



Missing Middle Initiative (MMI)

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis

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Overview

Launched in 2010 by the G20 in response to the 2007-08 food price crisis, the **Global Agriculture and Food Security Program** (GAFSP) is recognized as a key global financing vehicle for catalytic investments across the entire agriculture value chain. To date, GAFSP's US\$1.7 billion portfolio is comprised of US\$1.3 billion in grant financing to public sector investments (62 projects in 39 countries), US\$17 million for the Missing Middle Initiative (MMI) pilot to support Producer Organizations (POs) (five projects), and approximately US\$416.50 million in private sector investments (66 investment projects in 27 countries). GAFSP is active in more than 45 countries, with 64 percent of funds allocated to projects in Africa with other projects located across Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Since 2010, GAFSP-financed projects have benefitted more than 16 million smallholder farmers (including 6.3 million women) and their families. GAFSP serves as a complementary, additional source of financing that leading development agencies, as Supervising Entities (SEs), can use to complement or extend their financing to respond to country and client needs on the ground.

In April 2019, the GAFSP Steering Committee approved a revised operational model (GAFSP 2.0). This restructuring of GAFSP aimed at further enhancing synergies across GAFSP's public and private sector activities. The two main tracks under GAFSP 2.0 are:

- **Business Investment Financing Track (BIFT)** through which GAFSP will offer concessional/blended financing targeted to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in target countries, through a partnership broadened to those SEs that have private sector investment arms or departments.
- **Grant-Based Financing Track (GBFT)** through which GAFSP will offer grants to:
 - **Countries:** Support countries' strategic national agricultural and food security investment plans considering the countries' current situation and needs.
 - **POs:** Building on the MMI pilot experience that focused on enhancing access to finance for POs, GAFSP 2.0 widens the scope to a wider range of activities and offers small grants targeted to PO-led projects proposals. This financing track provides financial support to smallholder farmers and strengthen the capacity of POs by providing them with funding and capacity building to better serve their communities.

MMI Background

To respond to smallholder farmers' unmet demand for agricultural finance, estimated at US\$450 billion, in 2016, GAFSP launched the MMI pilot under its Public Sector Window. On top of responding to financial needs, the MMI also aimed to respond to the recognition that when smallholders are viewed as just beneficiaries and not partners, the focus of these interventions is limited to basic farmer welfare and subsistence rather than supporting them thrive. Building on this assumption, the MMI goes beyond the limited "welfare beneficiary" approach and empowers smallholders to serve their communities directly, and it does so by enabling, developing, and strengthening their own autonomous farmers' and producer organizations (FOs and POs). Following a farmer-first approach, the pilot projects were conceptualized by the POs themselves. Together with their selected SEs partner, they continue to lead the projects through implementation.

The MMI pilot includes five projects, totaling approximately US\$17 million in small-scale grants. The projects started implementation in 2018 across Bangladesh, Mali (x2), Senegal, and East Africa (Rwanda and Uganda) and are expected to close by the end of 2022.

Project Descriptions

Bangladesh: Increasing Access to Finance for Farmer Organizations

Project implementation began in March 2018. The original grant amounted to US\$2.48 million. In September 2020, GAFSP approved an additional US\$1.2 million and a one-year extension. The project is led by the Sara Bangla Krishak Society (SBKF), an umbrella organization including 55 FOs mainly in Rangpur and Barisal Divisions, and implementation is supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as the SE. The project's objective is to enhance access to finance and markets by strengthening their capacities in management, governance, and engagement with agriculture value chains. To date, the project has benefited more than 9,000 people, including 5,000 women. Some accomplishments include improving the FO's organizational management capacities, generating more than US\$12,000 through service fees and profits from a common facility center to produce inputs, mechanization services, and post-harvest operations. And close to 4,000 members have access to funds.

East Africa: Using the e-granary innovative mobile platform to deliver economic services to farmers

Project implementation began in May 2018. The original grant amount is US\$2.61 million. In September 2020, GAFSP approved an additional US\$478,240 and a one-year extension. The project is led by the Eastern African Farmers' Federation (EAFF) and supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) as the SE. The project's objective is to use the e-Granary mobile platform to deliver economic services to farmers, including brokering commercial partnerships and contracts between farmers, off-takers, and input dealers and providing financial services with low transaction costs. More than 38,000 people, including more than 16,000 women, have registered on the platform. In Uganda, more than 2,600 smallholder farmers have accessed improved and certified agro-inputs through pre-financing arrangements worth more than US\$281,000.

