



# National agrifood systems and COVID-19 in Palestine

## Effects, policy responses, and long-term implications

This country profile covers responses and effects up to mid-August 2020

### INTRODUCTION

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The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant pressure on health systems all around the world. The drastic measures established to contain its spread are creating serious impediments to economic activity (including agrifood systems) and, consequently, to livelihoods and food security and nutrition.

The COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates both how health and food systems are linked to one another, and how local food systems are linked to global systems. High rates of urbanization and the globalization of trade and travel have contributed to the spread of the virus across countries. Lockdowns and movement restrictions within countries and across borders have disrupted national and local food and agricultural output and input markets and have caused sharp reductions in overall economic activity globally. In poorer countries, disruptions have further exacerbated the fragility of systems (including agrifood systems) and livelihoods.

*The Global Report on Food Crises 2020* found that 135 million people in 55 countries and territories are facing acute food insecurity at “crisis” level or higher – a situation that requires urgent action. The report further concluded that over 183 million people were experiencing a “stressed” level of acute food insecurity and bore a high risk of sliding into a “crisis” level if confronted by additional shocks (FSIN, 2020). The situation is particularly worrisome in light of the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the situation evolves, the question arises as to how, or whether, food, health and financial and economic systems could become better prepared to prevent similar outbreaks from escalating into a full-blown economic and social crisis.

This report is part of a series of country profiles that describe: (i) policy measures enacted by governments to contain the spread of the virus; (ii) policies and measures to stabilize the functioning of agri-food systems; (iii) potential effects of policies on agri-food systems and vulnerable groups. Finally, the profiles also assess longer-term options for agri-food system policies and investments so as to make them more resilient.

## CONTEXT

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Palestine is a lower-middle income economy with a GDP per capita of USD 3 072 USD in 2017 (constant prices 2015) and a population, in 2018, of 4.92 million people, 1.96 million of whom live in the Gaza Strip and 2.95 million in the West Bank (PCBS, 2019). The Palestinian territories are under Israeli occupation and are characterized by a fragile security situation; there are numerous restrictions on the movement of people and goods and on access to natural resources and markets.

The COVID-19 crisis hit Palestine in early March 2020 when the first cases of the virus were confirmed. This triggered the declaration of a state of emergency by the Palestinian Prime Minister and the imposition of restrictions to contain the spread of the virus.

On 11 August 2020, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported the following figures on the spread of the virus (OCHA, 2020a): Reaching nearly 20 000, the number of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory who have contracted COVID-19 has been on a steep rise since the second half of June. Positive cases are mostly concentrated in the West Bank, particularly in the Hebron and East Jerusalem governorates.

In response to the surging infections, the Government of Palestine (GoP) imposed severe movement restrictions on the most affected areas and adopted a series of additional measures aimed at containing the pandemic.

In addition to the public health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis is delivering a negative shock to the humanitarian situation and socio-economic development in Palestine, putting public welfare, livelihoods and employment, poverty and food security, social cohesion, financial and fiscal stability, and institutions at risk. The crisis has brought to the fore the prolonged deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian relations and has shone a harsh light on the inadequacies of the status quo, including the framework that governs the economic relationship between the two sides (UNSCO, 2020).

Around 1.7 million Palestinians (33 percent of the population) are food insecure<sup>1</sup> and in need of assistance (OCHA, 2020b). The most recent food security data of September 2018 showed that food insecurity was particularly severe and growing worse in the Gaza Strip, where it affects 68.5 percent of the population, 47 percent of which was severely food insecure and 22 percent moderately food insecure (FSIN, 2020). The situation was less severe in the West Bank, where the prevalence of food insecurity varies. Area C<sup>2</sup> is particularly vulnerable: vulnerable communities, such as Bedouins and herding communities, experience peaks of food security that are similar to Gaza levels.<sup>3</sup> In these communities, women and youth are particularly affected (OCHA, 2020b). The nutrition situation is characterized by the double burden of malnutrition driven by poverty, food insecurity, poor dietary habits and sedentary lifestyles. Micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity pose significant challenges to health and well-being (RAZA, 2019).

The Israeli occupation of West Bank, the blockade of the Gaza Strip and the separation barrier are considered the main drivers (also known as 'root causes') of food insecurity, manifesting themselves through more immediate causes, such as a lack of access to economic resources. In

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<sup>1</sup> Severely and moderately food insecure combined.

<sup>2</sup> The West Bank (except for East Jerusalem) is divided into three administrative areas: A, B and C; only Area A (comprising approximately 18 percent of land area) is under full Palestinian civil and security control.

<sup>3</sup> WFP (2019) highlights that more than 60 percent of the Bedouin and herding communities in Area C of the West Bank are food-insecure.

particular, the low-income, low-economic growth trap in which Palestine is stuck, coupled with demographic growth, is not allowing job creation to keep up with a rapidly growing labour force. Ultimately, the prolonged occupation, the blockade on Gaza and outbreaks of hostilities have eroded the resilience of Palestinians. They are increasingly less able to cope with sudden shocks, such as spikes in conflict, demolitions in the West Bank, trade restrictions and persistent electricity shortages in Gaza, natural and environmental hazards, such as winter storms, the effects of climate change, and inadequate water and sanitation services (OCHA, 2020b).

## POLICY MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID-19

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The GoP's approach to COVID-19 pandemic outbreak focuses on preparation, containment and communication (Government of Palestine, 2020):

- Preparation: mobilization of health professionals and facilities across the West Bank, equipped with training and the necessary protective gear, medical supplies, and medicines.
- Containment and suppression: testing, and quarantine measures and restrictions on citizen movement.
- Public health outreach: a coordinated communication campaign that relays public health, situation updates and government guidelines to citizens via national, local and social media;
- Transparency measures: daily briefings.
- Regional coordination: coordination of COVID-19 response with Jordan and Israel.

