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The impact of COVID-19 on food and agriculture in Asia and the Pacific and FAO's response

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has led to widespread economic distress throughout the region. The pandemic has had profound impacts on food systems, including food security and nutrition, food and livestock production (including upstream input and credit provision), fisheries, natural resource management, food safety, animal-to-human health risks, transboundary pests and diseases, food supply chains and regional food trade. National social protection systems have responded to these impacts throughout the region, helping to dampen the impacts on vulnerable people. National responses to COVID-19 have also highlighted the importance of creating robust statistical systems that exploit the full range of digital technologies for real-time data collection and analysis.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has responded to the crisis in a range of ways. It engaged with member countries and a wide range of partners to undertake rapid assessments in support of COVID-19 impact analysis, response and recovery. FAO's assessments included contributions to UN-led socio-economic impact assessments in support of national COVID-19 recovery plans targeting the most vulnerable groups: women, children, smallholders, migrant workers, indigenous groups and others. FAO also developed more than 50 policy briefs, 13 publications, several food policy tools, and real time data access mechanisms, covering a wide range of specific topics related to COVID-19.

FAO has reprogrammed its support and redirected its own financial and human resources to give priority to COVID-19 recovery assistance. FAO is also undertaking resource-mobilization efforts to scale up its support to Members on COVID-19 recovery under a corporate umbrella programme that targets global and regional priorities².

Suggested actions by the Regional Conference

- Support FAO in its work to continue developing, refining and building capacity of Members to collect and disseminate data and use targeted policy tools and instruments that guide efficient and effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the domains of food security and nutrition, livelihoods, ensuring continuing agricultural activities and minimizing food supply chain

¹ Rescheduled from 17-20 February, Thimphu, Bhutan

² <http://www.fao.org/partnerships/resource-partners/covid-19/en/>

disruptions especially to highly perishable items such as fish and aquaculture products that have shown particular vulnerability.

- Encourage FAO to continue the collection, storage, curation and dissemination of current, reliable age and sex disaggregated data related to food systems, nutrition and agriculture and livestock, to create a reliable baseline of data so that recovery and growth can be measured accurately.
- Promote trade policies harmonized with domestic food system strategies, built on diversified import sourcing, improved export opportunities and capacity, trade facilitation through digital innovations and stronger intra-regional trade coordination for stable and well-functioning food markets to support food security and nutrition
- Commit resources to leverage digital innovation, smart farming and enhanced digital literacy and services for farmers in order to rebuild food systems.
- Recognize that the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 are manifest even in countries in the region that have not suffered directly from the disease in terms of public health, and offer relevant and timely support to all affected Members.
- Design, expand and remove barriers to access to social protection schemes linked to food production and rural revitalization and targeting vulnerable groups including women, youth, labourers, migrants (local and international), indigenous groups and small scale farmers.
- Commit to integrating the perspective of gender equality in recovery plans and long-term development strategies, in response to the UN Socio Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA), to support the equitable access to and benefit of women and men to productive resources and services, income-generating opportunities and social protection, while ensuring women's representation and participation in decision-making.
- Support efforts to promote employment opportunities for vulnerable workers (in informal sectors; youth; in rural areas) including under public employment programmes, financial reliefs for smallholder businesses and include young agripreneurs in public investments to facilitate food systems transformation. Therefore, temporary compensation schemes, and other safety-nets measures should be extended to the informal workers and rural young women and men. Also, for all continuing to work in essential services along the agri-food supply chain, occupational safety and health should be guaranteed along with adequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE). Encourage resiliency by tasking FAO to support countries in creatively conceptualizing how the fisheries and aquaculture sector could be adaptive and resilient to future pandemics, and to develop and take advantage of opportunities for enhanced investments in sustainable natural resource management (NRM) for a more productive, greener and inclusive economic recovery.
- Call on governments to support the further development and implementation of FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme, including through voluntary financial contributions.
- Request FAO to expand its work in already established areas such as zoonoses, AMR, transboundary animal diseases, livestock food chains, food safety and natural resources management to include the impact of COVID-19 and risk reduction for future pandemics.

