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COUNCIL

Hundred and Sixty-sixth Session

26-30 April 2021

FAO's response to COVID-19: Building to Transform

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has had unprecedented effects on all dimensions of human life. The full economic and social impact is still unfolding as the disease continues to spread around the world. On top of the death toll and overstretched health systems, the virus and the measures to contain its spread have caused a deep economic recession, increased extreme poverty and acute and chronic food insecurity, rolling back progress made in the last few years. A new wave of the pandemic will bring about a new wave of restrictions and, hence, further economic hardship against a backdrop of an already fragile food security and nutrition situation. While massive vaccination campaigns may eventually obviate the need for economically damaging restrictions, inadequate supplies and inequitable access to vaccines means that population immunity in low- and middle-income countries will not be achieved within 2021.

Global markets are expected to start recovering from the effects of the virus and the recession in 2021. However, in the short run, the global measures to contain the COVID-19 crisis have implications for the demand and supply of agricultural commodities. The pandemic will continue to be a source of market uncertainty for the years to come.

The monitoring of policy responses to COVID-19 shows that agri-food systems proved to be more resilient than other sectors of the economy, because of exemptions from the restrictive measures and policies aimed at supporting the smooth functioning of the agri-food production and markets. However, acute and chronic food insecurity have increased, due mainly to the effects of the global recession, which hit the most vulnerable groups hardest through reduced employment, incomes and migration remittances. Women were harder hit given their multiple roles in the household and predominant participation in informal agri-food markets.

The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme appeals for immediate-, medium- and longer-term actions to prevent the health crisis from becoming a food crisis. The programme aims to mitigate the immediate impacts while strengthening the longer-term resilience of livelihoods, moving towards a green recovery, and building to transform the agri-food systems. FAO's response to the pandemic leveraged the Organization's convening power, real-time data, early warning systems and technical expertise to direct support where and when it is most needed.

Suggested action by the Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees, and by the Council

The Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees and the Council are invited to take note of the progress made and to provide guidance, as deemed appropriate.

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I. Background

A. An update on the pandemic and its global impacts

1. The full economic and social impact from the COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding as the disease continues to spread around the world. By 22 January 2021, there had been more than 95 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, including over 2 million deaths (World Health Organization, WHO, 21 January 2021). While large stimulus packages are now being mobilized in many high-income countries to avert deep economic recessions, negative economic growth globally is unavoidable.
2. Almost all countries are going through a “second or third wave of infections”. There are important differences in the incidence of morbidity and mortality rates, which are related to population characteristics (age structure, nutrition and health status, among others), the timing of responses to the pandemic and the readiness and quality of health systems.
3. Developing regions have been more severely affected by the second or third waves than by the first one. For instance, the pandemic has become an increasing challenge in the Africa region, with nearly 2.39 million cases and 55.6 thousand deaths reported by WHO as of 22 January 2021. In January, the death rate in the continent surpassed 2.4 percent compared to 2.2 percent globally, and health systems are stretched to capacity¹.
4. A new wave of virus infections in low-income countries may bring about a new wave of restrictions, reversing previous relaxations of restrictive measures. This may lead to further economic hardship against a backdrop of an already fragile food security and nutrition situation, and in the face of other threats to economies and agri-food systems, including a desert locust outbreak that has damaged tens of thousands of hectares of cropland and pastures.
5. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) 2020 estimated that, as a result of COVID-19, an additional 83 to 132 million chronically undernourished people will be added to the total number of chronically undernourished globally in 2020, depending on the economic growth scenario used to make the estimates².
6. The September 2020 Global Report on Food Crises estimated that between 101 and 104.6 million people in 27 countries were classified as being in crisis or worse (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification/Cadre Harmonisé (IPC/CH) Phase 3 or above), according to analyses carried out between March and September 2020³. For the same 27 countries, around 97.6 million people were classified as being in crisis or worse (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above) in 2019. While it is difficult to disentangle the precise effects of COVID-19 from those of other stressors, the report’s food security analysis shows that the pandemic has had a compounding effect on these pre-existing and ongoing drivers of food crises, mainly through declining economic activity related to COVID-19 restrictive measures, leading to income losses and reduced household purchasing power.
7. The World Bank estimates that COVID-19 will push an additional 88 to 115 million people into extreme poverty, measured at the international poverty line of USD 1.90 per day compared to a baseline scenario⁴. The total number may rise to as many as 150 million people by 2021, depending on the severity of the economic contraction. The numbers point to a reversal of gains in global

¹ BBC News based on data from Johns Hopkins University: Coronavirus: Africa infections rising sharply in worst-affected countries, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53181555>

² 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.

