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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR AFRICA

**Thirty-first Session<sup>1</sup>**

**26-28 October 2020**

**COVID-19 and Its Impact on Agri-food Systems, Food Security and  
Nutrition: Implications and Priorities for the Africa Region**

## Executive Summary

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, measures put in place to control or mitigate its impact, and the economic recession induced by the crisis are worsening the food and security situation in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This has become a significant threat to ending extreme poverty and eradicating hunger in Africa, and risks wiping out the modest gains made towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Malabo Declaration and Agenda 2063.
- Globally, the impact of COVID-19 on economic growth and poverty is much worse than earlier predicted. Revised projections from the World Bank estimate that the pandemic could push 88-115 million more people into extreme poverty in 2020, particularly in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> In SSA, economies are predicted to contract by 2.8 percent in 2020, while per capita income is projected to decline by 5.3 percent.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic halted a period of economic growth registered in many countries during 2019 and is expected to result in severe recession in Africa. While COVID's initial impact was centred in urban areas, it also spread to and affected rural areas that are "generally" more vulnerable to the effects. Nevertheless, containment measures pose new challenges to rural economies in maintaining food security, especially for rural women. These measures affect income-generating activities and livelihoods because they reduce economic opportunities and ultimately deteriorate access to nutritious foods, while also increasing women's workloads and the risks of gender-based violence.
- The recovery from COVID-19 will likely be slow and uncertain. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been working with countries, United Nations

<sup>1</sup> Rescheduled from 23-27 March 2020, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, 2020. Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty. By Castañeda, Lakner, Mahler and Wu. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank. 2020. Global Economic Prospects, June 2020. Washington, DC:

Documents can be consulted at [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)

Country Teams (UNCTs) and other development partners to assess the impact of COVID-19 on food systems, including food security and nutrition, rural poverty, trade and markets, agricultural production and prices and other related aspects, and to inform policy and investment decisions. It is necessary to generate new evidence for the development of stimulus programmes. A considerable part of these initiatives should meet the needs of the poor as they are more vulnerable and exposed to the impact of the pandemic, and have limited capacity to cope. Social protection programmes will be critical to meet the needs of the most affected and at-risk vulnerable populations as well as for recovery and resilience interventions.

- Interventions should consider specific gender roles in agri-food systems and address women's specific and multiple needs as guardians of household food security, food producers, farm managers, processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs. Interventions should also integrate women and their organizations and informal networks in the design and implementation of COVID-19 response and mitigation strategies.
- FAO's support to Members in Africa include engaging policy-makers, in collaboration with the African Union Commission (AUC), to give priority to investments in food and agriculture, with the support of development partners, to address COVID-19 impacts rapidly and effectively. Efforts have been directed at developing action-oriented solutions, including sharing knowledge products and good practices and enhancing national and regional capacities, in collaboration with UNCTs and other development partners. Moreover, FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme for Africa provides a comprehensive and coordinated approach for dealing with the challenge.
- Multistakeholder and multisectoral dialogue, that includes the private sector, needs to form part of the policy processes that transcend sectoral and institutional boundaries in order to build-back better and more resilient agri-food systems post COVID-19 crisis.
- The changing development landscape brought about by COVID-19 also provides opportunities to focus on strengthened collaboration with countries and demonstrate how FAO can provide the foremost technical expertise and knowledge to strengthen Members' response and recovery.

**Matters to be brought to the attention of the Regional Conference**

- Ministers are invited to take note of FAO's work in response to COVID-19 and provide guidance on how FAO can further strengthen its support to Members.
- The Regional Conference for Africa is requested to consider the emerging priorities from COVID-19 in its discussions on Africa's regional priorities and the work going forward of FAO's Regional Office for Africa (RAF).

