COVID-19 pandemic has disoriented the already vulnerable food value chains in Kenya. With little supply diversification mechanisms especially at the local level, smallholder farmers in Kenya suffer the most whenever unexpected shocks hit the agricultural sector. One of the largest gaps presented by the crisis is the urgent need for stakeholders to prioritize the development of clusters at the grass-root level that ensures a continued supply of agricultural produce and enhance the resilience of food production and distribution systems.

Both the county and national governments are currently faced with the dilemma of allocating the dwindling resources amid the current economic recession, to battle the virus, contain locusts invasion and floods in most parts of the country, or mitigate the crisis facing the food sector.

However, a group of peri-urban farmers in Kiambu County is acting fast to save food value chains and lay a positive foundation for a rebound, by connecting the rather dynamic and geographically isolated producers to the new markets niches.

In rural Kenya, 30% of the food consumed is purchased, while 98% of all the food consumed in Kenya's urban areas is purchased. With an urban population constituting about 27.5% of the total population, Kenya’s food economy is heavily reliant on rural-urban supply chains. Besides, smallholder farmers in Kenya account for 63% of the food produced in the country. A disruption of such an overly relied upon supply system in both rural and urban zones, underlines the immediate need for local solutions to ensure the nation is continuously fed.
I visited the farm of Mr. Peter Mugongo, a 62 year-old farmer based in Gathongoro village, and who has depended on the Nairobi City market for over 27 years of his full farming career. Mr. Peter is teaming up with other farmers in his region, to explore local solutions to the challenges caused by the crisis.

This came after the government imposed a restriction of movement into and out of Nairobi metropolitan area, and further directed the closure of schools and restaurants that initially provided ready markets. The County Government of Kiambu had also ordered markets to be closed, leaving the local farmers devastated with unsold produce. The first remedy was to work on storage to prolong the lifespan of food. He converted a container into a local food reserve center that acts as a holding place for supplies as they await delivery or collection.

"I foresaw a situation where food prices would rise unnecessarily while the same is rotting on our farms," says Mr. Peter. He reached out to other farmers in the region with a view of creating a harmonized platform of selling their produce at an agreed price range. "This was meant to ensure food security, job security for farm workers, fair prices to both the seller and buyer, and minimizing social unrest that would come with disrupted food systems," explained Mr. Peter. Price inflation on food commodities would also give a false signal of food shortages, which is not the actual case.

About 20 smallholder farmers are jointly finding direct consumer market, eliminating middlemen, and in some cases combining produce to meet demand. The local clusters are also helping them access timely and reliable information and respond accordingly. "With a general disruption in airline transport and cross-border supply, people are now shifting from consuming imported to locally-produced food, which creates a more reliable market."

With organized coordination, farmers do not have to move and risk infection of COVID-19 as the produce is mostly collected on-site or from the food store. This has ensured consumers continue to enjoy diversified and healthier meals at considerable prices.