Mali: Inclusion of Rural Youth in Poultry and Aquaculture Value Chains

Project implementation began in November 2017. The original grant amounted is US\$2.61 million. In September 2020, GAFSP approved an additional US\$1.2 million and a one-year extension. The project is led by the association of Professional FOs (AOPP) and the National Coordination Agency for FOs (CNOP), and implementation is supported by IFAD as the SE. The project's objective is to include rural youth in poultry and aquaculture value chains to create sustainable economic activities, including training in technical, organizational, and financial issues. To date, the project has established five poultry and fish feed production units, as well as pilot demonstration units for poultry, fish farming, and fish smoking. The project also has set up a guarantee fund in the banking sector to provide farmers with the necessary credit to start, run, and expand their businesses; so far, 96 entrepreneurs have received financing.

Mali: Improved Rice Paddy Quality and Quality Cowpea Processing for Improved Nutrition and Increased Farmer Development

Project implementation began in April 2018. The original grant amounted is US\$3 million. In September 2020, GAFSP approved an additional US\$655,200 and a one-year extension. The project is led by the Société de Coopération pour le Développement International (SOCODEVI), an international NGO, and supported by the World Food Programme (WFP) as the SE. The project's objective is to strengthen four main rice and one cowpea producer organizations for women, providing direct training to members on production, harvesting, and processing. The project improves organizations' capacity to offer value-added services to their members, including better tools and training, and set up a credit guarantee scheme in the banking sector. To date, more than 14,000 smallholder farmers have benefited from the project. The project has already established

nearly 25 school fields and has provided more than 50,000 people with information on improved production techniques through radio broadcasts. As a result of the project, more than 200 grassroots associations and cooperatives, including 124 women organizations, have access to production and marketing credits.

Senegal: Strengthening rural women's livelihood for sustainable economic development in the region of Tambacounda

Project implementation began in January 2018. The original grant amount was US\$2.48 million. In September 2020, GAFSP approved an additional US\$248,000 and a one-year extension. The project is led by two POs, the Association des Producteurs de la Vallée du Fleuve Gambie (APROVAG) and the Fédération Yakaar Niani Wulli (YNW), which together have around 3,000 members. ActionAid Senegal (AAS) is a partner in the project implementation, and it has been working with these two organizations for many years. FAO supports implementation as the SE. The project aims to strengthen rural women's livelihoods for sustainable economic development by improving agricultural productivity and market access for smallholder farmers. Since its launch, the project has reached more than 1,600 smallholder farmers, of which more than half are women. The grant has provided more than 7,000 Vitro plants to renew planting material in the production areas and has organized training sessions on advocacy to provide women members with tools for land governance and economic empowerment.

Report Objectives

This report aims to provide an overview of MMI projects in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the outbreak of the crisis to date. The report focuses on how MMI projects have responded to the crisis by first using their original budget envelope and then using additional funding, highlighting lessons learned. The information contained in this report was gathered through: i) a stocktaking analysis in May 2020 aimed at investigating how projects responded to the crisis by making use of existing funds; ii) the six-monthly reports that projects deliver to the GAFSP Coordination Unit (CU) for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) purposes; iii) the session, MMI & Resilience: Lesson Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis, held in June 2021, in the context of the virtual MMI workshop, where MMI project teams shared and learned from the broad range of operational experiences.

COVID-19 Impact on MMI Projects

COVID-19 impacted the world in an unprecedented manner. In addition to the impact on global public health, this pandemic presented considerable, long-lasting economic challenges and is rapidly exacerbating an ongoing food security and nutrition crisis. This is also true for MMI projects, where in some cases, the situation was already in critical condition due to recent droughts, severe flooding, and desert locusts. Regardless of the specific critical issues in project areas, some consistent challenges affected the five MMI projects to different extents. The most common impacts on beneficiaries and agri-food chains were:

- Restrictions on the movement of people and goods.
- Logistical challenges such as difficulty in transporting goods for sale and in acquiring inputs.
- Closure of markets due to health regulations.
- Shortage of labor availability.
- Limited access to finance and price volatility.
- Scarcity of information and lack of access to protective gear.

These challenges resulted in a disruption of production and processing, limited access to markets, and the impossibility of selling products or buying inputs for production. All of this led to high price volatility for some products and a loss of income.