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## I. Introduction

1. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to control the spread of the disease are disrupting the functioning of food systems in countless ways, with severe health and socio-economic impacts. In SSA, the pandemic hit within an existing context of persistent food insecurity and malnutrition where in 2019 alone there were 235 million hungry people struggling to have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food<sup>4</sup>, and 66 million people categorized as experiencing acute food insecurity in need of urgent humanitarian and livelihood assistance.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 also poses significant risks to food supply chains, which are comprised of a complex web of interactions involving farmers, agricultural inputs, processing plants, shipping retailers and more. Port closures and internal logistics challenges have disrupted food supply chains profoundly.<sup>6</sup>
2. COVID-19 continues to spread in SSA, aggravating other threats to food supply chains, including not only Fall Armyworm and desert locust infestations, but also African Migratory and red locusts, which have damaged tens of thousands of hectares of cropland and pasture. Several risk factors, such as climate change and variability and its consequences on food supply chains and productivity as well as conflicts and natural disasters affect the dynamics and likelihood of occurrence of food chain crisis threats.<sup>7</sup> A recent joint FAO and World Food Programme (WFP) analysis of food insecurity and nutrition hotspots identified 15 African countries that are at high risk of severe deterioration of food security and nutrition.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic is exposing the existing flaws in food systems, including gender inequalities and the unfair treatment of women and girls.
3. Unless urgent actions are taken to ensure the functioning of domestic agriculture and food value chains in order to protect and enhance the resilience of the most vulnerable populations and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on agriculture, food systems and livelihoods of the rural poor, there are considerable risks that the current public health crisis could become a food and economic crisis. This would further increase the number of people facing acute hunger as jobs are lost, the flow of remittances slows, and food systems are disrupted.
4. Rural areas are often less affected by the health aspects of the pandemic compared with urban centres. Nevertheless, the poorest segments of the population reside in rural areas where access to services, social protection and finance mechanisms is limited compared with urban areas.<sup>9</sup> Containment measures pose new challenges to rural economies, especially for rural women, in

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<sup>4</sup> FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9692en>

<sup>5</sup> 2020 Global Report on Food Crises. Joint Analysis for Better Decisions. Rome, Food Security Information Network (FSIN), 2020

<sup>6</sup> Torero Cullen, Máximo, COVID-19 and the risk to food supply chains: How to respond, FAO, March 2020

<sup>7</sup> FAO 2020. Forecasting threats to the food chain affecting food security in countries and regions. Food Chain Crisis Early Warning Bulletin. no. 35, April–June 2020. Rome.

<sup>8</sup> AUC-FAO Task Force Report: Support to new food insecurity and nutrition hotspots, July 2020. Hotspot countries are Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Zimbabwe

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/CA8824EN>; <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8561en>; <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8843en>; <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca9531en>

maintaining food security, and affect income-generating activities because they reduce economic opportunities and access to nutritious foods, while also increasing their workloads and the risks of gender-based violence. To ensure more effective interventions it is crucial to identify the most vulnerable women and girls, men and boys, and develop measures to reduce their exposure to risks and increase their access to productive resources, support and financial services, technologies, markets and local institutions. Furthermore, it is crucial that interventions meaningfully engage and ensure the participation of vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, in all the process of implementation so that their voices and needs are heard.

## **II. Threat of COVID-19 to Agri-food Systems, Availability and Access to Food and Nutrition**

5. A sustainable agri-food system is defined as one that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations is not compromised. For agri-food systems transformation to continue to take place under the current crisis, multistakeholder and multisectoral dialogue needs to form part of policy processes and design that transcend disciplinary, divisional, and institutional boundaries. Thus far, the pandemic has had more of an impact on access to food, but availability is still a concern. Adequate stocks of most staple foods ensured and still ensures the availability of food during the pandemic at the global level. In addition, some African countries had above average grain harvests at the end of 2019 and early-mid 2020 (East Africa and Southern Africa, for example).
6. Logistics in the agri-food sector includes all activities that enable the flow of agriculture inputs, outputs, and agriculture-related services, such as transportation, warehousing, procurement, packaging and inventory management. The efficacy of logistics is critical for the agri-food sector, in particular in times of crisis. Disruptions can cause adverse impacts on the quality of food, freshness, its safety, and can impede access to markets and affordability. Challenges in the distribution of food to local markets and across countries, however, have exposed the weaknesses in food supply chains and demonstrated the vulnerability of food systems, food security and nutrition to crisis-induced disruptions, particularly in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable populations.
7. Initially, there was widespread concern about the potential impact of COVID-19 on agri-food systems in Africa. Over time, these issues are being resolved through policy actions and decisions taken by global, regional, country and local actors in agri-food systems. FAO has played a leading role in the process of informing and stabilizing policy measures by implementing an array of tools across the globe, including policy briefs for evidence-based decision-making, data management and analytics to assess how problems have been resolved and provide market signals that reduce uncertainty, convened high-level meetings to ensure countries designate food and agriculture as essential services during lockdowns and published joint statements with the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on food trade and markets. These actions have helped maintain a clear technical discourse on COVID-19 and its impacts on agriculture and food security, based on evidence.
8. Food price hikes were initially recorded in many countries of the region as consumers increased food purchases in response to the lockdown measures. The pandemic exacerbated price increases and analysis of food price trends showed that 20 of the 24 countries for which data are available recorded increases in staple food prices in June 2020 compared with February 2020