³ 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, September 2020 update “In times of COVID 19” https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2020_September%20Update_0.pdf

⁴ The baseline scenario has global growth contracting by about 5 percent in 2020 while the downside scenario presents a global growth contraction of 8 percent in 2020.

poverty reduction for the first time in a generation. Extreme poverty is estimated to affect between 9.1 percent and 9.4 percent of the world's population in 2020. This would represent a regression to the rate of 9.2 percent in 2017. The global poverty rate was expected to drop to 7.9 percent in 2020⁵, in the absence of the pandemic.

B. Access to vaccination

8. Creating population immunity against COVID-19 through massive vaccination may ultimately obviate the need for restrictive measures, at least to a large extent⁶. After the development of various successful vaccines, the world is witnessing the biggest vaccination campaign in history. As of 20 January, more than 52 million doses have been administered in 51 countries⁷. However, the bulk of vaccinations, so far, has been limited to high income and some large developing countries. WHO is warning of serious risks of inequitable distribution and lack of vaccines for poor countries, as the higher-income countries are more economically capable of securing vaccines for their populations. At the same time, WHO is leading the global COVAX initiative, partnering with vaccine manufacturers to provide worldwide equitable access to safe and effective vaccines.

9. In Africa, 600 million doses of vaccines have been targeted for the continent by COVAX while another 270 million have been secured by the African Union. Vaccination through COVAX is not expected to start before April 2021, however, secured supplies so far are grossly inadequate for the continent's 1.2 billion population. This means that restrictions will continue or even intensify in the face of a new wave of infections.

II. FAO's Assessment of Developments in Food Markets and Food Security and Nutrition

C. The State of Food Markets

10. Recent FAO projections⁸ confirm the weakening of demand growth over the coming decade. Per capita consumption of many commodities is foreseen to be flat at the global level, making population growth the main driver of consumption growth. The projected demand growth is expected to be matched by efficiency gains in crop and livestock production, keeping inflation-adjusted agricultural prices roughly at current levels. International trade will remain essential for food security in food-importing countries, and for rural livelihoods in food-exporting countries. The simulations also indicate that, in the short run, the global measures to contain the COVID-19 outbreak have implications for demand and supply of agricultural commodities. The pandemic will continue to be a source of uncertainty in the markets.

11. Global economic prospects over the coming decade remain positive, despite the deep recession in 2020, which is projected to reduce global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 4.4 percent. Shortages of labour in commodity processing, trade constraints and reductions in transport fuel consumption due to COVID-19 were also taken into account for the 2020 estimates. For 2021, an above-trend global GDP growth of 5.2 percent is expected to partially recover economic losses.

12. The severe income losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to have interrupted the growth of food consumption in 2020. In particular, the consumption of vegetable oil and livestock products is projected to have been affected, most severely in low-income countries. Consumption of staple foods will be impacted less, as households are expected to spend a larger share of their reduced income on cheaper cereals, roots and tubers, and pulses to cover basic needs. In the near term, the predominance of staple-based diets in low-income countries is increasing as a result of

⁵ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/september-2020-global-poverty-update-world-bank-new-annual-poverty-estimates-using-revised>

⁶ However, some vaccine producers have warned that COVID-19 could become an endemic disease, and that vaccines would need to fight against the emergence of new viral variants and a naturally waning immune response.

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/>

⁸ The projections presented in this document are an update of the OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2020-2029, which was launched in July 2020.

the pandemic. The medium-term implications for food consumption depend on the economic recovery across the world, as well as the wider socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

13. Global agricultural production is projected to increase by 13 percent between 2017-2019 and 2029, a slower rate than during the previous decade. The global medium-term picture, though, masks possible short-term negative effects on food and agricultural production in individual countries covered by the FAO monitoring of agri-food markets reported below (Section II.D). A country-by-country analysis shows that COVID-19 related movement restrictions (including border crossings) have caused disruptions in the flow of purchased, and particularly imported, farm inputs, which may have affected yields and production. If movement restrictions, especially cross-border, are re-imposed as a result of the second wave of virus infections, downward pressure on production will continue. Agricultural production will continue to undergo structural shifts from food to feed crops and livestock production in the coming decade. COVID-19 is expected to result in a temporary slowdown in this transition in 2020, but the trend is assumed to resume from 2021.

