

SAA launches effective digital platforms to provide agricultural extension and advisory services to smallholder farmers in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia – the second most populous country in the African continent – has recorded over 220,000 positive cases of COVID-19 and registered 3,174 deaths as of 12 April, 2021. Following the outbreak, the Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA) conducted a rapid assessment on the impact of the pandemic on the agrifood system in its focus countries in Africa, including Ethiopia.

The assessment found that farmers' access to training and technical support has been hindered by the pandemic – this was further reiterated by extension agents stating that they were unable to travel to provide training to farmers. Farmers also reported a reduced supply of inputs, with several expressing concerns about the inflation of commodity prices. Similarly, the majority of farmers anticipate that their access to labor is likely to be challenged as a result of the restrictions on movement, and disruptions to the community's established arrangements supporting smallholder farmers. The pandemic also affected farmers' public work campaigns, including community-based soil and water conservation, and canal construction activities.

Additionally, agribusinesses are seriously affected by the mobility restrictions. A significant number of output traders reported that they did not have enough grain in their stock. Agro-processors reported shortages of raw materials due to the travel restrictions – an issue further exacerbated by farmers hoarding for price hike speculations. Traders faced capital deficit for the lack of credit access from financial institutions and were thus unable to aggregate retail agricultural products.

e-Extension approaches and media relations

In an effort to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, SAA launched effective e-extension platforms using resources such as video messages, regular mobile communication and social media networks. These platforms enabled SAA to share good agronomic practices, and real time weather forecast to extension agents who in return reported training and demonstration activities. In addition, good practice videos were prepared on maize, teff and wheat production to train farmers through the Digital Classroom System (DCS) platform. In partnership with Farm Radio International, SAA was able to disseminate information to farmers using community radio stations in the Amhara and Tigray regions.

Furthermore, SAA introduced Bitrix24 – a software which facilitates information sharing – with Woreda and Kebele level staff members, extension agents and other stakeholders through smart phones. The platform is used to send and collect training material, field activity progress reports, weather forecast updates and other related information which benefit smallholder farmers. After providing basic training on the application of the software and other social networking sites such as Telegram, the country program provided smart phones to partners located in its operational areas.



Supervision on communication using digital tools on smartphone

Human resource development

Through its human capacity development program, SAA has partnered with nine universities in Ethiopia and the organization's assessment found that academic institutions were also affected by the pandemic. All universities were closed and classroom sessions were interrupted due to the pandemic. Consequently, SAA launched an e-learning platform at Bahir Dar University located in the Amhara Region. The e-learning platform ([click here](#)) is effective in addressing gaps created by the lack of face-to-face teaching as lecturers are able to teach and share course material using the platform. The website is built on a broad database and allows students to download training resources, as well as upload audio-visual materials captured from their project areas. In order to improve accessibility of the e-learning platform through smart phones, a mobile application is also being developed.

Furthermore, SAA provided consecutive capacity building training sessions to students and lecturers of the university on e-learning related topics, including the basic management of e-learning platforms, photography skills, story writing techniques and video editing. To support this initiative, SAA also provided relevant IT equipment such as professional cameras with accessories, tablets, laptop and desktop computers, printers, LCD projectors and professional studio lighting kits. The web platform also has a feature which enables students to complete their examinations online.

At present, higher education institutions are gradually reopening with students and lecturers observing COVID-19 prevention guidelines. But the e-learning platform continues to play a crucial role in improving the teaching and learning process – to date, faculty members have converted 33 modules into compatible electronic audio-visual formats.

Looking to the future, SAA intends to continue to build on the effective digital platforms it has introduced to combat the effects of COVID-19. Upcoming activities include organizing training on Bitrix24 for staff, strengthening video-based training in Value Chain Centers (VCCs) areas aided by DCSs, and finalizing the mobile application which is currently under development. We will continue to monitor all e-learning activities, and to identify ways in which the digital platforms can be developed to support smallholder farmers in these unprecedented times.



SAA representatives visit an audiovisual and ICT resource center established at Bahir Dar University



Click here to download the full SAA Covid-19 Impact Assessment report

For more information, contact:

Abel Hailu, Communications Officer, SAA

Gurd Sholla, Daminaroff Building, 4th floor, Bole Sub-City, Kebele 13 PO Box 24135 Code 1000

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Tel: +251-11-647-7670/71 | Fax: +251-11-647-7666 | info@saa-safe.org | www.saa-safe.org



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