From impact to transformation – improving the food supply chains in Kuwait in the context of COVID-19 pandemic – Kuwait policy note

KEY MESSAGES

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted people’s lives in every corner of the globe in an unprecedented manner. Movement restrictions and preventive measures in reducing the movement of goods, and services that rely on transportation, as well as labour migration, have induced overall disruptions in supply chains logistics. These factors have impeded the shipment of food and agricultural inputs and essentials, thus threatening food security and nutrition, particularly for the most vulnerable segments of population (FAO, 2020b).

- Extending the efficacy of logistics is critical (through essential information, regional transport networks, policy measures, and development short supply chains to extend shelf life of high-value and perishable products) as disruptions can cause adverse impacts on the quality of food, freshness, its safety, and can impede access to markets and affordability.
- Strengthening the institutional capacity of associations representing small agri-enterprises, and customizing financial stimulus packages to the needs of agri-enterprises is important, so as putting the resiliency consideration at the centre of the crisis mitigation plan as the small businesses comprised of farm enterprises, traders, food manufacturers, distributors and retailers, across food chains play a critical role in maintaining functioning food systems.
- Controlled environmental agriculture (CEA) become more important for delivering fresh, safe, traceable, nutrient-rich and healthy premium locally-produced fruits and vegetables.
- Sustainable development of aquaculture and livestock should be supported by focussing on competitiveness and value addition measures, packaging, and freezing storages or encouraging government purchases.
- Reviewing regulatory frameworks to promote e-platforms to connect farmers with producers and markets, boost the investments in digital physical infrastructure, and enhance human capital can play an important enabling role.
- Promoting healthy diets is essential and it is prominent to run awareness campaigns that advise all segments of society to maintain a nutritious and healthy diet, and to play a catalytic role.

In Kuwait, the supply of products to consumers was affected only moderately thanks to government competencies in maintaining the food supply alive during the crisis, despite imposing heavy costs.

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1 For more information, see FAO-launched policy brief series, presenting a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the pandemic’s impacts on food trade, food supply chains and markets but also people’s lives, livelihoods and nutrition. The collection of policy briefs can be found here.
The State of Kuwait has demonstrated strong commitment in curbing the virus and addressed the impacts on all sectors of society. Kuwait used variety of instruments and reduced risks associated with international markets. This ensured food availability for all by focusing on markets, consumers’ needs and preferences and most prominently mobilised the successful efforts of the private sector and civil society.

This policy brief is drawn out from three virtual consultations (webinars) organized by UN Resident Coordinator’s Office in Kuwait in collaboration with Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development (GSSCPD), Public Authority of Agriculture Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAF), Public authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN), United Nations Office for Projects (UNOPS) between May and July 2020. While some recommendations focus on issues in short-term, they are primarily targeting the policy level actions required for building resilience of the food systems to minimise the disruptions in supply chains in the long-term perspectives.

Planning logistics and transport
The efficacy of logistics is critical for the agri-food sector. Disruptions can cause adverse impacts on the quality of food, freshness, its safety, and can impede access to markets and affordability (FAO, 2020c). While prioritizing the health of consumers and those working in food value chains, the following measures are among the best practices that have been proven to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food value chain:

- gathering essential information to align measures and information related to logistical policy;
- prioritizing logistics to maintain and increase agricultural production and market access;
- supporting transportation;
- supporting food processors and retailers in particular SMEs;
- ensuring consumer access to foods; and
- promoting information technology to keep logistics.

Kuwait would benefit from regional transport and logistics networks, including Observatory on Border Crossings Status under COVID-19 in which ESCWA has addressed the efforts of the UN Regional Commissions, in cooperation with other International Organizations, to provide solutions, including standards, guidelines, metrics and methodologies. This would immediately help the government and business to keep transport networks and borders operational to facilitate the flow of goods and services, while seeking for greater opportunities to configure and tailor alternative supply chain networks.

Innovative, sustainable food cold chain management
It is crucial to develop shorter food supply chains and extend the shelf life of high-value and perishable products to cope with contingent COVID-19 pandemic and to promote sustainable food chain logistics from production to markets. The innovative Passive refrigeration system (known as PRS) offers practical applications across the food supply chain to save energy and weight losses of products in storage, extend the shelf life of produces and improve the quality of preservation.

Adjusting business models to sustain agri-food enterprises
The COVID-19 crisis is compromising agri-enterprises’ ability to continue business as usual and, in some cases, is threatening the survival of some firms beyond the crisis, particularly small
firms comprised of farm enterprises, traders, food manufacturers, distributors and retailers across food chains. These companies play a critical role in maintaining functioning food systems during the crisis.

Among various options that target a mix of ministries, public institutions, food industry associations, local business service providers and chambers of commerce, it would be key to strengthen the institutional capacity of associations representing small agri-enterprises, and customize financial stimulus packages to the needs of agri-enterprises.

Financial resiliency consideration should be placed at the centre of the crisis impact mitigation plan. The government authorities should leverage the critical role that these companies can play in maintaining functioning food systems during the crisis.

**Developing sustainable food systems**

Kuwait gives high priority to the importance of food security. However, the agricultural sector faces numerous challenges owing to severe scarcity of freshwater, land and harsh weather conditions, which creates significant restrictions on food security. Domestic food production is not in a position to cover local food demand, and Kuwait is import-dependent. There is a need for incentives for small-scale producers and creating a competitive environment.

By promoting R&D and technologies with higher water productivity and controlling environment constraints, increasing domestic production are possible. In recent years, the controlled environmental agriculture (CEA) has become ever more important in delivering locally produced fresh, safe, traceable, healthy premium fruits and vegetables (e.g. tomatoes, egg-plants, peppers, micro-herbs, berries, even crop carriers for medical components). Among challenges the CEA faces, however, include start-ups; highly diverse expertise from farming to high-tech engineering to banking; complex technical and financial engineering requirements, etc.