14. According to the medium-term projections, prices of main agricultural commodities are expected to remain broadly flat to 2029 as demand increases are expected to be met by efficiency gains in production. Inflation-adjusted prices are projected to dip in 2020, recover through 2026 and then resume their declining trend. Given the confirmed new wave of the pandemic, which is hitting developing countries particularly hard and is causing renewed lockdowns and restrictions in high-income countries, the timing and magnitude of global economic recovery remain uncertain.

15. On the trade front, while some countries imposed trade-restrictions with the objective to curb potentially adverse effects of the pandemic on domestic agricultural markets, fortunately, most of these measures were temporary and short-lived. Experiences from past crises have proven that trade restriction measures should be avoided, as they generally generate market uncertainty and can result in sudden price spikes and increased price volatility. They can also result in loss of confidence in global markets, especially by importing countries. It is important that governments avoid resorting to these measures and, instead, ensure that markets are open and trade continues to flow smoothly. This is essential for the proper functioning of agri-food supply chains.

D. Monitoring policy responses to COVID-19

16. Most of the analysis in this section is based on the monitoring of more than 30 countries and one regional economic community (The Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS) carried out by the joint European Union-FAO Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation Programme (FIRST). FIRST is tracking country-specific COVID-19 related policy responses and impacts on agri-food systems and vulnerable groups^{9, 10}. The analysis covers the period from May to August 2020 and was prepared by FIRST Policy Officers stationed in relevant government ministries in the countries. The monitoring reports are intended to serve as a tool to support policy decision-making. Below, the key results of the monitoring exercise are briefly described.

17. **Following short-term disruptions due to restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19, markets along national agri-food supply chains had largely stabilized by the end of the reporting period.** Initial measures relevant for the agri-food sector included social distancing, restrictions on movements, curfews, closing of some categories of markets (such as street and open-air markets) and limiting inter-regional and/or cross border movements for individuals and merchandise. Food market stabilization can be attributed to two main factors: (a) the progressive relaxation of restrictions; and (b) conducive policies targeting the agri-food sector.

18. Gradual easing was applied at national level, sometimes excluding areas with high COVID-19 infection rates. Relaxation of restrictions was due to concerns about the economic implications of the measures, assessed evolution in the infection rates and, in some countries, popular pressure.

⁹ Please see: <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/resources/country-profiles/en/>

¹⁰ Some of the country profiles are produced in collaboration with the Global Network against Food Crises.

19. Policies targeting food and agriculture aimed at facilitating the functioning of agri-food supply chains, while all activities related to food and agriculture were considered to be essential. Two broad categories of measures were enacted:

- i. Farmers, food traders, and workers involved in the agri-food supply chain (transporters, processing factory or food outlet workers) were amongst those who were generally exempted from lockdown and working/mobility restrictions.
- ii. Governments actively supported local agriculture and food production through the provision of subsidies, direct distribution of agricultural inputs, opening of lands to cultivation, promotion of mechanization and home gardening, and facilitation of access to credit for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

20. With respect to export restrictions and border closures, several countries made efforts to secure market supplies and export flows through regional agreements (e.g. ECOWAS) or bilateral deals with neighbouring countries. However, despite exemptions granted to the agri-food system, cross-border and inter-regional movements of food and inputs experienced disruption or substantial delays especially during the early stages of the restrictions.

21. Despite gradual stabilization of the functioning of agri-food markets, a major increase is expected in acute and chronic food insecurity and malnutrition. This is due to sharply reduced economic activity which has resulted in significant reductions in employment, income and access to adequate and healthy diets, especially among vulnerable groups. In addition, even temporary market disruptions have resulted in food shortages and high prices especially in urban areas and areas away from supply points and have reduced access to inputs. This had led to further impacts on the livelihoods of more vulnerable populations.

22. COVID-19 related shocks have forced vulnerable groups to rely on coping strategies with potential long-lasting negative effects, such as the sale of productive assets (land or livestock), reduced expenditures on education and shifts in diets towards staples and away from more costly nutritious foods.

23. The economic crisis in migration destinations has reduced remittances. Migrant workers were forced to return to rural areas putting significant strain on receiving households and downward pressure on rural wages. One of the major concerns arising from the effects of COVID-19 is the rising indebtedness of the poor and near-poor without access to formal credit sources and support programmes.

24. In almost all countries the crisis has affected women more than men. Lockdowns, quarantines and other forced home confinement measures have resulted in an increase in the incidence of domestic violence. Closures of informal agri-food markets especially in urban areas have affected women entrepreneurs who are often dominant participants in those markets. The enormous strain on health systems and/or the almost exclusive focus on COVID-19 has diverted resources from the management of acute malnutrition and other diseases including pre- and post-natal care programmes. Closure of schools has resulted in disruptions of school feeding programmes which for many children are a key source of nutrition.

