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With the welcome news that Ebola infection rates seem to be abating and that new vaccines are being made available is that fact that millions in the affected West African countries are still facing dwindling food supplies and financial ruin, as measures employed to control the epidemic are devastating already fragile agricultural economies. While food shortages can be met in the short term through imports and food aid, the emergency response needs to focus on protecting weak agricultural markets so as to safeguard farmer livelihoods, agricultural production, and national economies.

Border closures and movement restrictions designed to control the spread of the epidemic have resulted in regional markets being closed, significantly limiting trade opportunities. The [World Food Programme](#)

(WFP) reports that in Guinea, 16 weekly markets on the Guinea-Senegal border have closed and prices for potatoes have dropped significantly in recent months on account of border closures. The ban on gatherings in affected areas will likely limit the availability of workforce to harvest existing crops and plant next year's harvest. The UN

[Food and Agriculture Organization](#)

(FAO) together with the WFP has announced that urgent action needs to be taken to re-establish the farming system in the three affected countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia but while the lack of sensitization of locals and governments to the risk of such activities in the transmission of Ebola still exist, alternative actions are needed.

A recent meeting in Senegal, organized by the FAO, brought food security and agricultural production specialists together to examine these regional problems, working with stakeholders from the agricultural market chains sector and experts in animal health, anthropology, epidemiology, public health and health risks. The experts at the meeting noted that the risk of the disease spreading by agricultural products was extremely low, and the main issue at stake for food security was to remove contamination risks linked to gatherings and travel in order to limit decreases of production and rising food prices. Concrete response options and measures to guarantee the fluidity of trade channels for agricultural products are required. With nowhere to sell produce and sudden price drops, the International Fund for Agricultural Development has warned that millions of farmers will be unable to repay loans and that this in turn could cause a major rural lending crisis with no credit availability next year.

The severity of this market situation is such that irrespective of the number of seeds and tons of fertilizer given to farmers through traditional emergency response programs, the facts remain that if the prevailing market conditions do not improve, the affected countries are likely to remain on course for a production crisis. When faced with the mounting difficulties and costs associated with failing markets, evidence suggests that most farmers elect out of markets and base their production on self- consumption and building up a household buffer.

Even with the first signs of the epidemic retreating, there is an urgent need for governments and their partners to support the development of new markets and avenues for farmers to sell their produce.

In the glaring absence of an adequate and robust private sector investment in rural markets, programmes and institutions need to actively encourage pricing and procurement mechanisms which connect struggling agricultural communities with new markets.

One such market is provided by school feeding programmes which, with their fixed number of days and consistent demand, provide viable local markets which can play a pivotal role in lessening impact of failing markets elsewhere. This approach has been championed by the African Union's [New Economic Partnership for African Development](#) (NEPAD) under the banner of Home Grown School Feeding which it has identified as one of the CAADP flagship programmes necessary for Africa's economic growth.

The school feeding menu is designed to fulfil nutrition requirements based on local production systems. What we mean by local varies depending on a number of factors and can range from a large province or to a cluster of villages. This is not to suggest the creation of small segmented markets delinked in any way from larger regional and national markets. In a sense it is about devolving the benefits of functional markets to the lowest feasible level in order to create strong vibrant market constituencies.

There is emerging evidence in countries such as [Ghana](#) , [Nigeria](#) , Cote d'Ivoire and [Mali](#) about benefits of locally sourced school feeding in developing strong and sustainable local markets. The examples of Mali and Cote d'Ivoire are particularly instructive as school feeding and associated local markets remained operational through long periods of intense conflict.

The debilitating nature of this public health crisis underlines the importance of resilient food and agricultural systems. In the event of market failures effective local markets can prove to be a crucial life support to farming and national food production. National governments, donors, and international organizations need to seriously and urgently engage in helping re-build and develop new local agricultural markets through programs such as Home Grown School Feeding.

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