(before the COVID-19 crisis).<sup>10</sup> In June 2020, cereal prices increased in local markets by up to 40 percent compared with February 2020 in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Mali, the Niger, Senegal and Togo. From February to June 2020, the highest price increases were recorded for millet (up to 38 percent in Mali) and sorghum (up to 34 percent in Togo). The prices of roots and tubers also soared in some local markets: up 62 percent for cassava in Cabo Verde, Ghana and Sierra Leone; up 84 percent in Ghana for yams; and up 48 percent in Togo for cassava *gari*. In Mozambique, rice prices increased by up to 62 percent during the same period while in Angola, prices of staple foods – cassava (flour), maize (flour), palm and soybean oil, and rice – increased between 8 and 12 percent during the period. In South Sudan, prices of sorghum and maize increased by 56 and 67 percent between February and June in the capital Juba, as the Government of Uganda, the country's main source for cereals, began implementing screenings at the borders in the framework of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, which impaired commodity trade flows. Similarly, prices of other important staples, including groundnuts and cassava, increased by 78 and 96 percent over the same period. In Somalia, prices of locally produced maize and red sorghum increased between March and May in the capital Mogadishu by 64 and 50 percent, respectively, due to panic buying and disruptions of trade flows from cereal producing areas. Similarly, prices of imported rice increased by up to 33 percent across the country, due to the higher prices on the international market, panic-buying and internal trade disruptions.

9. Food price increases were also recorded for nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, meat, eggs and dairy products, following the outbreak of COVID-19. Using price data for February 2020 as the baseline, 19 out of 30 countries with available data recorded an increase in onion prices in August 2020 compared with February 2020, and half of countries with available data recorded price increases for lettuce, chicken meat and bananas over the same period. The countries with the largest price increases are Zambia (onions and oranges), Mozambique (lettuce) and Djibouti (chicken meat).
10. Although still above their levels a year earlier, analysis of recent trends in the prices of staple foods and nutritious foods shows that food prices have levelled off or declined in many countries compared with the price hikes that followed the initial outbreak of COVID-19. For example, in Uganda, the price of maize in June in the capital Kampala was about 40 percent lower than the peaks reached in April. For nutritious foods, this is the case for animal products and fruits. However, the price declines were not only caused by the lifting of some restrictive measures, but also by a lower demand caused by economic recession and substantial declines in purchasing power. In addition, while beneficial for the urban poor, who are net food buyers, the price declines can be detrimental for producers, particularly net sellers.
11. Some countries started to implement export restriction policies and other measures, such as stricter controls on cargo vessels, which jeopardized shipping activities and affected agricultural production and trade. However, recent data show that in August 2020 countries worldwide have imposed less export restrictions than during the 2007-2008 global food price crisis.<sup>11</sup> As such, unlike in 2007-2008, when several major exporting countries put in place export restrictions, during this pandemic, export restrictions have not been as widespread and generally they were short lived.
12. A severe economic contraction is likely not only to undermine countries' capacities to access food products (due to costlier imports as exchange rates depreciate) but also reduce demand for SSA exports (agricultural products, raw commodities) that are an important source of national income. Africa's agricultural exports are worth about USD 61 billion (average 2015-2017)

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<sup>10</sup> FAO and World Bank, Africa Food Security Bulletin, 2020

<sup>11</sup><https://public.tableau.com/profile/laborde6680#!/vizhome/ExportRestrictionsTracker/FoodExportRestrictionsTracker>

while imports are worth about USD 80 billion over the same period.<sup>12</sup> The dominance of agricultural products in composition of exports and food products in imports increases the vulnerability of both producers and consumers to the impacts of global shocks such as the 2007-2008 food price crisis and COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> In addition, falling oil prices and a contraction in exports demand have underpinned the massive slowdown in economic activities and depreciation of local currencies in oil-exporting countries such as Algeria, Angola, Chad, Libya, and Nigeria. The negative effects will be significant for other exporters such as Egypt and the Republic of the Congo, among others. For some of them, such as Nigeria, oil revenues represent the majority of export revenues (95 percent in the case of Nigeria), so fiscal vulnerability is very high.