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Introduction

1. The virus that causes COVID-19 has infected over 3 million people in Asia and the Pacific (as of 7 August) and caused the death of more than 80 thousand. Attempts to control the virus's spread, along with fear on the part of the public, led to lockdowns and widespread economic distress. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that 2020 would be marked by the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression with a loss of USD 12.5 trillion of cumulative output. In addition, the impact of COVID-19 has had profound impacts on food systems and on the most vulnerable throughout the region.

2. FAO responded to the COVID-19 pandemic swiftly by setting up a COVID-19 rapid task force. This task force helped to redirect work plans and priorities to address countries' needs to respond to COVID-19. FAO has also developed tools and instruments, and mobilized its internal technical resources to provide timely policy guidance to Members to guide their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. FAO guidance covers the domains of food security, nutrition, livelihoods, ensuring continuing agricultural field activities and minimizing food supply chain disruptions. FAO also supported rapid COVID assessments in most countries of the Asia-Pacific region, including by providing guideline methodologies, financial support and technical back up. In implementing this work, FAO engaged with UN agencies, Rome-based Agencies (World Food Programme and International Fund for Agricultural Development), international financial institutions (e.g. World Bank, Asian Development Bank) and other partners for coordinated COVID-19 assessments (e.g. UN Country Team's socio-economic impact assessments) and reorientation of country support in line with COVID-19 related needs. More recently, FAO has developed an umbrella programme to mobilize additional financial resources to help countries address the challenges of COVID-19.³

COVID-19 Impacts and Responses within the Food System in the Region

Food Security and Nutrition

3. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a serious global economic downturn.⁴ Slowdowns and downturns result in job and income losses and other disruptions that often lead to increased food insecurity for vulnerable groups such as women, migrant and informal workers, youth, children and people with disabilities (PWD).⁵ The SOFI 2020 highlighted the unaffordability of healthy diets to millions and declining incomes will exacerbate the problem making food, particularly nutritious food needed for a healthy diet, less affordable for many more, especially the poor. Disruptions to and possible breakdowns of marketing, logistics and trading systems as well as shortage of labour to support agricultural production could make food unavailable in some locations at some times. Hunger and malnutrition are likely to rise. FAO projects the number of undernourished people to rise globally to between 83 million and 132 million in 2020 depending on the economic growth scenario⁶, and citing an estimated increase of 14.3 percent or an additional 6.7 million children suffering acute malnutrition due to the pandemic. The Director-General joined other heads of UN agencies in a call for action for nutrition in the face of this crisis.⁷

³ <http://www.fao.org/partnerships/resource-partners/covid-19/en/>

⁴ **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**. 2020. *World Economic Outlook* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 14 May and 28 July 2020]. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2020/01/weodata/index.aspx>

⁵ **FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO**. 2019. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns*. Rome, FAO. (also available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf>).

⁶ **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. (also available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/CA9692EN.pdf>).

⁷ Henrietta H Fore, Qu Dongyu, David M Beasley, Tedros A Ghebreyesus. Child malnutrition and COVID-19: the time to act is now. *The Lancet*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/>

4. An economic downturn is likely even in countries not directly affected by the virus. For example, Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have experienced few cases of COVID-19 at the time of writing. However, these countries are very dependent on tourism, which has been substantially diminished worldwide as a result of the virus's spread (The World Tourism Organization estimates a fall of 64 percent in international tourist arrivals for Asia and the Pacific). Consequently, the IMF projects that some of the largest economic contractions among the region's developing countries will occur in the Pacific, with declines in GDP of more than 3 percent in Fiji, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Pacific SIDS are also very dependent on food imports – these countries typically produce less than 65 percent of their dietary energy supply domestically.⁸ The economic contraction is also hitting at the same time as the tropical cyclone season. This combination of factors makes the Pacific SIDS highly vulnerable to food insecurity.⁹

Crop and Livestock Production (including upstream input and credit provision)

5. While the COVID-19 health crisis has not translated into a full-blown food crisis, disruptions in upstream food supply chains (including planting, crop management, harvesting, and marketing) have been widely reported in countries across the region¹⁰. This impact is particularly acute in supply chains for highly perishable foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and fish putting the quality of diets at high risk. Countries have taken many short-term measures to reduce the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on food supply chains, including the provision of financial and fiscal support, support for outputs, inputs and credit, and allowing labour and transportation movement related to agriculture and fisheries activities.