### Lockdown measures

Since 5 March 2020, when the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed, the GoP acted decisively to stem its spread, announcing a state of emergency that lasted until 25 April 2020 and imposing lockdown and curfew measures. Gatherings, in all forms, were prevented and all schools, universities and colleges were closed, as were restaurants, cafes and all tourism-related activities in the West Bank. A decision was also taken to close off the city of Bethlehem, the epicentre of the first wave of Palestinian COVID-19 infections. Movements between governorates in the West Bank were restricted, while Gaza crossings were completely prohibited, except in humanitarian cases. On 22 March, restrictive measures were intensified, limiting the movement of citizens and restricting commercial activities, while still allowing goods to flow into the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The banking sector continued to work on a part-time basis to ensure continued cash flow, especially for Palestinian companies, and to enable citizens to meet their basic expenditure needs. The lack of Palestinian control over crossings to Israel and in Area C limited the GoP's ability to control the movement of workers to and from the West Bank to Israel.

On 25 May, the GoP declared the end of the two-month lockdown and lifted all movement restrictions in the West Bank. Palestinian checkpoints in the West Bank were removed. Mosques, churches and shops reopened, and local transportation started to work normally. Government offices, including courts and ministries, reopened. However, wearing masks, physical distancing and hygiene measures were still mandatory in public and at the workplace. Cafes and restaurants continued to operate, offering take-away and delivery services only. At universities and schools, only administrative staff were allowed to be on the premises.

In the meantime, while most movement in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was being relaxed, a spike in cases (dubbed the 'second wave') throughout June led to renewed restrictions, including on access from Israel to West Bank and Gaza. The resurgence of cases forced the GoP to impose selective closures and lockdown measures, especially in governorates classified as

COVID-19 hotspots. GoP officials have indicated that a complete closure will be imposed on any locality that experiences a surge in positive cases.

On 4 August, following the Eid al Adha holiday, a further 30-day extension of the lockdown across the entire West Bank was announced, accompanied by the relaxation of certain restrictions to encourage economic recovery, including the gradual reopening of food markets. Coffee shops, restaurants, sports clubs and gyms were permitted to re-open at 50 per cent capacity during weekdays, subject to safety measures. On weekdays, there is a night-time curfew from 12 a.m. to 7 a.m., and a weekend lockdown from Thursday 9 p.m. to Sunday 7 a.m., with the exception of pharmacies, bakeries and supermarkets. The prohibition on public gatherings, including weddings and funerals remains in force (OCHA, 2020a).

On 4 August, the Israeli authorities allowed Palestinian labourers with valid permits to enter Israel through official terminals and to remain in Israel until 27 August. Their employers are required to provide them with health insurance and adequate lodging and to ensure that they adhere to the safety measures decreed by the Israeli Ministry of Health are followed (OCHA, 2020a).

The GoP called on all Palestinian labourers in Israel to comply with safety regulations and to refrain from commuting between their homes and workplaces. However, following its decision to halt security coordination with the Israeli authorities in response to Israeli government threats to annex parts of the West Bank, the GoP removed the checkpoints it had deployed on key routes used by labourers and is no longer monitoring their movement (OCHA, 2020a).

## **AGRIFOOD POLICY MEASURES TO RESPOND TO THE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS**

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### **What are the major measures (in place or expected) to be enacted aiming at the food system directly?**

The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) worked on guaranteeing access to farms and markets as well as continuity of international trade. The Ministry of National Economy (MoNE) periodically checked that staple food was available.

Food production and processing, bakeries and groceries were exempted from lockdown measures. The movement and the activity of agrifood workers has been, in principle, allowed throughout the crisis subject to permits qualifying those carrying them as agrifood workers and the maintenance of physical distancing and hygiene measures. However, weekly retail agricultural markets in West Bank and Gaza Strip were closed for two months and only started reopening – on a part-time basis – in early June. The gradual reopening of markets was later interrupted and, in July, movement restrictions and lockdown measures were re-imposed in response to the second wave of the virus.

In an effort to sustain production and secure availability of fresh products the additional government actions included the following:

- The MoA distributed 1 million vegetable seedlings for home gardening across the West Bank during April.
- In Gaza, the MoA distributed fodder and fertilizers to farmers and poultry (broilers) breeders with a total value of USD 1 million.
- The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) is distributing e-vouchers (USD 10.3 per capita) to 65 000 beneficiaries in the west Bank and Gaza Strip each month to be used for food

purchases during the period April to July 2020 (see sub-section 2.b: ‘support through cash based transfers’).

#### Measures by non-governmental actors:<sup>4</sup>

Food security-related activities are implemented by the 16 partners of the Food Security Sector<sup>5</sup> and include:

- providing households with seedlings, seeds, fertilizers and compost to support homestead food production: 38 955 beneficiaries were selected, on the basis of family size, from households that lost their source of income due to COVID-19;
- purchasing locally produced and processed agrifood commodities from small farmers, women’s associations and women’s clubs, and distributing them to needy and affected families: a total of 44 125 beneficiaries.

#### What additional policy measures are in place or expected to mitigate the effect of the crisis on vulnerable groups and their livelihoods?