This challenging situation also significantly slowed down project implementation at all levels, including data collection for M&E and the ability to plan and organize knowledge-sharing and learning events.

Early Response

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, in May 2020, the GAFSP CU conducted consultations with all SEs for Public Sector Window and MMI projects to assess the alignment of the ongoing and planned activities with the new conditions that emerged as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The assessment revealed that 40% of GAFSP projects had already responded to the crisis through restructuring or specific project design adjustments.

More specifically, the assessment concluded that four out of five MMI projects had already developed a COVID-19 response using their original funding envelope, including the projects in Bangladesh, Senegal, East Africa, and one in Mali (World Food Programme, SOCODEVI). This indicates that organized farmers are remarkably resilient and can serve their members' needs in times of crisis. The MMI projects' flexible design and approach allowed the POs to adjust the program activities in a critical time in line with the growing needs resulting from COVID-19.

Early response activities focused on:

- **Advocacy activities:** Advocacy with the governments to maintain the agricultural supply chain in the face of COVID-19 induced movement restrictions; provide stimulus packages to ensure activities around the production chain continue without any disturbance; and maintain connectivity between farmers and markets.
- **Activities to ensure production continuity:** Key activities included purchasing and distributing improved seeds and organic fertilizers to the member producers. This helped ensure members do not miss the critical planting season due to limited ability to source quality inputs.
- **Activities to prevent post-harvest losses:** Capacity building of communities on processing, preservation, and consumption techniques of local products, and the acquisition of goods from producers to support those who had already suffered losses in sales.
- **Extension of the project closing date:** This will help ensure adequate time for recovery after the crisis and ensure the activities' success.
- **Dissemination of tools and information to prevent the spread of the virus:** This included broadcasting radio messages on good agricultural practices; the production of operational guidelines for activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the purchase of COVID-19 prevention kits, and the distribution of protective equipment (masks, hand washing kits, etc.) and pandemic awareness tools; raising awareness of the risks of the COVID-19 infection and measures to be taken, as well as updates on the situation in the country and globally through community radio programs; and establishing committees for monitoring and coordinating action against COVID-19.

Specific activities undertaken by MMI projects as an immediate COVID 19 response:

Bangladesh: Increasing Access to Finance for Farmer Organizations

55 POs with their apex organization (SBKS) designed a project emergency response that includes:

1. Awareness campaigning on farm safety measures to reduce COVID-19 infection.

2. Advocacy with the government to keep agricultural supply chain functions and allocate stimuli for agriculture (credit, cash, in-kind support).
3. Mobilize COVID-19 Emergency Response sub-committee at the PO level.
4. Establish linkage with up- and down-stream market actors.
5. Establish 57 Virtual Call Centers to facilitate communication among FOs members safe purchases and sales of input and products.
6. Establish temporary collection points at each PO for aggregation buying of inputs, bulk selling of produces.
7. Liaise with authorities for the movement of selected van pullers of POs.
8. Liaise with the Post Office to use their empty covered van for agricultural commodity transport to distance market.
9. Daily farm gate price monitoring.

Senegal: Strengthening rural women's livelihood for sustainable economic development in the region of Tambacounda

To support smallholder producers, three main emergency actions are were undertaken:

1. Purchase bananas produced between June and July and support producers who have already suffered losses in the sale of bananas by covering part of their production inputs.
2. Buy food seeds and distribute them to their member producers for the next agricultural season.
3. Support POs (FYNW, APROVAG) to set up e-monitoring for the rapid collection of information remotely using the digital system.

Activities modified in different ways:

4. The implementation schedule was rearranged; all training activities, organization of workshops, recruitment of service providers has been shifted to the end of the acute crisis period.
5. Upon consultations with the two POs, new proposed activities focused on marketing interventions and monitoring.
6. POs were able to implement emergency measures, with the support of their partners (Action Aid Senegal, in particular), such as the distribution of peanut seeds and organic fertilizers to women members of FYNW; food items to APROVAG and FYNW members; and protective equipment (masks, hand washing kits, etc.) and pandemic awareness tools.

East Africa: Using the e-Granary innovative mobile platform to deliver economic services to farmers

Following the recommendations of a supervision mission in Dec. 2019, the project had been under restructuring already before COVID-19. Some COVID-19 response actions were added to the already foreseen restructuring:

1. The project was extended by eight months, as COVID-19 resulted in field operations delays.
2. Additional activities include training farmers on good hygiene practices and COVID-19 and the provision of personal protective equipment to farmer groups. Funding for these activities is yet to be identified/allocated.