13. The pandemic is already having a negative effect on pre-existing gender and other intersecting inequalities (age, ethnicity, race, disability) in all dimensions of food security and nutrition, through reduced food production and distribution capacities, decreased purchasing power and diminished access to nutritious food.<sup>14</sup> The negative consequences of these disruptions are more pronounced in landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) in Africa, such as South Sudan and the Central African Republic, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), such as Comoros, Mauritius and the Seychelles. These countries are both import-dependent and rely on remittances and tourism as the main sources of their foreign exchange. Furthermore, heavy reliance on trade taxes and duties could lead to severe COVID-19-related revenue losses in Africa Least Developed Countries (LDCs).
14. As lockdown restrictions are eased, policy-makers facing the difficult decision of balancing the health and economic needs of their populations should give priority to safeguarding agri-food systems through and beyond the crisis. In particular, priority should be given to the millions of livelihoods, especially in rural areas, that depend on agriculture, as well as protecting access to food and nutrition for the poor and vulnerable populations.<sup>15</sup>

### **III. Potential Impacts of COVID-19 on Availability of and Access to Nutritious Foods**

15. COVID-19-induced disruptions affect the entire agri-food system, impacting both supply and demand channels at different points in time. The impacts affect all components of the agri-food system, from primary supply to processing, trade to national and international logistics systems, and intermediate and final demand<sup>16</sup>. The pandemic has affected factor markets, such as labour, capital, and intermediate inputs of production. Rural dwellers who are isolated and without access to water or sanitation, women – who are major players in cross-border trade – and those confined to refugee camps, among others, will suffer the worst effects of the pandemic.
16. The prevalence of food insecurity and malnutrition, due to COVID-19, is expected to increase significantly in SSA, particularly in countries where there are weak health and social protection programmes or those that are available cannot be scaled up to meet the needs of the population.

<sup>12</sup> FAO paper on agricultural trade prepared for the 31st Session of the Regional Conference for Africa 2020

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html>.

<sup>14</sup> CFS. 2020. Interim issues paper on the impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition (FSN) by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and nutrition (HLPE). Rome, High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security; FAO. 2020. Gendered impacts of COVID-19 and equitable policy responses in agriculture, food security and nutrition. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9198en>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_food\\_security.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_food_security.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8430en/>

Healthy diets are not affordable for about 829 million people in SSA<sup>17</sup> and the high levels of unemployment, lost livelihoods and rising poverty levels due to COVID-19 will cause affordable healthy diets to be out of reach for an even larger number of people on the continent during 2020. The estimated 66 million people categorized as experiencing acute food insecurity in SSA could nearly double by the end of 2020 due to the impacts of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> In addition, as of 2019, 52.4 million children under the age of five are stunted and the number of children under the age of five who are classified as wasted is 10.6 million.<sup>19</sup> These numbers could also grow rapidly due to the impact of COVID-19.<sup>20</sup>

17. Results from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank-led socio economic assessments as well as Wageningen University rapid assessment of COVID-19 indicate that the impact of the pandemic's spread has been both widespread and extensive, causing a significant loss of lives and livelihoods. These assessments suggest that COVID-19 will hit African economies severely, with negative GDP projections in countries such as Equatorial Guinea (-5.8 percent), Ethiopia (-5.6 percent), Zimbabwe (-5 percent), Nigeria (-1.6 percent) and Angola (-1.2 percent).<sup>21, 22, 23</sup>
18. The scope and severity of the economic impact of COVID-19 is still not known but without continued interventions, these trends could have devastating effects on the number of hungry people. Preliminary assessments, based on scenarios modelling, suggest that the pandemic could add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished people globally in 2020, depending on the economic growth scenario.<sup>24</sup>
19. Vulnerable groups, living mostly in rural areas where labour is primarily informal (such as smallholder farmers, livestock keepers, artisanal fishers, persons whose livelihoods depend on the informal economy, women, youth, children engaged in child labour or at risk of child labour, and migrants) have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted the existing income inequalities and weaknesses in social protection mechanisms, particularly in terms of coverage and inappropriate benefit levels, to help cushion the effects of unemployment and loss of income for large segments of the African workforce operating in the informal economy, and notably the rural poor and women in particular.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the rural poor are largely excluded from social insurance measures due to high informality and low coverage, and face significant barriers in accessing social assistance programmes and essential healthcare services.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9692en>

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition

<sup>19</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9692en>

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html>.

<sup>22</sup> [https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog?sort\\_by=rank&sort\\_order=desc&sk=covid](https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog?sort_by=rank&sort_order=desc&sk=covid)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.wur.nl/en/Research-Results/Research-Institutes/centre-for-development-innovation/Our-Value-Propositions/Guiding-Sector-Transformation/The-effects-of-COVID-19-on-food-systems-rapid-assessments.htm>

<sup>24</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO.