6. Rebuilding food systems starts from upstream crop production. It requires connecting farmers with input suppliers, information and service providers (including extension, credit and finance), leveraging digital innovations, smart farm technologies, enhanced digital literacy for farmers, and increased flexibility across supply chains. Where appropriate, increased mechanization and automation can also lessen labour constraints, as happened during COVID-19.¹¹ Promoting food production for local markets (short value chains), encouraging community-led agro-ecological approaches to local food production, and expanding small-scale home gardening and underutilized indigenous crops are other ways to improve food security and rebuild food systems to be more resilient. Enabling small farmers with digital technologies can also help improve the efficient use of inputs (fertilizer, water, energy) and lower environmental footprints (contributing to climate-smart agriculture). Rethinking agricultural policies post-COVID-19 requires coherent strategies that integrate technology investments, digital-literacy support, and improved trade logistics to enable robust farmer-input market linkages and farmer-market connectivity and traceability down the supply chain. Strengthening rural livelihoods will require the combination of social protection and social safety net interventions with measures to support food production while ensuring that occupational safety and health measures are put in place.

7. The effects of COVID-19 on the livestock sector are still largely unquantified, but current observations reveal disruptions to livestock value chains.¹² Poultry and cattle growers were particularly affected under COVID-19 lockdowns due to market closures, declining demand or loss of export

S0140-6736(20)31648-2 27 July 2020.

⁸ FAO. 2018. *Dynamic development, shifting demographics, changing diets*. Bangkok, Thailand. (also available at <http://www.fao.org/3/I8499EN/i8499en.pdf>). Thank you to Peter Warr for making this point.

⁹ FAO. 2020. *Small Island Developing States Response to COVID-19: Highlighting food security, nutrition and sustainable food systems*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8994en>

¹⁰ ADB briefs on food security in Asia and the Pacific amid the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/611671/adb-brief-139-food-security-asia-pacific-covid-19.pdf>)

¹¹ A webinar on impact of COVID-19 on agriculture in the Asia-Pacific region and role of mechanization (<https://www.unescap.org/news/impact-covid-19-agriculture-asia-pacific-region-and-role-mechanization>)

¹² FAO. 2020m. *Mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on the livestock sector*. Rome.

markets.¹³ Movement restrictions have led to a stoppage of livestock movement and trade, leaving many smallholder farmers in some countries unable to sell their livestock.¹⁴ These market restrictions have curbed pastoralists' access to pastures and overall farmers' access to markets, breeding materials and replacement stocks (e.g. day-old chicks and semen). Furthermore, rumours and misperceptions linking animal products to the transmission of COVID-19 have led to numerous drops in consumption of products of animal origin and to significant losses to the livestock sector across Asia.^{15,16}

8. Many farmers and herders were forced to liquidate their assets in order to meet their needs. Recovery response options can range from short-term emergency support to producers to avoid negative coping methods (selling of assets) to medium-term investments in market outlet designs and infrastructure in line with hygiene, safety, and health requirements to meet consumers' demands in a post-COVID-19 climate. Additionally, alternative marketing options to link producers to final consumers, including online or through e-commerce facilitated by investments in logistics (and cold chain structures), also emerged as urgent policy recovery options to transform the livestock agro-industry sector post-COVID-19.

Fisheries

9. Fish and fish products contribute to food security and are key components of a healthy diet. In Asia and the Pacific, millions of people are engaged in the primary and secondary sectors of capture fisheries and aquaculture. The livelihoods of these men and women were negatively affected during the pandemic.^{17,18} Measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 such as the ban on international and domestic travel, restriction on gatherings and festivities, and closure of food services, offices and schools have led to reduced demand for fish and fish products and a reduction in international trade. Migrants working on vessels and in processing plants have been unable to go back to their villages or their countries. In aquaculture, the supply of aquaculture inputs as well as the movement of labour was disrupted. Fish farmers have suffered losses because they cannot sell their harvests or had to sell at reduced prices.