In addition:

3. EAFF has done several assessments and surveys on the quality of e-granary services and participated in learning events with partners such as IFAD, agro-agencies, etc., and relevant information was shared with members.
4. EAFF also produced and shared agricultural markets COVID-19 guidelines with members.

5. The e-Granary NGOs lobbied for essential service permits allowing them to continue agro-value chain activities (organizing inputs procurement and delivery to farmers, aggregation and collective selling, etc.).
6. EAFF and NFO are also lobbying for better management of cross-border trade with new barriers imposed by the government, including lengthy customs procedures, denial of truck entry.
7. Farmers and their families, vulnerable from COVID-19, received prevention kits including hand-wash, hydro-alcohol gel, Madar liquid soap, bleach, protective masks, and gloves.

Mali: Improved Rice Paddy Quality and Quality Niébé Processing for Improved Nutrition and Increased Farmer Development

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, additional activities were organized aiming at improving food security and livelihood:

1. Capacity development of community initiatives aimed at increasing demand for foods with high nutritional value (large-scale communication session: caravan, radio program, community fair).
2. Capacity building of communities on processing techniques, conservation, and consumption of local products.
3. Capacity strengthening on COVID-19 for POs and health services at the local level.
4. Equipment (hygiene kits).
5. Training and funding to purchase or make masks, soap promoted through radio. In addition, a specific plan was developed and implemented during the capacity-building activities for the 2020-2021 campaign, including the establishment, animation, and monitoring of school fields as well as the broadcasting of radio messages on good agricultural practices.

Furthermore, specific COVID-19 provisions were specified in the tender documents for the construction of the cowpea processing unit, which was developed and implemented by the construction company. This plan also aligns with government measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, SOCODEVI's contingency plan for COVID-19, and WFP Mali's operational guidelines for activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This operational plan indicates the path followed for activities requiring regrouping to protect the various actors and their environment from COVID-19.

Mali: Inclusion of Rural Youth in Poultry and Aquaculture Value Chains

In addition to government actions, although oriented towards urban centers, the CNOP has set up its system to inform and sensitize rural communities:

1. Three regional COVID-19 focal points have been identified to provide training on the pandemic as well as barrier measures. And to better apply the training, the villages were provided with equipment consisting of handwashing kits, liquid soaps, mufflers, posters, hydroalcoholic gel.
2. To keep family farms informed on the state of implementation of agricultural policies beyond the intervention regions, radio programs were prepared and broadcast on 14 community radio stations in the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou, and Mopti, to an estimated audience of nearly 4 million people.
3. At the national level, CNOP actively participates in a monitoring and action committee against COVID-19 which has been set up to act collectively to face COVID 19 and contribute to national discussions -crisis for the revival of the agro-silvopastoral and halieutic sector.

4. The CNOP participates in the national committee to fight COVID-19 set up by the government.

Although projects took timely action to react to disruptions to project implementation and the agri-food production and supply chain, challenges remain as these actions were insufficient to address the scale of disruptions caused by the outbreak. Among the most common challenges are:

- The absence of a pre-established emergency response protocol led to difficulties in coordinating a rapid response.
- The pandemic brought unexpected costs and new ways of working. The costs of working remotely were unexpected and adapting to the virtual working setting has been challenging for projects.
- Due to unprecedented circumstances, the decline and slowdown in funding disbursement slowed project implementation, and most organizations and financial institutions had to adopt a 'wait-and-see' mode.
- The inability to carry out an adequate and reliable assessment of the impacts of the pandemic on project beneficiaries due to travel constraints.
- The situation became particularly critical in cases where the crisis was added to other emergencies already in place.

Additional Funding Process

In addition to the immediate response, many projects have also initiated medium- to long-term activities to address the damage and setbacks that the pandemic has caused. To support projects to respond further by scaling up or implementing new activities, in August 2020, GAFSP launched a transparent, competitive process to provide additional funds for ongoing public sector projects based on need and potential impact. In September 2020, the GAFSP Steering Committee allocated close to US\$3.7 million in additional financing to the five ongoing MMI projects that will finance the scale-up or implementation of new activities to address the short-to-medium term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on agriculture, nutrition, and food security.