<sup>25</sup> Impact of COVID-19 on informal workers. Rome, FAO, 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8560en/CA8560EN.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Social protection and COVID-19 response in rural areas. Rome, FAO, 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8561en/CA8561EN.pdf>

20. The impacts from COVID-19 on food and agricultural demand are transmitted through direct effects such as on the agriculture sector that lead to reductions in food supply and reduced demand for services in the tourism and hospitality industries that leads to employment losses with important implications for food security and nutrition. Measures put in place to control the spread or mitigate the impacts of the pandemic have disrupted African food supply chains in countless ways.
21. Lockdowns and other restrictions on human movements within and across borders impeded farmers' access to input and output markets, and increased food loss. They also limited the availability of inputs for non-farm segments of food supply chains, interrupting agro-processing and logistics operations, such as storage and distribution. Even as borders open, logistics challenges have caused significant delays in moving goods, including agricultural commodities, across countries. Closure of commercial enterprises, particularly in the tourism hospitality and food services and catering industries, have disrupted key food supply chains and led to massive job losses. Moreover, disruptions to logistical services have impeded the efficient functioning of key food supply chains.
22. Restrictions were imposed on social gatherings, and there was closure of offices and businesses. Quarantine restrictions also resulted in reduced access to advisory and support services, such as extension and veterinary services, pest control, and systems for sanitary and food safety controls. School closures meant that tens of millions of children did not get access to school feeding programmes. WFP estimates that about 50 million children in SSA missed access to school meals<sup>27</sup> School closures also increase the risks of falling into child labour and add to women's burden across their multiple roles in productive, reproductive and community spheres.

#### **IV. Interventions to Promote Food Security and Nutrition in COVID-19 Response**

23. The recovery from COVID-19 will likely be slow and uncertain because the crisis is still unfolding. While health is the top priority, countries need to take decisive actions to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on food supply chains, lives and livelihoods, particularly in rural areas, where most of the vulnerable populations live and rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Several African governments have responded by designing and implementing economic stimulus packages, mainly to sustain economic activities, limit the immediate negative impact on businesses, and, to some extent, keep markets and agri-food supply chains functioning and inclusive.
24. The current disruptions caused by COVID-19 to production, processing and the distribution of food across countries and regionally has also highlighted the need for more constructive relationships between public policy, the private sector, research and education. While addressing the imminent difficulties in the food system caused by the current crisis, it is nonetheless also critical to continue to foster a collective focus on longer-term solutions in the region. These include data and technological innovations that combat ongoing issues such as climate change, youth employment, while also guaranteeing access to affordable and nutritious food in order to boost the resilience of food systems.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>

25. Stimulus programmes in African countries should meet the needs of vulnerable and the most at-risk populations by expanding and improving emergency food assistance as well as enhancing nutrition interventions. This is critical for successful responses, because the health status of poor and vulnerable people is directly linked to their access to nutritious foods. Loss of income opportunities hit poor and vulnerable households hardest and workers in the informal economy, including migrants, traders and owners of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are struggling to provide food for their families. Ensuring availability and affordability of nutritious foods should be key objectives for promoting healthy diets and nutrition. Particular attention needs to be paid to landlocked countries that have recorded the steepest increase in food prices since the outbreak of COVID-19.
26. Social protection programmes should be expanded and adapted to address urgent emergency responses, protecting food security and livelihoods during the pandemic, and to address the recovery and rebuilding of livelihoods of vulnerable people. Expanding and/or adapting existing social protection programmes – including cash transfers, in-kind food transfers, access to health insurance and employment-related guarantees – are essential tools to support families to cope with the short-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on incomes and consumption, while also contributing to longer-term resilience. Social protection systems can combine a number of these programmes to ensure shock responsiveness in the face of various predictable and unpredictable events.
27. Social protection is recognized as a key element both for relief and recovery strategies for the pandemic at a global and regional level.<sup>28</sup> More robust and shock-responsive systems are needed to ensure resilience and should be an integral component to rural transformation. In Africa, social protection was widely used by governments to address the immediate impacts of COVID-19, with social assistance programmes constituting about 84 percent of the social protection response, with cash transfers comprising the bulk of measures<sup>29</sup>. When markets are functional, this modality provides income, allowing households flexibility to prioritize spending according to their most pressing needs, often food. Evidence on cash transfers across Africa shows that they help vulnerable households to increase and diversify food consumption, avoid selling off productive assets, and are used for a range of productive investments. Social protection responses designed with a nutrition-sensitive approach can positively impact food security and nutrition conditions. It is crucial that these programmes ensure that the targeting, design and implementation of social protection interventions is inclusive of rural women and girls.
28. Trade can play a key role in allowing goods and services to move across borders from areas of surplus to areas experiencing deficit, thereby alleviating acute shortages and food insecurity. Reduced trade leads to a decrease in the inflow of foreign currency into exporting countries, resulting in shortages that tend to cause currency depreciations. Coordinated efforts are required to maintain open global and regional trade channels, keeping food markets functioning and