10. The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for countries to rethink how the fisheries and aquaculture sector could be adaptive and resilient to eventual future pandemics. Among the strategies they could consider are strengthening domestic markets and the intra-regional market, and improving quality and safety, encouraging multi-stakeholder investment in services to fishers and fish farmers, enhancing human and social capital (e.g. entrepreneurial skills, organizing and strengthening fisher and fish-farmer organizations), and introducing social protection for all.

Resource Management under COVID-19

11. Multiple studies have shown that rampant deforestation, ecosystem degradation, and uncontrolled exploitation of wildlife can spread certain diseases to humans. In numerous parts of Asia and the Pacific, many ecosystems, including small streams, lakes, and wetlands, have been degraded beyond critical thresholds. Their continued degradation increases the likelihood of future spillover events. In addition, the region is now witnessing impacts that directly result from the human response to the pandemic, such as lockdowns, food market closures and associated urban-to-rural migration.

¹³ **FAO.** 2020. Rapid assessment to evaluate the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic on the poultry sector in Bangladesh. (also available at <https://fscluster.org/bangladesh/document/fao-ectad-rapid-assessment-evaluate>).

¹⁴ **FAO.** 2020i. Rapid assessment of COVID-19 outbreak on agriculture and food security in Cambodia: Policy responses. (also available at Internal document).

¹⁵ **FAO.** 2020e. Rapid Assessment: State of food and agricultural among herders & farmers in Mongolia during COVID-19

¹⁶ **FAO.** 2020i. Rapid assessment of COVID-19 outbreak on agriculture and food security in Cambodia: Policy responses. (also available at Internal document).

¹⁷ **FAO.** 2020. The effect of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture in Asia. Bangkok. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9545en>

¹⁸ **FAO.** 2020. How is COVID-19 affecting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8637en>

The lockdown phase in many countries coincided with the harvest season and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP), both of which are very labour-intensive. In India, for example, approximately 275 million people collect NTFPs such as tendu leaves and tree-borne oil seeds. At the same time, there has also been an uptick in deforestation during lockdowns, as well as increases in poaching, animal trafficking and illegal mining.¹⁹ In regions where local food markets have been closed and people are forced to return to villages, pressure on natural resources has increased considerably.

12. The COVID-19 recovery plans, under preparation for many countries, offer immense opportunities for enhanced investments in sustainable natural resource management (NRM). Such investments can create a more productive, greener and inclusive economic recovery, and transition towards a healthier and more resilient Asia and the Pacific. Potential avenues for investing in sustainable NRM include ecosystem restoration for increased productivity and resilience, specific support to the region's poor and marginalised who depend on sustainable NRM for their livelihoods, and establishing urban and peri-urban green spaces for general well-being. Sustainable NRM includes enhanced investments in natural resources that generate income and employment such as agroforestry and farm forestry to create durable assets and innovative digital approaches, including remote sensors to monitor and manage water resources.

Food Safety

13. FAO provided advice to countries through advisories on the incorporation of COVID-19 health measures within supply chains to ensure their continuous functioning. There is no evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted by food or its packaging and processing.²⁰ Therefore, growers, transporters, storage operators, processors, retailers, vendors and consumers could proceed with all operations without any apprehensions linked to food, of course conditional on them taking the necessary health protocols. Advice was provided on implementation of measures on farms; in transportation of fresh produce, labour and agricultural inputs; wholesale and retail markets and establishments; processing units; food services including app-based delivery services, and for consumers. Measures such as physical distancing, mandatory use of masks, frequent hand washing, regular temperature checks and frequent disinfection of surfaces are compelling new food-safety norms in Asia and the Pacific region and will have a positive impact on food safety. The strong advocacy and uptake of these practices inspired by the pandemic provides a springboard for greater adoption of Codes of Practices and standards from farm to fork.

