The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a severe global impact across the world and while some economies may have resources to better support their needs, many other countries are not in such a fortunate situation. Initial humanitarian support was firmly directed at the health dimensions of the crisis. However, food and nutrition security and associated agriculture and food systems livelihoods have rapidly risen up the priority chart.

This paper should not be read in isolation at the regional level as it links the global frameworks such as the United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)’s own contribution at the global level to actions identified and proposed at country level, to be coordinated through a broader multi-partner and multisectoral response.

There are a number of clear reasons why food security has attracted significant attention from national governments where agriculture and associated sectors are a major component of the economy and an even greater proportion of a country’s employment. This sector also demands the attention of international partners who wish to reduce the impact of what is perhaps the severest shock to urban and rural populations in more than 50 years. It is likely that the impact on food security and agricultural livelihoods of the most vulnerable populations will compound and intensify any health shock arising from the disease itself. In addition, millions more will experience hunger and malnutrition, figures are expected to increase over time. Particular attention should focus on women who hold a central role along food supply chains and food processing and associated industries. The impact affects lactating mothers, with increased child mortality and stunted growth. Millions more will lose their livelihoods in the agriculture sector, which is critical for the population at large in many of the least developed countries.

Some of the most food insecure countries in the world are in the Asia and Pacific region and these are the central focus of work at regional level. Attention has been drawn recently to rising levels of acute food insecurity in Afghanistan following a large-scale drought that comes in addition to the COVID-19 emergency. However, this is only one example of multiple colliding risks and across all countries food security is expected to further deteriorate over the coming months.
The targeted country action is built around FAO’s urgent global four-point plan designed to save lives and livelihoods through a set of critical interventions. Namely:

- **Data collection and analysis.** Pre-empting and responding to the impacts of the pandemic requires close monitoring and continuous on the ground assessment.
- **Continuity of essential operations for the most vulnerable.** FAO’s immediate priority is to ensure essential operations continue and to mitigate the pandemic’s impact on vulnerable people.
- **Safeguarding the proper functioning of market chains and the flow of agricultural products is a key determinant of food security and nutrition.**
- **Preventing transmission of the virus along the food chain is crucial to maintaining food supplies.**

These four priority intervention areas have been translated into country level actions targeting the most vulnerable. FAO’s Regional Offices support them directly through provision of technical and operational surge capacities. Field level actions in the six priority countries; Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Philippines (identified under the Humanitarian Response Plan), include the following:

### Ensuring availability and stabilizing access to food for the most food-insecure populations

- Distribute agricultural inputs through in-kind support including provision of seeds and crops to smallholder farmers and aquaculture inputs to fishers;
- Support to livestock owners through provision of nutritious feed, vaccinations and medication against high impact diseases;
- Provide female-headed households with poultry, small ruminants (goats/sheep) and kitchen gardening support packages;
- Technical support to reduce plant losses from pests;
- Cash-for-work programmes supporting agricultural livelihoods such as improved irrigation schemes, land and forestry rehabilitation etc., wherever possible targeted towards vulnerable groups such as migrants;
- Distribute inputs combined with unconditional cash transfers (cash+) to support COVID-19 vulnerable households whose livelihoods have been severely affected;
- Complement localized nutrition-sensitive food production, food utility and nutrition assistance to vulnerable households, to address widespread malnutrition that is set to exacerbate due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Support alternative income-generating activities, with a focus on women producers;
- Distribution of assorted vegetable seeds, home gardening kits and food storage equipment.

### Ensuring continuity of the food supply chain

- Monitor the food security and nutrition situation regularly, in close collaboration with United Nations (UN) partners;
- Distribute equipment and provide training to vulnerable farmers to improve farming practices, storage, processing, marketing capacities and reduce post-harvest losses;
- Provide packing material for cereal and vegetable crops, to reduce post-harvest losses in transportation to markets. FAO will also facilitate harvesting with support for farmers to plough and thresh cereal crops;
- Provide technical support to governments to design and implement stimulus packages (including interest free loans and grants) for vulnerable groups, especially female farmers;
- Facilitate farmers’ access to markets and establish direct links with consumers through electronic platforms so they can sell their produce more easily;
- FAO to ensure food safety and observance of quality measures to control the spread of the virus.

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improve mechanisms to develop farmer knowledge and skills on technical and business interventions to increase production, improve market functions, and enhance business interactions;
create market linkages between farmers/female producer groups, input suppliers and other market actors;
deliver more agricultural products to market by providing transport vouchers and promoting commercial relationships within different value chains;
promote integrated water resource management and water conservation;
capacity development for governments and other stakeholders on climate-resilient agriculture and water management practices;
support communities in restoring food processing facilities to reduce food loss and enhance agricultural productivity.

Ensuring no COVID-19 transmission risk along the food supply chain actors are not a transmission risk

implement awareness-raising campaigns on health and safety measures to reduce the risk of local virus transmission, targeting all actors in key agriculture and food system value chains;
promote standard operations procedures (SOPs) and protection standards among farmers, producers, transporters and agricultural suppliers, maintaining physical distance restrictions and involving as few people as possible;
raise awareness in rural farming communities using mobile technology, local radio broadcasts and networks of farmer field schools, to ensure vulnerable farmers have access to information to protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

Expected results

While the results are targeted at the country level, FAO’s Regional Offices, with support from FAO HQ in more specialist capacities of assessment and analysis, will support the delivery of results including coordination of technical and surge capacities in country programmes. The key results expected are:

1. improved real time assessment data and updated analysis for better monitoring of food security impacts facilitating timely, rapid, targeted end programme response intervention by governments and humanitarian partners to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and food system value chains and slow down the further deterioration in food security and nutrition across the region;
2. strengthened producers’ capacity in food insecure countries, to increase food production and income, store and transport produce and access markets safely;
3. continued production of food by vulnerable populations, in particular women, and access to food, mitigated levels of acute food insecurity from COVID-19 with any rises kept to a minimum;
4. food chain actors are well informed on reducing the transmission risk of COVID-19, through training, demonstrations, social messaging campaigns, market disinfection and similar activities.

Partnerships

FAO will draw on its global partnerships, including Rome based agencies and work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), working under the food security cluster at national level while collaborating directly with governments at all levels. Coordination with other UN agencies and sector leads will be critical with particular emphasis on working closely with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in providing inputs into the Humanitarian Response Plan and the World Health Organization (WHO) in developing and promoting safe actions along the food chain. Ministries of agriculture (including livestock and fisheries), forestry and natural resources and environment, disaster risk management and climate change agencies and ministries of social welfare and development will be key partners across the region. The greater the engagement and coordination the higher will be synergies and the overall impact of the results. Wherever possible collaboration will be encouraged with international financial institutions alongside traditional resource partners. Local partnerships with farmer and producers’ organizations (FPOs), non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and research institutions will be critical in delivery of effective and efficiently designed field programmes. Regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) will be key in promoting appropriate interventions and policy initiatives across the region. Finally, FAO will seek innovative and greater engagement with the private sector.
Programme links

The regional programme is aligned with global response programmes in the form of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan to COVID-19 and FAO’s global contribution to support targeted countries in the region while responding at national level according to each country’s priorities as identified by national government. The contribution is in support of the priorities of ASEAN and SAARC for the region.

Regional and country focus

The target countries are those already identified and targeted under the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Philippines as being the most food insecure in the region. However, it is important to note that the impact of COVID-19 may tip the balance for other countries of the region needing more direct attention and possible humanitarian support in the coming months.

At the regional level, the programme includes collaboration and coordination of support activities among regional partners with particular emphasis on the Regional Inter-Agency Standing Committee network of humanitarian partners.

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