Local authorities provided cash assistance to poor families in immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis. The MoSD distributed one time immediate cash payments (USD 100) to 100 000 poor families in the Gaza Strip. The Food Security Sector:

- provides cash-based transfers (CBT) to vulnerable non-refugees (elderly, people With disabilities and pregnant and lactating women) as well as electronic food voucher top-ups for non-refugees that receive regular CBT assistance: 45 000 beneficiaries have been reached so far (implemented by the MoSD; see above);
- provides food assistance to people in need in quarantine centres, including Palestinian refugees in in refugee camps: 13 430 beneficiaries;
- distributes electronic food vouchers and food baskets to vulnerable refugee households in the West Bank: 15 068 beneficiaries;
- other types of food assistance (e.g. food parcels): 67 839 beneficiaries.

Agriculture, together with the informal sector and enterprises led by women, are considered among the most likely affected sectors. The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) will target fragile private businesses, through cash and non-cash incentives support, the development of alternative work modalities, risk management plans, and workplace preparedness and compliance with safety and health measures. At an individual level, activities will target marginalized groups of women in the labour force, including the working poor, informal workers, women’s’ association and cooperatives, workers in settlements, women with disabilities, etc. The UNCT will also contribute monitoring and advocacy to promote equal access to support programmes for women, youth, small business owners, and other potentially disadvantaged or marginalized groups. Critically, the UNCT will ensure the continued functioning of food production and supply chains, reactivating investment and restoring operating capital.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed list of activities by topic (e.g. health, food security, etc.), please refer to the online OCHA 5w portal using the following link: <https://bit.ly/35wWepl>

<sup>5</sup> Created in December 2012, the Food Security Sector (FSS) brings together UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations on an equal footing. FSS members commit themselves to: “striving to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action, based on an ethical obligation and accountability to the populations we serve; acknowledging diversity as an asset of the humanitarian community and recognizing the interdependence among humanitarian organizations; being committed to building and nurturing an effective partnership.” (<https://fscluster.org/state-of-palestine/about>).

### **How is the government funding the measures described above?**

The UNCT has observed that the COVID-19 emergency has created an unprecedented fiscal crisis for the GoP (UNCT, 2020). The GoP's monthly revenues have fallen to the lowest level in at least two decades due to the collapse of domestic economic activity and external trade. Ongoing disputes over the monthly transfer of Palestinian clearance revenues by Israel had already severely impacted the government's cash flow.

The restrictions on policymaking suffered by the GoP, stemming from its lack of sovereignty, imply that it cannot rely on tools that other countries use to access financing, such as issuing bonds and increasing external borrowing. To maintain basic service delivery, the only available option is to postpone non-essential expenditures and reprioritize spending to allow social assistance to be provided to the most vulnerable families and critical liquidity support to be provided to SMEs, while maintaining priority public services. If such measures are applied, fiscal savings by the GoP could reach USD 590 million, reducing the financing need to USD 1.4 billion. However, actions by the GoP alone will not be enough to cover fiscal needs, and more drastic delays in public spending would be harmful, given the impact that public spending has on driving the economy (UNCT, 2020). If the donor community is unable to provide additional resources, the GoP will be forced to severely cut spending, affecting basic service delivery that can only result in an even deeper economic contraction. Ultimately, the lack of additional financing would also force the GoP to scale back medical and social expenditures in response to the COVID-19 crisis. As the World Bank has observed, there are likely to be severe implications for the livelihoods of vulnerable households, the depth of the recession, and the speed with which the economy will emerge from the COVID-19 crisis (UNCT, 2020).

## **IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS ON MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM**

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### **What are the immediate effects of the crisis and of the different sets of measures on agrifood systems?**

Following short term disruptions due to restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19, markets along national agrifood supply chains have eventually, overall, stabilized. However, the full impact of COVID-19 on food security in Palestine is not yet known.

A report by the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS, 2020) anticipates losses in the agriculture and livestock sector ranging between 5.1 to 6.2 percent during 2020. Economic forecasts by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics predict that losses in agriculture, forestry and fishing will be about USD 200 million, compared with a baseline scenario of no pandemic for 2020 (a 14.7 value addition percentage loss in the pandemic scenario for 2020 compared to the value of 2019 and a 17.6 loss compared to the pre-COVID-19 expectations for 2020) (PCBS, 2020).

Table 1. Crisis transmission mechanisms in the Palestinian agrifood system



COVID-19 outbreaks: immediate constraints	Consequences	Specific effects on food systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ restrictions on movement</li> <li>→ generalized risks and concerns for health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ diversion of public budget to health and social protection measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ limited public support to keep food system alive and maintain levels of agricultural production</li> </ul>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ economic relationships/markets operate with unprecedented limitations due to health risks and uncertainties</li> <li>→ reduced economic activities</li> <li>→ job losses</li> <li>→ drop in household purchasing power</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ reduced food consumption and higher food insecurity levels</li> <li>→ purchasing power erosion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ higher levels of vulnerability and food insecurity</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ weakening demand for agrifood products</li> <li>→ reduced supply of domestically-produced agrifood products</li> <li>→ potential risk of food unavailability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ widening gap between farm gate and consumer prices</li> <li>→ higher cost of inputs</li> <li>→ reduced margins for farming/agricultural production</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ liquidity shortage in the financial system</li> <li>→ limited or no formal credit and suspension of informal credit (at producer and consumer levels)</li> <li>→ only cash payments accepted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ reduced input availability (labour, pesticides, fertilisers, feed and fodder, seedlings, ...)</li> <li>→ reduced availability of working capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ reduced production capacity for subsequent seasons unless savings/stocks of inputs are available (n.b. generating a vicious circle with liquidity crunch)</li> </ul>