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<sup>28</sup> Social protection is highlighted as a critical response and recovery strategy at a global level by the UNSG Policy Brief on The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition, and FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme, and it is a central component of the African Union's *Joint Ministerial Declaration an Action Agenda for COVID-19* from the Joint Virtual Meeting of the African Ministers Responsible for Agriculture, Trade and Finance on the Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition in Africa, Joint Ministerial Declaration and Action Agenda, 27 July 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures, "Living paper" version 12 (10 July 2020). Ugo Gentilini (WB), Mohamed Almenfi (WB), Pamela Dale (UNICEF), Ana Veronica Lopez (WB), and Usama Zafar (WB).

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/454671594649637530/pdf/Social-Protection-and-Jobs-Responses-to-COVID-19-A-Real-Time-Review-of-Country-Measures.pdf>

avoiding food shortages. Challenges in port and inland logistics as well as depreciating local currencies pose significant challenges for import-dependent countries.

29. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) offers a key avenue for Africa to boost inter- and intra-regional agricultural trade and spur development in many sectors. The agreement provides a framework to address regulatory barriers and ensure that they do not unnecessarily hinder trade flows. The postponement of the implementation of the AfCFTA as a result of COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink the future direction of the agreement as well as the regulatory barriers impeding trade given the new and emerging trends from the pandemic.
30. Targeted support, including financial resources and technical assistance, should be provided to sectors and businesses, especially MSMEs that have suffered most from the economic slowdown caused by COVID-19, in order to help stave off job losses and stabilise households' incomes. Sectors, such as hospitality and informal trade, where the workforce is predominantly comprised of women and youth have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of the pandemic with greater risks on their jobs and livelihoods.
31. Stabilizing food production and supply, strengthening producer organizations, and linking farmers to markets through conventional and emergency channels are important to support smallholder food production and sale of agricultural products. Maintaining flexible and adaptable measures on rural and food markets are important to allow them to remain open, while balancing this imperative with public health concerns for social distancing and hygiene protocols. Facilitating movement of migrant workers is critical so that they can work on farms, processing plants and other segments in food supply chains to avoid agricultural labour shortages.
32. Government policy actions to address the food security and nutrition dimensions of COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of promoting holistic, integrated and coordinated responses, including multisectoral approaches and multistakeholder engagement processes, making sure to integrate the most vulnerable and marginalized such as women and their organizations. . In this sense, community engagement and empowerment approaches are key to facilitate the resilience of poor and marginalized groups as well as advancing their empowerment (Community engagement represents one of the five guiding principles to be integrated in all the humanitarian response interventions as set by the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan of the United Nations.).
33. Multisectoral approaches involving a centralized strategic planning hub and embracing relevant ministries, the private sector, civil society and development partners have been important to maintain a clear focus on evidence-based decision-making. Data and information systems need to be enhanced for analysis, monitoring and socio-economic impact assessments to inform decision-making and monitor impacts on different people.
34. In the medium-term recovery phase, countries should focus on addressing the broader development challenges, focusing on the growth impacts and within-country inequality from the COVID-19-induced economic recession. Supporting a vibrant private sector is critical for creating businesses and quality jobs that are necessary for an inclusive and sustainable pathway towards recovery from the pandemic, especially for MSMEs that are hardest hit by COVID-19. In addition, creating the political environment and policy instruments necessary to address structural inequality and structural causes of poverty, including investments in infrastructure and social protection programmes as well as public services like education and healthcare should go alongside investments in sustainable, nature-based practices.

35. COVID-19 also demonstrated the vast opportunities that exist for promoting innovations in a growth and recovery agenda. In the face of the pandemic, e-commerce and other digital solutions have kept food value chains alive in some countries by facilitating on-line retail, improving production efficiency and enhancing interaction of food chain actors. These should be a key building block for the recovery agenda. Enhancing investments, encouraging the scaling-up of digital technologies at all levels of the food value and supply chains, and building appropriate infrastructure and all-encompassing logistics systems can help stabilize smallholder farm production and promote increased productivity to reduce the impact of the pandemic on food and nutrition security. Special attention is needed for developing capacities of rural institutions and human capital to help bridge the literacy and digital gaps to ensure that efforts to leverage digitalization in COVID-19 response do not increase inequalities and further marginalize the poor and most vulnerable.
36. Medium- to longer-term measures required for building sustainability and resilience in food and agricultural systems include strengthening domestic markets, promoting intra-regional trade in agri-food products, and supporting development and scaling-up of financing mechanisms and investments to support agriculture and trade. Special efforts are required to support the productive capacity of men and women farmers by strengthening their organizations and increasing their access to productive resources, inputs and services for the next production season and in long-term responses. Supporting smallholders in the transition to more sustainable practices is also important, such as by leveraging social protection to promote climate Smart agriculture.<sup>30</sup>
37. The COVID-19 response has put an enormous fiscal strain on public resources and the crisis provides an opportunity to re-think investment and financing mechanisms for agriculture and trade in Africa. A fiscal policy and investment response strategy requires a combination of domestic resource mobilization, leveraging private sector resources and mobilizing external resources through innovative financing mechanisms.

