock.

[CARE Zambia's ADAPT program](#) focused on **strengthening existing seed suppliers** to boost their knowledge and bottom line—while also getting more quality seeds into the hands of community members. To mitigate food shocks, plants that have easily recyclable seeds (i.e. bananas) and are long-lasting (i.e. cassava, tubers) should be prioritized.

USE

Proper utilization of quality agricultural inputs is tantamount to increase harvests and incomes and CARE focuses on ensuring appropriate use of inputs on the farm. CARE's [Farmer Field and Business School](#) (FFBS) trains farmers on appropriate and context specific agriculture practices which are sustainable, productive, profitable, nutritious and equitable and resilient ([SuPER](#)). CARE will also support farmers to organize into [village savings and loan association groups](#) and/or facilitate linkages to financial institutions to receive appropriate financial services and products to make better use of the inputs and services they will have access to.



The [HALOW+](#) program in Bangladesh trains Coronavirus Awareness Committees to draw social distance makers.

@ CARE Bangladesh, 2020

In the context of COVID-19, CARE programs are immediately **sensitizing and preparing communities** for forthcoming quarantines using **just-in-time input supplies** and **extension messaging**. Extension messages should seek to empower women and focus on agro-input utilization and proper storage to reach individuals using **distance learning to transfer knowledge to farmers** to increase farm yields and shield against short to medium term spikes in hunger. These messages may also link to public health messaging to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and to include updated information on gender-based violence services that are safe and accessible during the pandemic.

Funded through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, [CARE's Ghana's Pathways Program](#) used **Talking Books to convey seasonally appropriate key recorded messages**. The Talking Books are embedded with a microchip and the messages are refreshed quarterly. This format is not only useful for illiterate individuals but also for building gender equity. As one male Gender Champion in Garu-Tempane put it, "The talking book was a very powerful gender tool. (...) Women would bring the talking book home and play it. This allowed a 'non-person' to communicate to difficult-to-reach men, and the message was not coming from another man or from their wife. The talking book had a significant impact on hard to reach men in the village."¹

[Feed the Future's USAID Nutrition and Hygiene project with CARE Mali](#) works with farmers to increase their yield on crops that they already know and liked. When conflict and insecurity made it difficult to reach farmers, CARE worked with in partnership with [Farm Radio International](#) and **local radio stations** to host **shows on nutrition, agriculture, and child health**, and the intersections between them. Apart from radio and Talking Books, other types of electronic extension messaging are also being used, such as WhatsApp groups to inform famers about input availability, access, and use.

Farmers also receive information on seed, planting material handling and storage, fertilizer application, and techniques to reuse seeds to ensure maximum viability without compromising yields. Indigenous and learned knowledge and methods on proper seed storage are important to share for seeds that can be re-used for multiple seasons.

¹ CARE Ghana Pathways Project Final Evaluation, TANGO International. June 2016.

ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

Women smallholder farmers are at the core of CARE's work with agricultural and market systems, and CARE's paper on [Gender Implications of COVID-19 Outbreaks in Development and Humanitarian Settings](#) and [CARE and IRC's Global Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19](#) covers the impact of the pandemic on women, girls, and at risk groups in detail. To counter-act these inequitable forces, CARE focuses on enabling environments to influence key policies that promote multi-stakeholder platforms, direct policy dialogues, and capacity building to support [SuPER](#) input and service supply systems at the local, national, regional and global levels. CARE also recognizes the important role of the **end markets** where farmers sell their goods. These end markets can play an enormous role in influencing behavior of farmers, distributors, suppliers, and researchers, which can be leveraged to support [SuPER](#) systems. CARE is continuing to address end market opportunity constraints and enhance business skills of small-scale producers in order to unlock end market opportunities and ensure that farmers can **profit** from their agricultural products.

CARE's global work in [Pathways](#) and other programs stimulate enabling environments that **change gender perceptions and relations** at multiple levels (within households, communities, among market actors, input service providers, traditional authorities, policy makers, and law enforcement). More positive and enabling attitudes, behaviors and social norms result in greater support in securing **women's equitable access** to and control of inputs, land, water and capital as a key means of production enables greater opportunities for women smallholders to engage in sustainable seed and input systems.

[CARE Zimbabwe's Masvingo El Nino Recovery Project](#), funded by USAID's Office of Foreign

Disaster Assistance, encouraged **women to be in leadership roles during crises to ensure that women's needs are met, and that women have a voice community decision-making on crisis response**, to find long-term solutions to agro-input market disruptions. In general, meaningful participation of women and girls in decision-making and leadership roles are prioritized to ensure that programs respond to the roles, needs, and priorities of women, men, girls and boys, and to ensure that solutions are relevant, effective, and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on food and nutrition security as much as possible, particularly for at-risk groups.



Fainesi Thom Zagwa's harvest has improved after receiving training on planting seeds in Malawi.

@ Josh Etsey/CARE, 2020

KEEPING AGRO-INPUTS FLOWING DURING CRISIS IS POSSIBLE

COVID-19 threatens the food and nutrition security of vulnerable communities, and resilient seed and agricultural input markets are imperative to mitigate acute food shortages following quarantines. CARE is drawing on COVID-19 [Rapid Gender Analyses](#) and existing and previous programs to find solutions that enable input suppliers to provide farmers with needed inputs; transfer knowledge on agro-input utilization and storage; support local seed growers; and link smallholder women farmers to markets via gender responsive programs. Even in the face of difficult circumstances, it is possible to maintain viable agro-input markets to protect vulnerable women, girls, men, and boys.