Table 2. Economic forecast for Palestine, 2020

Indicator	2019	Baseline scenario for 2020	Scenario with three more months of pandemic	Losses in 2020 (difference between baseline scenario and pandemic scenario)	Percentage of change in normal status (baseline scenario for 2020 compared to 2019)	Percentage of change in pandemic scenario for 2020 compared to 2019
<b>Gross domestic product (GDP) components by expenditure side</b>						
GDP	15 764	16 137	13 638	-2 499	2.4	-13.5
Final consumption	17 310	17 746	16 409	-1 337	2.5	-5.2
<b>Economic activities</b>						
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1 092	1 131	931	-200	3.7	-14.7

Note: amounts in USD millions and percentages

Source: PCBS, 2020. Data at constant prices (base year 2015)

The full impact of COVID-19 on food security in Palestine is not yet known. However, as the crisis stretches into months and the number of cases continues to rise, it is clear that the pandemic, and the measures in place to control its spread, will have a major impact on vulnerable individuals and food system stakeholders, from producers to processors, marketers, transporters and consumers. Small and marginal producers have been already affected by the reduced demand for their produce combined with unprecedented challenges in securing production inputs and accessing credit and markets. Furthermore, despite the stabilization of the food markets, an increase in acute and chronic food insecurity and malnutrition could be expected for already vulnerable categories of the population as a result of reduced economic activity and associated reductions in employment, incomes and access to food. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Office for West Bank and Gaza Strip has been surveying a panel of key informants on a weekly basis, since late March, named “COVID-19 impacts on the Palestinian food system: Evidence from small and marginal producers”. The panel includes small and marginal farmers, herders, fishers, traders and representatives of cooperatives. This exercise, although not statistically representative, has been useful for monitoring the perceptions of key stakeholders on the impact of the pandemic on the Palestinian agrifood system.

The FAO survey has shown that smallholder farmers and herders have been particularly affected by the reduced demand for their produce. The survey determined that the disruption of informal credit arrangements, lack of inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, seedlings, machinery spare parts, fodder, feed, veterinary medicines) and their increasing prices (above pre-COVID levels) when available, were considered as serious consequences of the measures put into place to contain the spread of the virus.<sup>6</sup> This was particularly problematic for herders, who had to deal with fodder unavailability (or at best the availability of low-quality fodder) from early March until June. Some herders reported that their sheep were not reproducing because of nutritional deficiencies. A number sold their female sheep to cover production costs, while others traded lambs for fodder.

Respondent producers reported that input-driven production cost increases, together with declining crop quality and prices, and low demand (see below), were harming the profitability of their activities. Some producers have had to interrupt production because they could not afford the cost of inputs. The increase in production costs also were due to the need to comply with hygiene and physical distancing measures. Others chose to reduce their production or to produce only for self-consumption or local sales. Processing has been taking place at levels below production capacity and the marketing of produce has been limited by market closures and movement restrictions.

Informal marketing and credit arrangements, which characterize most small-scale producer transactions in Palestine, have been disrupted by the risk and uncertainty generated by the pandemic and transactions are on a cash-only basis. Some exceptions emerged when input providers and traders started to face liquidity constraints themselves. However, producers who were able to access informal credit to pay for inputs, albeit conditional on price mark-ups, reported being overwhelmed by debt exposure and fears for the sustainability of their businesses. Finally, despite exemption from movement restrictions – subject to permits – agricultural production has been affected by a shortage of labour, due to fears of contagion or lack of acceptance of permits, and/or lack of transportation.

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<sup>6</sup> In Palestine, basic agricultural production inputs are imported from Israel rather than produced or manufactured locally, especially agricultural fertilizers, seeds of all kinds, and the most important livestock feed. Imports of these goods and materials are subject to international trade, movement and logistics restrictions.



These findings confirm UNCT fears that Palestinian food security could be significantly affected by the pandemic (UNCT, 2020). Small producers and cooperatives have been particularly affected. Some have sold at lower than expected profit margins or even below break-even. As noted, others have decided to postpone production. Herders and dairy producers that cannot graze or sell their livestock or diversify their dairy production towards less perishable products have suffered serious losses.

Low market demand has been reported since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, especially for fresh products. Producers and traders associate decreased demand to movement restrictions, closure of restaurants and hotels, reduced household income and general concerns around the possible consequences of an economic downturn. Poultry and livestock producers have faced low demand since March 2020. The sales of dairy products have faced a prolonged downturn as well. Herders and traders reported falling sheep prices due to a virtually non-existent demand.

Traders have found it necessary to reduce the volume and prices of their purchases, while producers report profit losses and a widening gap between wholesale and retail prices. Furthermore, some FAO survey respondents observed that local products suffered competition from Israeli products, which were available in large quantities. In particular, the poultry market was reported to be suffering from an excess supply of Israeli products at lower prices than local production. Agrifood exports have been massively affected and are currently at a fraction of the levels before the COVID-19 pandemic. Herb producers and traders were particularly hard hit as movement restrictions occurred during the peak of the trading season.

With the easing of movement restrictions during June 2020, there have been signs of improvement. However, the requirement to comply with physical distancing, health and sanitary measures, as well as an enduring low demand, have kept production below its full potential. The resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the second half of June and the ensuing reinstatement of movement restrictions continued to keep production levels low. The risk and uncertainty characterizing the socioeconomic environment during the COVID-19 outbreak is also leading to cutting on investments in expansion and diversification of activity and harmful risk-coping strategies, including returning to subsistence agriculture, deferring maintenance of equipment and assets, finding inferior input substitutes, and selling assets.