Medium- to Long-term Response through Additional Funding

Activities financed with GAFSP additional funding focus on:

- Scaling up existing early response activities.
- Supporting nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices delivering food packages and providing supplies for home gardening activities to support food security at the household level.
- Providing agricultural inputs for forthcoming growing seasons to enhance resilience.
- Strengthening local and national markets.
- Enhancing awareness of good nutrition.
- Creating cash-for-work and cash-for-training opportunities.

Specific medium-to-long-term activities planned to be undertaken by MMI projects, include:

Bangladesh: Increasing Access to Finance for Farmer Organizations

1. Promote government stimuli among smallholder farmers.
2. Create Common Facility Centers leveraging smallholders to reduce production costs.
3. Organize Community Webinar Series, connecting farmers with private sectors, processors, extension agencies, policymakers, etc.
4. Establish community-based seed production through the creation of seed villages of pulses, oilseeds, and paddy.

5. Partnership with private companies to promote export.
6. Promote a Revolving Loan Fund (RLF), a PO-led resilient financial instrument.
7. Constitute a “Nutri-plate” platform to dialogue with Govt. Social Safety Net program.
8. Applicate of a “one health approach” across the value chain.
9. Strengthen the Virtual Call Centers as a resilience tool for POs for any future catastrophe and extension of the service to enhance digital service charters for villagers.
10. Enhance mechanization support to smallholders and safe transport and other logistics services for better connectivity.
11. Create of germplasm center to preserve and promote local climate-resilient varieties/species.
12. Introduce a COVID-19 Recovery Revolving (CRR) Loan.

Senegal: Strengthening rural women’s livelihood for sustainable economic development in the region of Tambacounda

1. Facilitate access to agricultural inputs for beneficiaries who have suffered crop and marketing losses to preserve/revive their activities (fuel for the motor pump; irrigation sets; biofertilizer).
2. Strengthen POs management information systems.
3. Develop the POs’ business model for productive investment to improve the producers’ marketing capacity (cold rooms, refrigerated trucks, processing facilities, means of transportation for trade/distribution to local markets.
4. Develop marketing skills within the POs and provision of additional support for negotiations, facilitation, identification of buyers, commercial mentoring in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

East Africa: Using the e-Granary innovative mobile platform to deliver economic services to farmers

1. Reorganize the company to increase the operational efficiency concerning supporting key services and functions of the organization.
2. Facilitate remote working arrangement. Deployment of remote working tools and framework, training the staff to be able to use the tools, and understanding reporting requirements
3. Moratorium on loan repayment.
4. Fundraise to support resilient companies and projects.
5. Support input access to help POs and their farmers to continue accessing certified inputs on time especially in preparation for the next two major planting seasons.
6. Increase call centers capacity to help the e-Granary users receive the correct information that should supplement face-to-face training and e-extension.
7. Redact to post-harvest losses through better storage and reduction of side selling by farmers and meet the volume requirement under the supply contract with the buyers.
8. Storage infrastructure improvement to mitigate post-harvest. losses while increasing the number of aggregation centers.
9. Enhance farmers’ capacity on structured trade and financial literacy.
10. Increase access to financial services and growing the number of local farmer mobilizers, critical in helping e-GRANARY cascade technology and services to farmers.
11. Develop a robust integrated online project management tool.

Mali: Improved Rice Paddy Quality and Quality Niébé Processing for Improved Nutrition and Increased Farmer Development

1. Ensure the adherence to the guidelines in the operational plan indicating the path for activities requiring clustering to protect the various actors and their environment from COVID-19.
2. Recruit a consultant in charge of marketing to strengthen the capacities of the project's beneficiary FOs on marketing.
3. Establish of two rice parboiling units in the two project's offices.
4. Establish, animation, and monitoring of school fields as well as the broadcasting of radio messages on the technical itineraries of good farming practices.
1. 5. Buy a third cycle of agricultural equipment (production, processing, and steaming) for the POs of the two components.