25. Governments, together with development and humanitarian partners, have provided support to the livelihoods of vulnerable groups in almost all countries surveyed. Expanding existing social protection programmes or setting up new ones has been a key instrument of livelihood support. Other schemes include nutrition support, employment benefits, financial and credit support. However, such measures have not been sufficient to compensate for the effects of the recession.

26. COVID-19 is an additional burden on the political and social systems especially in countries already facing food crises. The COVID-19 crisis has added to the effects of conflict and other shocks (extreme climatic events, pests, diseases, among others) threatening food availability and access. The combination of the effects of conflict, economic shocks, persistent droughts and floods, spread of desert locusts, dependence on imports and additional existing political and social vulnerabilities are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The coping capacity of vulnerable groups who are experiencing or are at risk of conflict and violence, displacement, denial of

access to livelihoods and entrenched levels of food insecurity has been further compromised by restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

27. **Support to agri-food systems and livelihoods to deal with the pandemic has been funded from new resources (from national budgets or through donor support) but also by shifting resources of governments and resource partners from development programmes to crisis management.** In many countries, the health sector has taken priority in government and donor support. Resources have also been mobilized to support social protection and ensure the survival of agri-food small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and help other productive sectors to cope with the crisis. Governments and donors in almost all countries covered by the monitoring exercise have repurposed existing programmes to face the COVID-19 crisis. Unless new resources can be mobilized, this shift will compromise longer-term development and stymie progress towards inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems.

28. **The management of the health and economic crises undermined governance structures and capacities, especially in fragile contexts.** Governments in almost all countries have put in place centralized coordination structures comprising several ministries to manage the crisis. In some countries, mechanisms were also put in place to coordinate actions by a large number of technical and financial partners. However, not all efforts towards coordination were successful and, in many cases, a proliferation of uncoordinated initiatives and of dispersed projects was observed. Some countries have delegated decisions on programme design and implementation to local governments, while others have consolidated responses under centralized governance structures.

29. **Information flows for evidence-based policy making have been seriously inadequate in many countries,** especially in terms of (a) flows between the “centre” and decentralized locations; (b) functionality of food security and nutrition information systems in crisis countries; and (c) dissemination and access to information regarding food markets and prices. Furthermore, the lack of real-time data on vulnerable groups and programme performance (monitoring and evaluation) have created confusion and compromised programme effectiveness.

III. The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme

30. The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme is established through an “Umbrella Programme”, covering all projects and programmes related to seven priority areas of work in the context of the pandemic response. The Programme provides an overall result-based monitoring and reporting, while coordinating the requested technical and policy assistance support across the Organization. Through the Umbrella Programme, the Organization has adopted a comprehensive and holistic approach to proactively address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic in addition to emergency and the humanitarian response, providing concrete, demand-driven support to national governments.

31. The COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme also enabled partners to leverage the Organization’s convening power, real-time data, early warning systems and technical expertise to direct support where and when it is needed most.