14. Moreover, food safety is also crucial for ensuring uninterrupted agricultural trade flows, which is particularly important during this pandemic. However, limited capacities to comply with sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements, and poorly applied procedures for demonstrating compliance with food safety standards can become significant impediments to trade. As such, one of the seven focus areas of FAO's corporate Umbrella Programme is to raise resources and assist countries with what is likely to be a long recovery process.²¹ On food safety, this programme aims to support regional cooperation to improve regulatory oversight in agricultural value chains, promote the implementation and use of science based standards, and promote mutual recognition and harmonization of food safety systems.

Animal to Human Health (Zoonotic) Risks and Responses

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200518-why-lockdown-is-harming-the-amazon-rainforest>

²⁰ FAO and WHO. 2020. COVID-19 and food safety: guidance for food businesses [http://www.fao.org/3/ca8660en/CA8660EN.pdf]

²¹ FAO. 2020. Trade and food safety standards: Facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade during COVID-19 and beyond [https://bit.ly/39Ck3OB]

15. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, originated from an animal source, as do an estimated 60 percent of human infectious diseases.^{22,23} The current pandemic emphasizes the need to prepare for, prevent, detect, and respond to such diseases in areas where the next pandemic is likely to emerge and take hold.²⁴ The risk is highest where there is close interaction between wildlife and livestock or agricultural production and is often exacerbated where agriculture has encroached upon or put pressure on natural ecosystems. Any measures implemented or strengthened at country level to mitigate the risk of exposure of humans and animals to SARS-CoV-2 from susceptible wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals, should be based on the results of country-specific risk assessments and a critical review of local animal husbandry and marketing practices.²⁵

16. The disruption of public services specifically related to animal health/extension services is leading to interruptions in disease surveillance and control, including the delivery and application of vaccines and medicines. These interruptions increase the likelihood of the spread of new and ongoing outbreaks of (transboundary) animal and zoonotic disease epidemics, including African swine fever in East and Southeast Asia and the spread of lumpy skin disease in China and South Asia.²⁶ Closure of live animal markets in many countries means small-scale producers cannot sell their goods.²⁷

17. The success of post-pandemic recovery will also be determined by a better understanding of the context and nature of risk. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, this includes developing and maintaining a global mapping of encroachment, tracking illegal trade that are pathways for future pathogen transmission, and thus, where potential future zoonoses could be identified. Wet markets (live animals and fresh produce) may require better design to allow for robust health and hygiene monitoring. Clearly needed are efforts to arrest ecosystem encroachments and harmful practices, restore degraded ecosystems, and address risks in animal production and value chains while protecting communities that depend on these for their food supply and livelihoods. This success will be delivered in part by adhering to existing CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) as well as by delivering an ambitious agreement at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity COP15. Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed our food system's vulnerabilities to health hazards and zoonotic diseases. It has broadened our focus to the food system from food security and nutrition, and from food safety²⁸ to health risks to humans from zoonotic diseases. Rebuilding a resilient urban food ecosystem requires appropriate infrastructure, market management, and digital technologies to better monitor and regulate in order to ensure safety and health.

Transboundary Pests and Diseases in the Region, their Interface with COVID and Responses

18. In tandem with COVID-19, these transboundary pests are accentuating the dangers to food security and the incomes of smallholder farmers who predominate in agriculture in Asia and the Pacific region. Weather conditions in East Africa and the Middle East have favoured the growth of

²² OIE <https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019-novel-coronavirus/>

²³ Karesh WB, Dobson A, Lloyd-Smith JO, Lubroth J, Dixon MA, Bennett M, Aldrich S, Harrington T, Formenty P, Loh EH, Machalaba CC, Thomas MJ, Heymann DL, Ecology of zoonoses: natural and unnatural histories, *The Lancet* 2012, Volume 380, Issue 9857, Pages 1936-1945, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)61678-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)61678-X).

²⁴ Gates B. Responding to Covid-19 — A Once-in-a-Century Pandemic? *N Engl J Med* 2020; 382:1677-1679. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp2003762.