### Consumer prices

The FAO survey found that the price of the local food basket has continued to rise during the crisis. Respondents reported price increases, particularly for poultry, meats, eggs, and dairy, and high prices for staples, including wheat and flour, rice, vegetables, and fruits. It should be noted that these impressions are not fully confirmed by data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), since the national consumer price index (CPI) tended to decline during the first half of 2020, overall and for most of the surveyed food products. March is an exception when CPI was driven by increases in the price of dried vegetables, potatoes and other tubers, chicken, short grain rice, eggs and fresh fruit. In July there were also recorded increases in the prices of dried vegetables, potatoes and other tubers, eggs and fresh fruit.

The discrepancy between the FAO survey and the PCBS data on food prices could be due to face that FAO recorded the perceptions of individuals, while PCBS relied on sales outlets to provide the prices of their products. The discrepancy could also be evidence of market fragmentation negatively affecting rural areas, as the FAO respondents were located in rural areas, while the PCBS sale outlets of reference were mainly in urban areas.

### Market functioning

Market closures, decreased demand, requests for cash-up-front payments, limited credit availability have been negatively affecting the volume of transactions.

Herders have reported difficulties in selling perishable dairy products and have switched to longer shelf life products (stone yoghurt), if possible. However also such products could remain unsold and accumulate. Herders, lacking fodder and with no access to grazing pastures and unable to sell lamb or dairy products have opted for postponing fattening and allowing longer suckling time.

Smallholder poultry farmers and herders have been suffering serious losses as some had to sell below break-even due to very low demand levels (for lamb, at times, the demand has been reported as almost non-existent).

Notably, some farmers have been converting their production for self-consumption and sell only within nearby villages, while farmers organized in cooperatives managed to sell directly to retailers.

### Other stressors and shocks

In early March, according to the MoA, a windstorm caused losses of more than USD 1.9 million to the agriculture sector (1.2m and 0.7m in the West Bank and Gaza Strip respectively). Movement restrictions limited the support provided to farmers. During May, a heatwave disrupted production and trade opportunities, since produce easily perishes at wholesale transaction level. By the end of June, due to the threat of Israel annexation of parts of the Jordan Valley, the coordination between the Palestinian and Israeli civil administration had been suspended, disrupting, inter alia, the issuance of permits for the movement of goods and people across Israeli borders and checkpoints, with negative effects on agriculture production and trade. The economic slowdown exacerbated the GoP's earlier decision to stop accepting the clearance revenues<sup>7</sup> that Israel collects on its behalf, resulting in the non-payment of May salaries to most public employees and only partial payment of salary since.

## What are the immediate effects of the health and economic crises and the different sets of measures on people's livelihoods, (acute) food insecurity and malnutrition status, and future prospects?

### Loss of jobs and employment

The MoSD has received 130 000 applications from people that that have fallen below the poverty line due to COVID-19 and are in need of assistance. The applications are being evaluated to determine whom to classify as newly vulnerable families (90 percent in the West Bank).

COVID-19 is likely to worsen an already challenging employment environment in Palestine.<sup>8</sup> According to UNSCO (2020), prior to the pandemic about 133 000 Palestinians – over 10 percent of the total Palestinian workforce – legally commuted to work in Israel, mostly for construction, agricultural and other low-skilled jobs. Notably, Israel classified many of these employees as

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<sup>7</sup> A major part of the revenue (60-70 percent) comes from the clearance revenues system, in which all taxes and revenues due at borders, seaports and by air on Palestinian goods and services are collected by the Israeli fiscal authorities on behalf of the GoP in return for a 3 percent administrative charge to Israel.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to COVID-19, the low economic growth trap in which Palestine is stuck was not creating jobs fast enough to keep up with a rapidly growing labour force. In particular, the unemployment rate, which reached 24 percent in the fourth quarter of 2019, and hyper-unemployment in Gaza at 45.1 percent, disproportionately affecting youth (69.3 percent) and women (57.3 percent), were already proving to be an underlying factor for poverty and food insecurity as highlighted by PCBS & FSS (2016).

"essential" workers and granted an estimated 40 000 permits for them to continue to work in Israel. On 4 May, Israel approved new regulations and enforcement guidelines obliging employers to provide medical insurance and appropriate accommodation for these Palestinian workers during their stay (UNSCO, 2020; Cohen, 2020). This left 93 000 individuals (7 percent of the total Palestinian workforce) without permits and, as a result of movement restrictions due to COVID-19, likely to become unemployed.

There are also concerns regarding the return of the labourers to the West Bank, due to the limited capacity of the Palestinian authorities to register and monitor them. The unregulated movement of workers back and forth also reportedly continues on a significant scale.

### Negative strategies to cope with food insecurity

The FAO survey found that the purchasing power of respondents had declined as a result of household income erosion (largely due to the financial crisis of the GoP, which discontinued the payment of salaries), worsening food consumption levels, which triggered negative coping strategies, such as borrowing food, reducing the number of meals consumed or eating cheaper foods with potential consequences for nutrition levels. More nutritious food (fruits, meat, fish) are reported to be consumed less frequently. Notably, during March and April, as many as half of the respondents (well above pre-COVID-19 outbreak figures of around 30 percent) reported they had poor to borderline consumption levels and that they had to borrow food or skip meals. Meat was deemed mostly non affordable, while sugar and fats were consumed regularly.

### Which groups are most likely to be severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and the associated measures?

FSIN (2020) notices that, in addition to those already food insecure and in need of food assistance (i.e. 1.7 million people equivalent to 33 percent of the total population), 0.8 million people (17 percent of the population) are considered only marginally food secure and at risk of becoming food insecure if confronted with an additional shock or stressor. As such, depending on the severity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, that indeed is an unprecedented stressor, up to 50 percent of the population might risk becoming food insecure and in need of food assistance. This prospect is all the more likely due to Israeli plans to proceed with annexing part of the West Bank. Bedouins in Area C, and small and marginal farmers in the Jordan Valley,<sup>9</sup> are particularly at risk, due to further limits on their access to core resources, like land and water, which are the basis of their livelihoods.