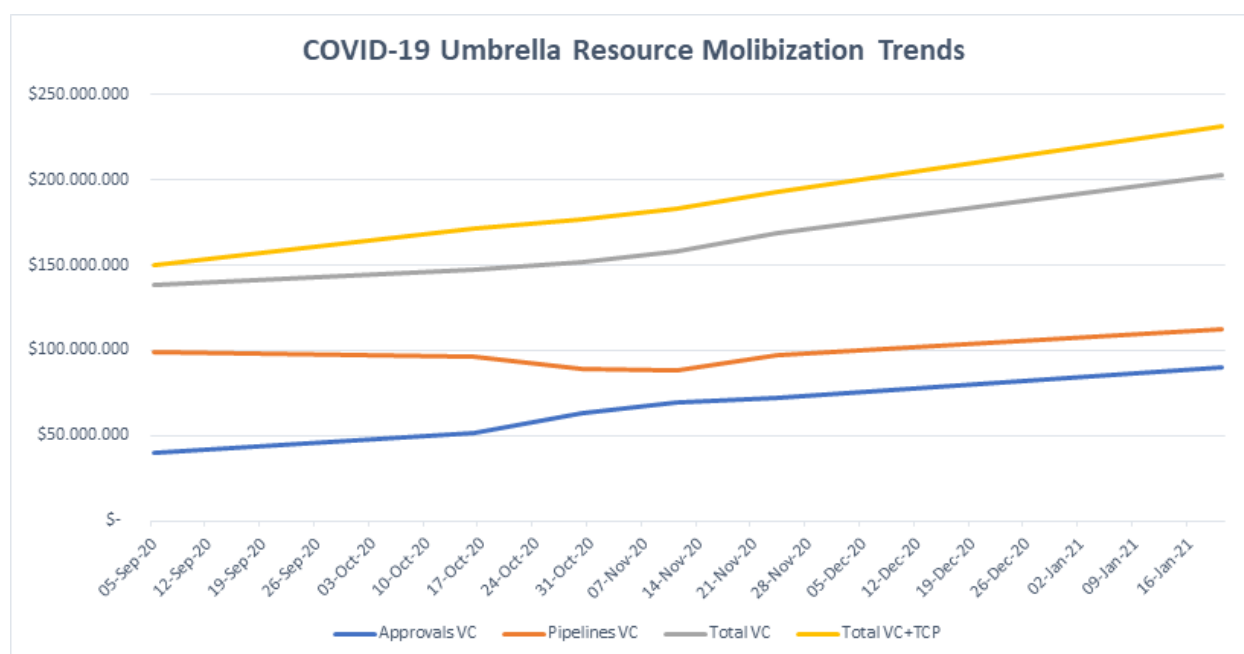
32. With operational requirements totalling USD 1.32 billion, this Programme has, as of mid-January 2021, received confirmed and pledged contributions totalling USD 231 million, or approximately **18 percent of the target**. Voluntary contributions – which are destined to both development and emergency-oriented projects – amount to USD 203 million, of which USD 90 million in approved contributions and USD 112 in forecasted contributions. FAO’s resources currently invested in the programme amount to USD 29 million.

33. Following the evolution of the pandemic, the share of development-oriented approved voluntary contributions has shifted from an initial 9 percent to the current level of 23 percent of the overall approved contributions. Forecasted voluntary contributions with development-based targets progressed from an initial 37 percent to the current share of 64 percent of the overall forecasted contributions. This suggests that the COVID-19 contributions under FAO’s programme are evolving

from an emergency- to a development-based approach. FAO's COVID-19 response, thus, is currently progressing towards the recovery landscape with a focus on medium- and long-term interventions.

34. Belgium, Canada, Japan, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the World Bank represent the current main resource partners investing in FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. Their approved and forecasted contributions currently amount to USD 164 million, roughly 81 percent of the overall voluntary contributions received and pledged.

35. In terms of regional focus, Africa has so far received the largest amount of voluntary contributions and FAO's resources – 33 percent of the total – followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, and Asia and the Pacific region – both currently standing at 17 percent. On the other hand, the funding allocated to Near East and North Africa (15 percent), and Europe and Central Asia (6 percent) suggests a need to balance regional focus.



36. The highlights of the main activities by each of the seven areas of work are presented as follows:

a) *The Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP): Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and safeguarding livelihoods in food-crisis contexts*

This priority area of work focuses on FAO's contribution to the United Nations COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response plan launched by OCHA in April 2020. The GHRP addresses the impact of COVID-19 in countries with ongoing humanitarian crises and a Humanitarian Response Plan. From March to the end of October 2020, FAO delivered livelihoods support (e.g. cash transfers, agricultural inputs and technical assistance) to 2 670 624 households (approximately 15 044 444 people), and approximately 44 percent of the beneficiaries are women. In addition, more than 5 million rural people have been reached by awareness-raising campaigns to reduce the transmission along the value chain.

Assistance across countries has been delivered to address multiple risks such as conflicts, extreme weather events and plant pests, in addition to COVID-19. Funding allocations are multi-purpose and address several vulnerability factors to build back better and increase livelihoods resilience of communities affected, not only by COVID-19 but also by other threats to food security. Adaptation and reprogramming of existing emergency and resilience

interventions has increased FAO's capacity to respond to emerging needs of agriculture-dependent communities in the wake of COVID-19. As funding for the food security sector's COVID-19 response remains limited, FAO has been largely relying on the overall Humanitarian Response Plan funding and multi-year resilience-building programmes to meet the additional needs of the most affected population.