²⁵ FAO. 2020. Exposure of humans or animals to SARS-CoV--2 from wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals. Qualitative exposure assessment. FAO animal production and health / paper 181. FAO, Rome 2020.

²⁶ FAO Policy brief Mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on the livestock sector (April 2020) <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8799en/CA8799EN.pdf>

²⁷ FAO. 2020. Guidelines to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livestock production and animal health. FAO, Rome 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9177en/CA9177EN.pdf>

²⁸ WHO and FAO. 2020. COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems: Interim guidance. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8842en>

desert locust populations and caused serious crop losses in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.²⁹ Locusts are voracious consumers of a wide range of crops and the locust attacks are considered as one of the worst in recent times and driven by climate change. This necessitates long-term solutions, aside from the immediate response.³⁰ Nearly 2 million hectares of cropland have been sprayed with pesticides as an immediate response, and donors are providing generous support. Asia and the Pacific region is already heavily affected by Fall Army Worm (FAW), a serious insect pest of maize that has now reached Australia after having been detected in India in 2018.³¹ COVID-19 has created difficulties in chemical pesticide spray operations against the invasive FAW and migratory Desert Locust in the region. The emergence and quick spreading of transboundary pests and diseases in this region, such as banana Fusarium wilt disease tropical race 4, cassava mosaic disease, the yellow-spined bamboo locust, and the olive quick decline syndrome, will pose additional threats to smallholder farmers. FAO is supporting countries through capacity building for surveillance, use of technologies, monitoring, and sustainable management through Integrated Pest Management and control measures.

Food Supply Chains

19. Market interruptions under COVID-19 lockdown affected a broad range of food products (fresh produce, live animals, and fresh fish). FAO COVID-19 impact assessments of food systems showed several vulnerabilities, including inadequate storage infrastructure, weak market linkages, inadequate diversity of supplies (including from imports) and labour dislocations. These vulnerabilities prevented many food products from reaching markets, creating supply and demand imbalances and significant food losses along supply chains.

20. Enhancing food availability and access under the post-COVID-19 “new normal” requires nutrition-sensitive production diversification, protecting livestock assets (from liquidation), building storage infrastructure, facilitating access to agricultural and feed inputs, enhancing market linkages, better traceability for food safety and quality assurance, as well as financial guarantees through central banks to facilitate smallholder liquidity and access to credit and finance. For staples, enhanced price and market monitoring are essential for maintaining open and transparent food markets.

21. Rebuilding food supply chains to be more resilient requires critical interventions, including reinforcing extension services, enhanced linkages to input markets and credit services, and nutrition-sensitive food diversification supported by seed market development strategy, and whenever feasible promotion of local food production (short value chains). Better alignment of trade policy to national food production and consumption strategies can ensure the securing of critically needed imports (inputs and equipment) and better harmonization of standards for exportable goods.

22. The financial sector plays a fundamental role in enabling successful country responses to the food supply chains. China is implementing a 5 percent interest rate reduction for loans to agri-SMEs in the Hubei province (as well as self-employed and private owners) through the Agricultural Bank of China. Thailand is providing debt relief to agricultural cooperatives, mostly rescheduled repayments, through the Bank for Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), the Cooperative Development Fund (OCSC) and Farmers Welfare Fund. It is crucial to address food supply chains and provide immediate financial and market support. Where possible, special fiscal and financial incentives could be considered for people and firms in food supply chain segments that are experiencing serious disruption. Well-designed risk sharing support through public guarantees on loans made available through accredited FIs can be a valid instrument for boosting the lending capacity and meeting policy priorities on maintaining the flow of finance to agrifood actors who lack sufficient bank-worthy collateral.