The FAO survey found that the pandemic and the measures taken to address the crisis have had a serious impact on the production capacity of small producers, who, in some cases, have had to resort to destocking or to produce less at lower quality in marginal areas. It also determined that, once affected, small producers are not easily able to resume production at full capacity even after restrictions are lifted.

Extremely vulnerable groups such have found their livelihoods at greater risk. These include the female-headed households, pregnant and lactating women and children, who might not be able to receive essential healthcare because of the re-prioritization of health services. For families already living in poverty, COVID-19 response measures have made it even harder for them to maintain their livelihoods and income.

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<sup>9</sup> More than 75 percent of Area C households depend on agriculture and animal husbandry for some part of their income, with the greatest dependence on herding and farming reported for in the Jordan Valley (Hammami, 2019)

Rising unemployment and under-employment and decreasing purchasing power, due to the movement restrictions and economic slowdown associated with COVID-19, have serious consequences for poor and vulnerable communities in Palestine, who already faced conditions of protracted insecurity, coupled with continuing economic decline. Around 320 000 individuals work in the informal sector – most of whom support large households – and have very precarious employment conditions. The UNCT COVID-19 Development System Response Plan is based on the expectation that these individuals are likely to suffer the most from COVID-19 related restrictions (UNCT, 2020). In light of the fact that only 45.5 percent of the working age population (2.93 million in 2016) is part of the labour force (ILO, 2018) (young people and women are particularly absent) – further impairing the working conditions of up to 25 percent is likely to exacerbate COVID-19 impacts for themselves, their families and the economy as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

## FOOD FOR REFLECTION: LONG-TERM POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Future policy measures need to account for a high degree of uncertainty over the next 12 to 18 months, including the emergence of additional waves of the COVID-19, the need for further restrictive public health measures, the potential impact on the global, regional and local economies, the quality of Israeli-Palestinian relationship as a result of Israel plans for annexing Palestinian land, and the severity of the Palestinian economic, social, political, and security stresses. The situation in Gaza is fragile and may change at any time. The FAO Office in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs) has identified a set of problems, responses and interventions needed to keep the food system alive, as shown in the following table.

Table 3. Problems, responses and proposed interventions

Problem (s)	Response	Interventions (medium to long term-oriented in bold)
Measures restricting movement of people impedes access to farmland, agrifood processing facilities and markets.  Measures restricting movement of goods disrupts food availability, income and incentives of food producers.	Secure smooth circulation of people and goods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor restrictions on movement of food, food production inputs, food producers and traders.</li> <li>• Define measures that reconcile the need to protect public health with ensuring adequate food availability for all.</li> <li>• Identify needs and vulnerabilities of small producers and processors and formulate feasible responses in coordination with relevant government and on-government actors.</li> <li>• Promote innovative marketing modalities that minimize consumers' movement while ensuring adequate access to food (e.g. e-marketing, delivery services, community-based wholesale/retail centers).</li> </ul>
Essential food production support services for farmers, herders, processors, marketers and consumers, including veterinary services, plant health and food safety services, are not	Secure timely delivery of public services to sustain production and distribution of safe food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Strengthen MoA and MoH food microbial contamination surveillance, sampling and testing, and inspection.</b></li> <li>• Mount an awareness campaign to inform practices and behaviours of farmers, herders, processors, traders, and</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Notably, according to UNSCO (2020), although they are typically paid in cash, lack health and unemployment insurance, workers compensation, and pensions, informal workers in Israel and the settlements, drive a significant part of the economy of the West Bank due to their higher wages, accounting for perhaps one-third of all consumer demand.

Problem (s)	Response	Interventions (medium to long term-oriented in bold)
<p>fully functional or not adequately adapted to COVID-19-related challenges.</p>		<p>consumers to deal with COVID-19-related challenges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reinforce the national Sanitary and Phytosanitary System’s capacity to ensure food hygiene in processing storage and transport and guarantee occupational health for farmers, herders and fishers</b></li> <li>• Deliver in-kind and technical support to small-scale food processors (including women and women’s cooperatives) to improve the quality, safety and shelf life of their produce.</li> </ul>
<p>The increased risk of doing business impedes producers’ access to inputs as suppliers require cash up front and no longer accept informal credit arrangements.</p> <p>Reduced access to inputs threatens production and the availability of fresh food in the coming months. It also impacts income of small and marginal producers.</p> <p>Marginal, extremely vulnerable people, such as women-headed households in in Gaza find their livelihoods at greater risk</p>	<p>Secure availability of inputs and capital.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide essential production inputs to small scale farmers, herders and fishers (animal feed and shelters, fertilizers, seeds and seedlings, green house covers, etc.)</li> <li>• <b>Support small scale food processors – especially women’s cooperatives and associations – to improve the quality, safety and shelf life of their produce.</b></li> <li>• <b>Promote the adoption of innovative marketing modalities to mitigate impact of movement restrictions on access to food and incomes, e.g. e-marketing, delivery services, community-based wholesale/retail centres.</b></li> <li>• Support homestead and community-level food production by the most vulnerable people.</li> </ul>
<p>Inadequate awareness results in zero allocation of humanitarian resources to secure essential availability and access to food (especially fresh food) during the coming months.</p> <p>No effective planning and coordination of interventions.</p>	<p>Advocate for emergency support and ensure better coordinated intervention by humanitarian and development actors.</p>	<p>To cope with an increased demand for critical information and coordination functions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harmonize monitoring and analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on food chain dynamics.</li> <li>• Develop and disseminate timely information, including regular situation reports.</li> <li>• Coordinate the formulation of joint needs assessments; consolidate and circulate results of assessments by individual actors.</li> <li>• Collect and analyse information on crisis response by different actors and ensure effective coordination of intervention design and implementation.</li> <li>• Develop and disseminate evidence-based advocacy information to strengthen collective commitment and funding to preserve the food system.</li> <li>• Define and facilitate capacity development activities for food chain actors.</li> <li>• Ensure intersectoral coordination.</li> </ul>

## What are the implications for the humanitarian and development community in the medium-term?

The traditional split between humanitarian and development interventions is showing its limits in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in Palestine. In a context of protracted political and humanitarian crisis, increasing needs and vulnerability and donor fatigue, the arguments for streamlining humanitarian, development and peace efforts are all the more persuasive.