The FAO response is people-centred and specific attention is dedicated to women's needs and women empowerment. Throughout the pandemic, specific attention was given to conduct gender-sensitive risk communication and community engagement to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission along the food value chain, in particular in the remote and hard to reach areas where FAO operates. Awareness-raising to mitigate the risk of transmission also targeted specific livelihood groups such as nomadic pastoralists, small-scale producers of fresh foods and informal food markets vendors.

b) *Data for Decision-making: Ensuring quality data and analysis for effective policy support to food-systems and Zero Hunger*

Food security data and rapid data collections were implemented in 19 countries¹¹ based on an adaptation of FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale. Telephone interviewing was used to collect the data and enumerators were trained remotely. Data are representative at national and first administrative level, allowing for a spatial analysis of COVID-19 impact. Country analytical reports are currently being produced to be shared with national counterparts.

To tap innovative data sources, FAO established a Data Lab to foster the use of data science and non-conventional sources to support Members in responding to the pandemic. A Big Data Tool was launched in mid-April 2020, as an automated interactive platform publishing real-time information updated daily. The tool scrapes daily food prices, tweets and news to analyse the COVID-19 impact on food chains. A sentiment analysis was added to detect early signals of social unrest on a global scale. All data are accessible and searchable with a semantic search engine and are available through the Hand-in-Hand geospatial platform.

A plan for adapting agricultural data collection methods was rolled out in countries where the Agricultural Integrated Survey (AGRISurvey) was implemented in agreement with the national counterparts. This resulted, in some cases, in a temporary postponement of field activities (Cambodia, Ecuador, Uganda), or the merger of survey rounds (Armenia). Remote trainings of enumerators and supervisors were provided in other countries.

A strong collaboration between headquarters and the country offices resulted in effective support to countries in terms of strengthening governments' and national capacities for 'post' COVID-19 recovery. In Mexico, FAO strengthened the capacity of the Secretariat for Agriculture and Rural Development to allocate public resources in investments in agri-food sectors with the highest cost-effectiveness possible. Similar work is ongoing in Paraguay and Uganda. In addition, FAO is developing a new monthly Nominal Rate of Protection indicator that will help assess in *quasi* real-time, the incentive/disincentive that different policy measures adopted during the pandemic may have generated for agricultural value chains. The indicator focuses on the most-consumed staple foods by the poor and food insecure and targets 30 low-and middle-income countries. The evidence will serve as a tool to recommend effective policy responses to facilitate economic recovery.

¹¹ Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Zimbabwe.

c) *Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty: Pro-poor COVID-19 responses for an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery*

The priority area of work under “Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty” significantly adjusted the nature of its activities in response to the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures taken to curb its spread during 2020. To mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic and promote inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery, FAO supported expansion of social protection to better reach and serve underserved groups; strengthened the sustainable economic inclusion of small-scale producers; strengthened rural women’s economic empowerment and protected rural employment.

Efforts around social protection ranged from strengthening national shock responsive social protection in response to COVID-19 (Rwanda, Somalia) and facilitating national scale-up (Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines and Viet Nam) to linking social protection to agricultural and rural-based livelihoods, including smallholder maize production (Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Zambia), fisheries and aquaculture (multiple countries), forestry value chains (China, Kenya), agro-pastoralist communities (Kenya), rural informal workers through cooperatives (Côte d’Ivoire), and natural resource management (Asia and the Pacific).

FAO leveraged digital technologies to strengthen sustainable economic inclusion of small-scale producers in the context of COVID-19. For example, in Tunisia, the Rome-based Agencies supported the Ministry of Agriculture’s efforts to assist smallholders in maintaining production, productivity and access to markets, in particular through accelerated use of information and communication technologies. The Forest Farm Facility refocused much of its efforts to respond to COVID-19, including promotion of e-commerce and other delivery mechanisms to allow producer organizations to trade and develop new market opportunities consistent with social distancing.

FAO continued to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the context of COVID-19. For example, FAO co-organized a series of virtual dialogues for parliamentarians from ECOWAS for peer learning on gender equality and resilient food systems in response to COVID-19. Dimitra Clubs were used as a mitigation mechanism at community level to increase access to information, promote women’s leadership and participation, and facilitate changes in behaviour. FAO supported gender-sensitive value chains in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to help overcome the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural livelihoods and the growing social and economic inequalities in accessing markets.

FAO provided support to the design and implementation of initiatives that promote decent youth employment in agri-food systems in the context of COVID-19 response. For example, the joint FAO-United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) regional programme on Opportunities for Youth in Africa facilitated national stakeholder consultations in the context of COVID-19. The Integrated Country Approach for decent jobs for youth in agri-food systems adapted to the COVID-19 crisis by utilizing webinars and online policy dialogues, and providing short-term support to sustain the livelihoods of young workers and migrants.

d) *Trade and Food Safety Standards: Facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade during COVID-19 and beyond*

In the context of COVID-19, FAO continued monitoring global and national commodity markets and the food security situation in every country in the world, providing up-to-date information on global and national prices, production, consumption and trade of major commodities including fish products and issuing alerts to allow timely interventions.