## **V. FAO's Regional Response to COVID-19 in Africa**

38. FAO in collaboration with partners at country, regional and global level acted swiftly to help countries take decisive actions in response to COVID-19. It convened high-level dialogues and meetings to identify concrete actions and solutions to respond to the pandemic, developed guidelines and implemented in-country assessments to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on agri-food systems, and prepared and issued policy briefs and other knowledge products to support policy analysis, investment, and programming of interventions.

### ***A. Engaging high-level policy-makers and partners***

39. FAO is working with the AUC and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to ensure that African governments, development finance institutions and other financial partners are prioritizing food systems in their COVID-19 policy actions and investments. A meeting of Ministers for Agriculture on the impacts of COVID-19 on food security in Africa was held on 16 April 2020. This was followed by a meeting of Ministers responsible for Agriculture, Trade and Finance, which was held on 27 July 2020 to deliberate on *Building Resilient Food Systems through Agricultural Trade and Investments to Achieve Food and Nutrition Security in Africa*.

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<sup>30</sup> [www.fao.org/3/ca7911en/CA7911EN.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/ca7911en/CA7911EN.pdf)

40. Through convening virtual webinars with partners, involving thousands of participants including parliamentarians and RECs, as well as media interviews on COVID-19-related topics by FAO managers, the Organization contributed to a better understanding of the risks of the pandemic on food supply chains and its impacts on rural development and rural poverty. This contributes to strengthening national and regional capacities, and developing action-oriented solutions that countries, development partners, the private sector, research and academic institutions, and civil society, including farmer organizations, can take to mitigate the pandemic's impacts.
41. FAO has worked with the African Union Commission, AGRA and AGRF, to convene private-sector dialogues, bringing together a range of private sector stakeholders to co-develop a solutions-oriented agenda to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and post COVID-19 recovery. Representatives of farmer associations, private sector industry associations, SMEs, large companies and governments provided a rich sharing of best practices that need to be scaled-up, as well as innovative ideas from across, and beyond the region that can be tested, to leverage further investment to build back better from the COVID-19 crisis.

***B. Sharing of information and knowledge products for evidence-based policies, advocacy and programming***

42. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 (SOFI 2020) report covers the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and nutrition as well as policy recommendations. In addition to this and several other publications by FAO's experts based in Rome, RAF has published and shared many policy briefs and other knowledge products on the impacts of COVID-19 on agri-food systems, smallholder, agri-food enterprises, production, processing, and resilience, food markets, nutrition, social protection, migrants and remittances, and youth<sup>31</sup> as well as analyses and solutions in response to the pandemic.

***C. Data and analytics***

43. FAO collaborates with country offices and government counterparts to produce the FAO Food Price Monitoring Analysis (FPMA) bulletin that provides an assessment on regional price trends.<sup>32</sup>; the FPMA Tool also provides online access to price data for 41 African countries.<sup>33</sup> FAO conducts market and price analysis<sup>34</sup> and produces 'big data' that is available for use, such as the collaboration between RAF and World Bank on the Africa Food Security Bulletin that track and analyse food prices in selected African markets and assesses the implications for food security and nutrition to inform World Bank Management decision-making. In addition, FAO's spatial database supports the Hand-in-Hand Initiative in target countries. Similarly, FAO Food Insecurity Experience Scale data collection, including gender disaggregated data, in 17 crisis countries, several of them African food crisis countries, provides further evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on food security in these countries.<sup>35</sup> Data collection on household food security and resilience provides FAO's offices in food crisis countries with a set of tools and approaches to identify and monitor COVID-19-related food security risks and to assess impacts in order to inform humanitarian and resilience programming.<sup>36</sup> FAO also provides technical assistance to

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/resources/policy-briefs-test/en/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.fao.org/giews/reports/fpma-bulletin/en/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://fpma.apps.fao.org/giews/food-prices/tool/public/#/home>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.fao.org/economic/est/trade-and-markets-home/en/#.Xz5pEpnLgWo>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/using-fies/en/>

<sup>36</sup> COVID-19 and Food Crises Contexts: Monitoring, Anticipation and Assessment Guidelines, FAO April 2020

Members to support their data collection efforts. More efforts are however needed to ensure availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data and analysis for monitoring gender-related impacts and tailor socially relevant and inclusive responses to COVID-19.