The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)<sup>11</sup> for the Occupied Palestinian Territory over time has allocated less funding to livelihood support in the food security sector. The recent trend (2016-2019) shows a decline in financing from USD 159.40 in 2016 to USD 143.10 in 2019. This is distributed unevenly between delivery mechanisms, with a relatively stable financing for food access (direct/voucher schemes), and more volatile financing for cash for work and livelihoods support. Livelihood support is most poorly financed sub-sector of the HRP's food security sector, receiving between 3 to 7 percent, depending on the year, with 2019 at its minimum.<sup>12</sup>

Support for livelihoods is virtually non-existent in the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. However, protracted measures to control the spread of the virus reinforces the importance of protecting people's livelihoods. The limited space given to livelihoods in the Occupied Palestinian Territory COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan has precluded urgent humanitarian interventions that could have reduced COVID-19's impact on vulnerable groups such as Bedouins and marginal farmers and fishers, preventing their increased dependency on food aid and other humanitarian assistance.

In the medium to long term, it will be key to include building resilience among the strategic objectives of the HRP for 2021; as has been noted by key informants to the FAO survey that, once compromised, it is difficult for small farmers to return to their pre-COVID-19 production capacity. Likewise, in the face of the disruption of the informal credit system, which paralyzed transactions in the food system, livelihood support interventions will be crucial to keeping the system alive.

With the prospects growing for a second wave of COVID-19 infections, and as efforts get underway to prepare the HRP 2021, which will address the impact of COVID-19, given the limited financial resources available, especially to the government, the international community should be ready to intervene with adequate livelihood interventions to avoid a further reduction and disruption of the productive capacity of small producers in the agrifood system.

### United Nations response

The UNCT in Palestine has prepared a COVID-19 Development System Response Plan. The document proposes a framework for organizing the development work over the next 12 to 18 months to address the long-term socio-economic impacts of the crisis. The framework includes five sectors for targeted interventions by UN agencies: health, social protection, governance and basic services, education, and livelihoods and economic recovery. The plan identifies human rights, gender, and youth as critical priorities that cut across all five sectors. The work will be carried out in cooperation with the government, development partners, civil society, the private sector and international agencies.

The UN plan will strengthen the capacities of government authorities to adopt policies targeting the informal and export sectors. The UNCT will deliver cash-for-work and income support schemes to

<sup>11</sup> The humanitarian community in the Occupied Palestinian Territory has developed a strategic plan for the Occupied Palestinian Territory every year since 2003. <https://www.ochaopt.org/hrp-2020>

<sup>12</sup> Calculations on the basis of OCHA Financial Tracking Service: <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/171/summary/2020>

the most vulnerable people, including refugees, informal producers, and informal workers, and will finance interventions to restore essential production capacities of vulnerable households. The UNCT will target fragile private businesses and sectors, such as hospitality, transportation, and agrifood sectors, through cash and non-cash incentives, the development of alternative work modalities, risk management plans, and workplace preparedness and compliance with safety and health measures. At an individual level, activities will target marginalized groups of women in the labour force. The UNCT will also contribute monitoring and advocacy around equal access to support programmes for women, youth, small business owners, and other potentially disadvantaged or marginalized recipients. Critically, the UNCT will ensure the continued function of food production and supply chains, reactivating investment and restoring operating capital.

## INFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

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### Information

The fragile condition of Palestinian smallholders is continuously subject to shocks on top of the protracted crisis condition in which they 'normally' live. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restriction measures to address it are proof of how much these can negatively affect the livelihoods of small producers in the Palestinian agrifood system. Building on the experience of the FAO survey exercise it would be useful to develop a monitoring tool that could regularly account for the impacts of shocks and stressors on the Palestinian agrifood system.

Furthermore, while food insecurity is measured at national and subnational levels, there is no representative survey for vulnerable communities, such as Bedouins, herding communities and small farmers in Area C, despite evidence that these communities have suffered levels of food insecurity that are similar to those in Gaza.<sup>13</sup> Information on these and other populations that are vulnerable to food insecurity and malnutrition is urgently needed.

### Governance

Governance issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be separated from the intrinsic inadequacy of the policy space (and policy effectiveness) in Palestine. The degree of manoeuvre for almost any activity, including policymaking, is limited by the restrictions and risks associated with the occupation. Life in Palestine is constrained by restrictions on access to resources and the movement of people and goods and restrictions on productive activities. Above all, the restrictions on government policymaking stemming from its lack of sovereignty affect everything else.