In support of policy-making processes, FAO has engaged in monitoring and analysing agricultural policy support indicators in eight Eastern European countries for which no indicators were available before.

A number of trade-related technical cooperation projects are ongoing in all regions, including: strengthening capacities in Market Information Systems and Policy Monitoring (in Eastern Europe and Central Asia); strengthening export capacity of safe and quality products in the livestock sector (Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) members); developing institutional and technical capacity for safe food through the implementation of food safety measures and certification schemes (Cambodia); and supporting the development of resilient food systems (Peru).

FAO also supported the African Union Commission (AUC) to develop a Framework for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) in agricultural commodities and services in support of the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and to improve the Biennial Review reporting on the implementation of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and the Malabo Declaration commitments.

Furthermore, FAO produced numerous briefs, publications and guidance notes supporting Members in adopting policy measures and responses to COVID-19 that would not distort trade and markets and avoid disruptions to food supply chains. Members were also supported through e-training and information exchange through international networks, such as the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), the Agricultural Trade Expert Network in Europe and Central Asia (ATEN), and the FISHINFO Network.

e) *Boosting Smallholder Resilience for Recovery: Protecting the most vulnerable, promoting economic recovery and enhancing risk management capacities*

The resilience programme incorporates a suite of complementary COVID-19 sensitive and specific interventions aiming at safeguarding the most vulnerable in rural and urban settings, promoting transformative economic recovery and building capacities and institutions for resilience.

This priority area focuses on COVID-19 affected and most vulnerable low and middle-income countries/regions. Therefore, projects under this priority area target high-risk countries, and specifically people whose livelihoods are vulnerable or already affected by the impacts of the pandemic and other crises and risks. The projects prioritize more than 30 food crisis countries that are implementing an emergency response as part of FAO's component of the GHRP for COVID-19, ensuring a continuum of actions during the recovery. This also includes other most vulnerable countries such as the least developed countries (LDCs) and SIDS where COVID-19 has impacted their food systems.

Many of the approved projects have been linked to both the Humanitarian and the Resilience components of the Umbrella Programme as both address immediate needs and longer-term livelihoods strengthening. For example, the project in Sudan "Improving the resilience of agricultural livelihoods using Cash+ scheme for floods and COVID-19 Response" targets vulnerable households that are in need of humanitarian assistance. The project aims to improve the agricultural production capacity through improved access to cash and strengthening livelihoods. Strong alignment with the social protection dimension of the Umbrella Programme has been identified in some other projects. For instance, in Bolivia, a project targets the population with high vulnerability, including indigenous people. The intervention aims at building back local communities' resilience, through articulating an early warning and information system with resilient productive systems to be able to address future shocks and threats.

f) *Preventing the Next Zoonotic Pandemic: Strengthening and extending the One Health approach to avert animal-origin pandemics (PNP)*

FAO is engaging in a Tripartite partnership, with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and WHO, through the Global Early Warning System (GLEWS) to monitor the global situation of COVID-19, providing updates and risk assessments. In addition, the Tripartite supports Members in capacity development, resource mobilization, emergency response, knowledge sharing and joint cross-sectoral risk assessment ([JRA](#)) and risk management, focusing on the animal-human interface. Guidance on national pandemic preparedness using a One Health approach is provided under the Tripartite Zoonosis Guide ([TZG](#)).

FAO is participating in the expert groups of WHO and OIE on SARS-CoV-2 at the animal-human interface, to share data and provide risk assessment, recommendations and guidance to Members on safe trade in animals and animal products, detection of SARS-CoV-2 in animals, virus evolution, as well as studies to investigate the origins of SARS-CoV-2 or the establishment of new animal hosts. Together with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Tripartite (FAO, OIE, WHO) committed to enhance the collaboration on the science-policy issues and priorities for actions.