*D. Engagement in UNCTs and with other partners on COVID-19 interventions*

44. FAO developed guidelines on assessing the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and food security in Africa and recommendations for policy-makers that have been used in several UNCT/World Bank-led socio-economic impact assessments and national response plans. FAO policy and technical staff provided analytical support to FAO and UNCTs as well as governments for these assessments and for planning inclusive responses. FAO staff are actively involved in all the workstreams of the joint FAO-African Union COVID-19 Task Force, as well as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) Food Trade Coalition Task Force.

## **VI. Implications of COVID-19 for FAO Regional Priorities**

*A. FAO COVID-19 response and recovery for Africa*

45. FAO developed the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme for Africa to ensure that the region has a well-articulated and coordinated approach for dealing with the challenge. The programme identifies seven priority areas of work that are being discussed with the AUC, RECs and Members to ensure that they are well aligned with regional and country priorities to respond to COVID-19. Discussion with partners and other stakeholders aim to identify concrete partnerships for immediate actions, innovative models and mechanisms for joint results and collaboration on priority areas.

*B. FAO regional priorities going forward*

46. The disruptions from COVID-19 on agri-food systems, lives and livelihoods as well as FAO's regional response have important implications for FAO's Regional Priorities going forward. The emerging programmatic priorities resulting from the crisis and RAF's response do not replace but rather supplement the priorities presented in the RAF Results and Priorities paper. While COVID-19 presents several challenges and uncertainties, it also highlights opportunities to bring FAO's knowledge and technical expertise to shape, support and influence Africa's response to the pandemic now and beyond COVID-19.
47. FAO Members request support to strengthen their response to COVID-19 in key areas such as (i) socio-economic impact assessments; (ii) COVID-19 response/implementation plans and/or support for implementation of the agriculture and food security components of response plans; (iii) data and analytical studies, including for food security information systems, and assessing the impact on agriculture and food systems; (iv) programming to support design and implementation (including pilot tests) of projects in specific subsectors; and (v) policy dialogue or other policy support work on COVID- 19.
48. Going forward, FAO in Africa needs to focus on the emerging priority areas of work, including:
- Continue to support Members to design and implement socio-economic impact assessments to measure the impact of COVID-19 on food security, nutrition and functioning of food systems, helping governments to make informed policy and investment decisions in COVID-19 response and strengthen food and agriculture in recovery and resilience plans,

with specific interventions to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on rural women and girls;

- Support Members to make nutritious foods available and affordable by designing and implementing interventions that draw from the recommendation in the SOFI 2020 report;
- Provide support for countries to establish and promote multisectoral approaches for addressing food security and nutrition. Such initiatives should involve a centralized strategic planning hub, and embrace relevant ministries, the private sector, civil society and development partners, and focus on evidence-based decision-making based on sound data and information systems;
- Expanded social protection instruments are an essential part of protecting livelihoods and household food security and nutrition and must be part of medium- to long-term recovery and resilience solutions. However, these programmes place a large fiscal burden on governments. FAO needs to support countries to design and implement more efficient, cost-effective and innovative social protection programmes including adjusting programme design, management tools and delivery systems;
- Continue to support governments and private sector institutions to put into place enabling environment reforms, mechanisms, and capacity building measures adapted to the needs of agri-food enterprises along food value chains to ensure improved food security and nutrition;
- Support the efforts of the AUC, AfCFTA Secretariat, Members and other stakeholders for quick implementation of the Free Trade Agreement, focussing on encouraging market transparency and governance mechanisms, supported by up-to-date and credible trade-related information and data;
- Foster continued dialogue on the establishment of an Africa Food Safety Agency to enhance harmonization and coordination of food safety standards and legal frameworks and promote risk-based programming and decision-making;
- Support countries and RECs to seize the opportunities for accelerating innovation and digitization, including working with partners to (i) scale up digital technologies for providing various agri-food services (extension, markets, finance, etc.); (ii) improve functioning of markets and trade, including trade digitalization access to digital tools and trade-related information through online platforms; (iii) scale up investments in development of digital skills to equip Members for the jobs and businesses that are required for COVID-19 recovery and resilience; and (iv) promote matchmaking to foster partnerships with private technology providers and producer associations on digital solutions.