Mali: Inclusion of Rural Youth in Poultry and Aquaculture Value Chains

1. Intensify activities already existing.
2. Strengthen information/communication to correct the inadequacies that the project faced during the emergency via appropriation workshops.
3. Intensify training directed to farmer relays and youth on monitoring tools and on Covid-19 and barrier measures to be considered in the implementation of their activities.
4. Organize a workshop on the banking system and youth agricultural entrepreneurship to ensure and empower rural youth and improve their entrepreneurial capacity.
5. Support the creation of four processing units for poultry and fish in areas of high demand, to promote public-private partnership
6. Support peasant families to help secure the resources of young people through donations of sanitary kits, inputs, seeds, small equipment for livestock and poultry feed, etc.
7. Strengthen the product monitoring system for young people working with GIEs or NGOs to collect information on the products of rural youth farms, the quantities marketed, and the income generated to allow youth to have prior information to go to the market with the products.
8. Establish contracts with health centres for training, support, nutritional monitoring of youth and their families to have nutritional information and to ensure their follow-up to measure the change and the impact of the project in the context of nutrition habits.

Lessons Learned

The MMI pilots demonstrate that PO-led projects embody some key elements critical in times of crisis, and beyond:

- **PO empowerment and capacity building:** MMI demonstrates that organized farmers are more resilient during shocks. This is especially true when, as in the case of MMI, POs are structured on an inclusive model and driven by the demand of their members, they are in the best position to create useful services for their members in times of crisis. Because crisis response activities cannot be “one size fits all,” they must be designed at the local level, considering the specific needs and possibilities of local communities. POs are uniquely positioned to play this valuable role. It is therefore essential to strengthen POs and continue to invest in these essential networks for small producers. Strong and inclusive POs are the answer to improving smallholder and community resilience. Moreover, Since the POs do not follow bureaucratic policies and processes, they are well positioned to provide quick response against unexpected crises and serve their members in demanding situations where access to other means of support is a challenge.

- **The involvement of all community actors, paying particular attention to groups that have less access to decision-making processes:** The MMI pilot projects have been able to establish good practices for ensuring the participation and consultation of families, women, youth and local actors is very decisive in the creation and implementation of activities, that have proven to be critical when dealing with crises.
- **Capacity-building activities dedicated to people of the community:** The MMI pilot projects are characterized by capacity-building activities in leadership, finance, business, and digital literacy. These activities have enhanced the human capacity within the community, a critical factor when responding to the crisis triggered by the COVID19 pandemic.
- **Activities aimed at aggregating resources as input needs and products:** These activities, central to MMI projects, also include enhancing measures of storage and processing facilities that are essential in times of crisis to avoid significant losses of perishable products. All these measures attract upstream and downstream value chain players, reduce production costs, maximize profit, and limit losses in times of crisis.
- **The efforts to connect small producers and markets:** The pandemic has highlighted the need for greater food sufficiency at the local level, especially given closed borders and disrupted supply chains. The MMI Pilot projects proved successful during the crisis precisely because they were able to bring markets closer to farmers and consumers, fundamental in times of crisis and otherwise, to ensure continuity of the food supply chain, streamline the value chain and ensure continuity of trade in all situations. The MMI has paid central attention to these activities as well as to promoting the short supply chain, including through virtual sales.
- **Effective communication:** Communication dedicated to the most isolated rural communities is a factor central to the five MMI pilot projects and has proven to be essential for local community members to understand the true extent of the crises and allow for a timely response to curb the spread of the virus.
- **The ability to access additional funds in a quick and flexible manner:** In addition to positive factors inherent in pilot projects, the COVID-19 crisis also taught that additional economic input and funding is essential in times of crisis where financing might become insufficient in times of crisis. The additional funding made available by GAFSP within a few months of the outbreak of the crisis was critical to scale-up existing activities and further empower POs to continue finding new solutions to support their communities.

Key takeaways from the COVID-19 crisis to inform future PO-led projects:

- **A crisis response plan should be developed in the project's design phase:** Crisis coordination and response plans must be designed and developed before a crisis so that there are no delays in coordinating an immediate response during emergencies. At the same time as developing short-term emergency/resilience actions (allowing small farmers to maintain their activities), it is also important to act on the structural causes to anticipate crises (medium/long-term strategic solutions).
- **An increasing focus on strengthening POs autonomy and developing economic strategies in advance to deal with shocks is needed:** The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the fragilities of the marketing system, dependence on partner subsidies, and the lack of economic strategies to cope with shocks.
- **Investments in digitalization should be scaled-up:** The digitization of data collection is becoming increasingly essential to cope with the lack of real-time information, especially during a crisis with travel restrictions. Implementation of a low-cost digital system for data collection would facilitate rapid assessments in crises without the risk of travel.