FAO's ongoing Emerging Pandemic Threats (EPT-2) and Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA) programmes, involving 36 countries in Asia, Africa and the Near East, and implemented by FAO's Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD) – a collaboration between the Animal Health Branch and the Office of Emergencies and Resilience – are strengthening countries' capacities to build and manage resilient health systems, with focus on pandemic preparedness and response. FAO's Sustainable Wildlife Management Programme ([SWM](#)) published a [White Paper](#) to highlight strategies for reducing future wildlife-borne spillover of disease to humans. Other FAO key COVID-19 publications under PNP include [Risk mitigation measures for livestock and agricultural professionals](#) and [Exposure of humans or animals to SARS-CoV-2 from wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals](#).

g) *Food Systems Transformation: “Building to transform” during response and recovery*

Activities have focused on mitigating the medium-term impacts of COVID-19 on value chain actors; strengthening resilience against future disruptions, and building the long-term institutional strength of public and private sector institutions. Across all regions, national policies and mitigation strategies have been informed by regular flows of data and analysis communicated via regional and national bulletins.

In this respect, collaboration with international and regional organizations, and other UN agencies has played a central role in regional and national responses. In Latin America and the Caribbean, a series of bulletins on wholesale markets, published in conjunction with the Latin American Federation of Supply Markets, has informed strategies for wholesale markets to ensure food supply. Collaboration with UNIDO in the Africa region saw assessments carried out in six countries on the impact of COVID-19 on small- and medium-sized food processors to inform the business enabling and investment environments.

Awareness-raising and capacity-building at the national, regional and global levels have been taken online through webinars and trainings on a range of topics. An example of this has been the training course on “Food loss and waste: legal frameworks in times of COVID-19” with legislative measures adopted by some countries in the LAC region. In the North East and North Africa region, the role of innovation and digital agriculture in strengthening the

resilience and sustainability of agri-food systems was analysed during a series of nine webinars, which saw the participation of several international organizations¹².

Progress has also been seen in the delivery of support on regional market integration based on multi-stakeholder approaches. For instance, a project covering eight countries in the Balkans and Central Asia is improving agri-food market integration with long-term impacts expected to improve market access, price information systems and evidence-based policy formulation.

Resilience responses common across all regions have been focused on strengthening short value chains. Informed by ongoing assessments, Armenia and Moldova will support operators in fruit and vegetables, fish farming, and milk and dairy chains to boost domestic and cross-border trade. Examples of similar national approaches can also be found in other regions. A Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) in western Kenya will focus on horticulture, as one of the most affected sub-sectors by COVID-19 due to its perishability, also leveraging ongoing work on urban food systems to strengthen short value chains. In Bhutan, a TCP will strengthen the capacity of actors operating in perishable food value chains in peri and peri-urban settings.

IV. Key lessons learned and relevant policy actions

COVID-19 related policy monitoring points to a number of key lessons and associated policy action areas:

- a) **Support and update monitoring systems and innovation in collecting real time data and analysis.** Monitoring systems should be updated to provide timely information and analysis regarding agri-food systems and vulnerable groups. Such systems will allow the identification of vulnerability hotspots and critical nodes and bottlenecks in agri-food systems, as well as risk monitoring and evaluation of actions and policies.
- b) **Link short- and long-term policy actions and investments.** Policy action should link emergency response to long-term sustainable development. The pandemic provides an opportunity to repurpose policies and investments in support of agri-food systems which will go beyond addressing current needs but also set the foundations of long-term recovery. Transforming agri-food systems and addressing structural constraints is key to building resilience of systems and individuals and for facing future pandemics.
- c) **Improve policy coordination and addressing long-term structural issues.** Policy coordination among key institutional actors (in food, agriculture, health, finance, security and planning) is central to addressing the consequences of the pandemic but also for catalysing long term action towards recovery. Successful policy coordination requires that coordinating bodies have a clear mandate and authority going beyond emergency response to building resilience and tackling structural issues and vulnerabilities.
- d) **Recovery must be inclusive.** In the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, policy response for both short-term relief and longer-term recovery should focus on the most vulnerable and leaving no one behind. Interventions should explicitly recognize the specific constraints faced by women in their multiple roles.
- e) **Keep trade open and ensure international cooperation.** One of the key lessons learned from the pandemic, so far, is that international cooperation should be strengthened and unilateral actions should be avoided. However, cooperation should also include provisions for elimination of obstacles and friction in border crossing which have been the cause of delays, shortages and waste.

¹² Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture of Saudi Arabia; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia; International Fund For Agricultural Development; International Telecommunication Union; World Bank; International Center for Biosaline Agriculture; International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas; and International Food Policy Research Institute

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- f) **Reduce the negative impacts of malnutrition on COVID-19 morbidity and mortality and the impacts of the COVID-19 economic crisis on nutrition.** Tackling undernutrition, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases is key as they contribute to increased COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. However, reduction in consumption of nutritious foods is one of the key coping strategies of households in the face of loss of income caused by the pandemic, compounding the negative impact of the pandemic.