The Palestinian Government has no control over its borders – land, air or sea – which, together with the presence of numerous checkpoints in the West Bank, implies deficiencies in the import and export logistics chain. The government has no control over its customs revenues; it is not responsible for the distribution of energy sources or water; it cannot issue import/export licenses or host technical staff without Israeli permission. Revenues come mostly (60-70 percent) from the clearance revenues system, where all taxes and revenues due on Palestinian goods and

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<sup>13</sup> A significant indicator of the vulnerability of communities in Area C is the overall food insecurity (severe and moderate), which affects 26 percent of the population living there (elaboration on preliminary data available for the Socio-economic Food Security Survey of September 2018); this is three times the average food insecurity in the West Bank. As mentioned, studies report that food and nutrition insecurity among selected communities within these semi-nomadic populations can reach 61 percent (WFP, 2018). In Palestine, food insecurity is measured by the Socio-economic Food Security Survey (SEFSec), which identifies four categories of food security status: food secure, marginally food secure, moderately food insecure, severely food insecure.

services are collected by the Israeli fiscal authorities on behalf of the GoP in return for a 3 percent administrative charge. Ninety percent of public finances are allocated to recurrent expenditures, and over half of development finance is funded by development partners.

Since 2007, Palestine has also been internally divided. The control of Gaza by the de facto authority and the lack of national reconciliation inhibits the ability of the government to effectively provide services and governance to the Palestinian people. The progress on 'state-building,' which preceded Palestine's recognition as a non-member United Nations Observer State in 2012, has lost momentum in the face of a disabling political environment and stalled evolution to statehood. Parliamentary democracy is also at risk as 13 years have now passed without a national election (UNSCO, 2020).

Nevertheless, in recent years, the government undertook a strategic thinking process that led to the formulation of the National Policy Agenda 2017-2022 (NPA) and a series of related sectoral and cross-sectoral strategies that address the agriculture sector, such as the National Agriculture Sector Strategy and the National Nutrition Policy, Strategy and Action Plan, among others.

The Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (2017) and the Food Security Commitment and Capacity Profile, undertaken by the EU-FAO Food and nutrition security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) Programme in 2018, noted that the government's policy response to food insecurity and malnutrition was dispersed, imbalanced and not comprehensive (MAS, 2017). Policies and programmes were generally developed and implemented independently at the sectoral level by line ministries, without coordination nor alignment with a broader vision for food and nutrition security (FNS). The agricultural sector was hampered by an unclear distribution of responsibilities, powers and roles. In response, the MoA developed and submitted the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2030 and the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security 2020-22 (NIP) to the Council of Ministers in November 2019. The NFNSP and the NIP were formulated within the context of the Sustainable Development Goal 2 Working Group (SDG2-WG), with support from FIRST.<sup>14</sup>

In early 2020, shortly before the outbreak of COVID-19, stakeholders identified a series of issues that needed to be addressed to improve FNS governance in Palestine:

- **Fragmentation:** FNS coverage is dispersed across various ministries. Although the SDG2-WG is an appropriate body for discussing FNS issues, it has virtually no power to influence public policy. Fragmentation among responsible entities leads to dispersed, imbalanced and limited interventions. Data and information are stored in a number of non-communicating databases, rather than in a single information system.
- **Understaffing/lack of key capacities:** The Palestinian Government lacks the human and financial resources needed to address the existing FNS issues. Depending heavily on donor support, which has been shrinking over the past few years, the scarce human and financial resources allocated to FNS hamper the government's ability to respond effectively to people's needs. The allocation of staff to planning, monitoring and evaluation is largely inadequate. There is virtually no capacity for technical analysis capacity nor is FNS-relevant information available for decision-making and policy design.
- **Declining funds:** Palestine faces a declining trend in development assistance trend and a chronic funding crisis in humanitarian assistance. In the face of harsher, more immediate

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<sup>14</sup> The coincidence of the preparation of the NPA 2017-2022 and the launch of the UN 2030 Agenda presented the opportunity for the Palestinian Council of Ministers to establish twelve SDG working groups under the overview of the Prime Minister's Office to allow different partners to participate in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. The Ministry of Agriculture was assigned the leadership of the SDG2 Working Group.



life-threatening, crises in the region and beyond, the urgency of humanitarian intervention in Palestine is in doubt. Similarly, development efforts are questioned due to the limited sovereignty of the GoP.

The need to develop institutional capacities on FNS is clearly defined by the National Policy Agenda of the GoP and related strategies and is reiterated as a priority in the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy 2030. The COVID-19 crisis further highlights the necessity for a better integrated and coordinated system. As envisaged by the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security 2020-22, such a system would comprise:

- **A convening body:** The Ministry of Agriculture would be responsible for overseeing inter-institutional coordination and policy dialogues on issues addressed by the NFNSP;
- **A policy decision body:** The Food and Nutrition Security Council (FNSC) would be responsible for decisions at the interministerial level. It would be responsible for coordinating NFNSP/NIP 2020-22 interventions, oversee NFNSP implementation and related processes, and provide arguments (e.g., dossier preparation) for higher-level deliberative bodies. The FNSC will be responsible for ensuring: i) a smooth high-level political decision-making process around food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture, ii) interministerial coordination, especially for policies, strategies or actions relevant to more than one ministry; and iii) resource mobilization for development financing, within the government and, if necessary, with the development community.
- **A technical task force:** The SDG 2 Working Group would serve as the technical task force of the Food and Nutrition Council and, assisted by the Policy Unit of the MoA, will monitor and evaluate FNS-oriented interventions.

These three bodies will interact to fulfil the governance functions of the NIP 2020-22, including: i) monitoring the physical and financial progress for an evidence-based decision-making process; ii) reporting and communicating results and ensuring participation of all relevant stakeholders; iii) advocating for required policy or regulatory changes and facilitating private sector/NGO intervention or public resource mobilization to fill priority needs. The multistakeholder composition of the SDG 2 Working Group and the interministerial nature of the FNSC will ensure the inclusiveness of the process.

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