By creating enabling environment through improving policy landscape, promoting public–private partnerships and investing in technologies that focus on food loss and waste, water productivity, and built on value added sustainable water-energy-food nexus approaches, Kuwait would benefit from increased efficiency of its limited agricultural resources thus contributing to the food security and resilience.

New ideas, as well as comprehensive assessments of the agricultural sector and food system, are essential for Kuwait. In this regard, partnerships through engagement with universities, research entities, private sectors and government are pivotal in promoting knowledge exchange and consolidating relevant practices and technologies, thereby enabling the achievements of overarching goals. It is essential to prioritise efforts that target the entire range of the food system elements, focusing not only on production, but also on food handling, storage and processing, food trade and marketing, consumer demand, food preparation and preferences.

**Building resilience for fish and livestock supply chains**

In Kuwait, the annual supply of fish *per capita* is low and highly reliant on imports. While domestic production from fisheries has been in decline since the 1990s, aquaculture production is still

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2 Food systems encompass the entire range of actors, activities and biophysical and socioeconomic environments involved in producing, processing, distributing, regulating and consuming foods.
limited. Building resilience for the sector implies to protect the health and livelihoods of stakeholders (fisherfolks, fish farmers, fish processors and traders) through emergency measures during the crisis, and to invest in building a resilient sector over the long term. For capture fisheries, management measures should be implemented for exploited fish stocks, and illegal, unreported or unregulated fishing should be fought, as stated in the Port State Measures Agreement. To improve diet and nutrition of Kuwaiti people, sustainable aquaculture should be supported across food system, by focussing on value addition, supporting packaging and freezing storage, or encouraging government’s purchases. This is the same for chicken and livestock.

In the short-term, policy and regulatory supports are needed to control prices, reduce inflation on livestock commodities. Provision of cash transfers to milk collection centers and factories would increase purchasing power for fresh milk and processing long shelf-life products. For this, dedicating financial facilities or subsidies would compensate for loss of income, or support for additional expenses due to the pandemic. Long-term transformation would need to focus on diversification, markets improving supply chain bottlenecks, and investing in sustainable livestock production and biosecurity.

**Promote digitalisation in food systems**

The role of digital technologies is enormous to protect human, plant and animal health as contributing to data collection, analyses and information exchange towards increased efficiency in supply chains and trade processes. Digital platforms provide a unique opportunity to bring greater efficiency, transparency and traceability (FAO, 2018). Especially, efforts would benefit from blockchains verifying data,³ as basis for product development and quality. This, together with financing, will overcome the complexity of trade efficiencies, and insufficient traceability and transparency for food safety.

Connecting farmers to producers to markets is essential to develop food supply chains. E-commerce provides large benefits for farmers through greater access to markets, new customers, increased incomes and price transparency, financial inclusion, and reduced waste. The following policy actions would further support the digitalisation efforts:

- develop digital trade standards;
- review legal and regulatory frameworks to promote e-signature and digital documents;
- improve and invest in digital physical infrastructure;
- enable ecosystems needed for a fast and effective shift to digital trade by strengthening human capital through extension services, education, training, and promoting digital preparedness of all stakeholders; and
- facilitate public and private investments to support farmers and start-ups.

**Healthy diets and nutrition**

Issues of overweight and obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are receiving considerable attention and should be addressed within a thorough and cross-sectoral framework. The prevalence of obesity among adults and children, has been in rise in Kuwait, and is among the highest in the world (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2020). This has become a public health concern, alerting to an elevated risk of diet-related NCDs. People affected by obesity, diabetes and NCDs are at high risk from COVID-19 (FAO, 2020d).

³ Data sharing to integrate fast and secure communication and exchange between supply chain actors and authorities.
The lockdown directives to stay at home due to the pandemic, the risk of eating unhealthily have become higher. It is therefore essential to promote healthy diets across food systems focusing on awareness campaigns that advise all segments of society to maintain a nutritious and healthy diet.

**Improving biosecurity is more fundamental than ever before**

COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the need to prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to zoonotic diseases in areas where the next pandemic is likely to take hold. Preventing dangerous spills involves working with communities in high-risk hotspots. The 73 World Health Assembly Resolution on COVID-19 urges to strengthen collaboration using One Health approach to address pandemic threats and priority zoonotic diseases and to support national platforms focusing on emerging priorities.

**Working towards developing a stronger, coherent and transformative Food Security and Nutrition Strategy**

Kuwait aspires to set SMART short to long-term goals for the whole spectrum of the agricultural sector. The country requires a robust strategic plan to transform its food systems to achieve food security and stable food supply chain. This is a need for comprehensive solutions, careful consideration and understanding of the significant constraints to overcome the existing wide range of challenges, to list some, from adoption of capital-intensive technologies to product development, facilitating trade and diversifying supply sources and options, as well as linking SMEs and small farmers’ products to markets, etc.

The UN in Kuwait, through the expertise and collaboration from FAO, is involved with the Kuwaiti Government in national efforts on strategic planning for food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture. It stands ready to support Kuwait in any further efforts to developing a consensus-based Food Security and Nutrition Strategy, a policy-oriented document, that assesses the major drivers of food security, nutrition and sustainable agricultural development in the country; the realism and adequacy of the planned strategic directions; and programme domains that should be prioritised for implementation.

**REFERENCES**


FAO. 2020c. responding to the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on food value chains through efficient logistics. Rome.


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