Digital Transformation

²⁹ FAO. 2020. Desert Locust situation update [<http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html>]

³⁰ FAO.2020. Building sustainable and resilient food systems in Asia and the Pacific [<http://www.fao.org/3/nb842en/nb842en.pdf>]

³¹ FAO. 2020. Report of the Asia and Pacific Plant Protection Commission (APPPC) and Update on Fall Armyworm in Asia and the Pacific to the 35th APRC [<http://www.fao.org/3/nb739en/nb739en.pdf>]

23. Digital innovations like agricultural E-commerce, big data and digital financial services are able to react rapidly to alleviate some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific region. The close cooperation between government agencies and the private sector has adequately supported smallholder farmers and agri-SMEs with multi-level and diversified services like contactless distribution and community-based marketing.

24. Key prerequisites to more resilient value chains are robust market connectivity between producers and buyers and better product traceability supported by digital technologies. Soft investments (in digital market platforms and digital literacy) or hard investments (in storage logistics, cold chains) are the building blocks of online and e-commerce-based market structures. Digital innovations within the food value chain require Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure in data and computing, and capacity deployed through digital market platforms that link multiple market players, including farmers, traders, finance agents, inputs suppliers, and consumers. Investments in digital platforms and blockchain systems enable better food traceability, and open up new market opportunities, including through trade.

25. The expansion of digital financial technology (such as fintech) provides an important opportunity to limit disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis and build resilience to future threats by enabling payments, access to government support schemes, and private finance, especially in developing and emerging contexts where the financial digitisation process is still at an early stage and thus holds the most potential to have a positive impact on the current scenario. The public sector has an important role to play through regulation and supervision, institutional support, infrastructure expansion and improvement, digital education and awareness development.

26. Countries need to take advantage of digitally enabled innovation and develop digital ecosystem in the agricultural and rural sectors, based on using the big data and cloud platforms, to serve in effective information release and collection, and to integrate the agriculture and service sector such as finance, logistics, trading markets, and social networks. Extend this technology to the rural area where information dissemination usually is incomplete. Integrated digitalization could help, on the one hand, release information like agricultural inputs procurement, market docking between supplier and consumer, and relevant digital farmer services promptly; while on the other hand, provide statistics for public agencies at all levels, to keep comprehensive track on the effectiveness of policy implementations.

27. The Government role is crucial in digital transformation, including setting data quality standards, monitoring ethical use, and the ensuring interoperability of data systems across several technologies. Governments should strengthen the public education and training on digital skills and adoption of relevant technologies, to ensure access by small-scale farmers and build digital literacy. Government can also encourage public-private partnerships across sectors (food, transport, health) where the private sector can play a pivotal role in technology deployment, investments at scale and service provision.

Global and Regional Food Trade

28. In addition to disruptions in production and domestic marketing, the COVID-19 lockdown measures have also impacted trade flows due to international logistics and transportation disruptions, and in some cases due to policy responses such as import or export restrictions.³² Trade flow interruptions affected both food and agricultural inputs (fertilizer, seeds) and equipment (food processing). Trade flows were more volatile for fresh produce, live animals, livestock products, and fresh or dry fish (due to marketing disruptions) than for staples or cereals (which benefited from sufficient reserves). Under COVID-19, food supply disruptions raised concerns over the uncertainty of import sourcing in time of crises without foregoing the critical role an open-trade system plays in

³² FAO 2020. Food supply chain and trade disruptions in Asia under COVID-19: A regional analysis with policy response options (A COVID-19 Policy Report, forthcoming). FAO, 2020.

contributing to food security.³³ To counter these concerns, the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a declaration, whereby member countries resolved to “...refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the flow of medical, food and essential suppliers...”³⁴. They also committed to deepening intraregional trade, particularly through enhanced food market and trade information sharing, price monitoring, improved market supervision, and other coordination mechanisms such as strategic stock management, seed banks, finance, and reducing trade and transaction costs outside those required by food safety and phytosanitary aims.

29. Within the ASEAN trading bloc, intra-regional trade is still subject to significant non-tariff measures, including SPS standards and technical barriers to trade. Scope exists for lowering those barriers that do not affect food safety or health risks.³⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic opened an opportunity to streamline border trade measures and customs procedures, harmonize standards and data exchange, and lower trade costs. Promoting trade facilitation while ensuring food safety measures to protect public health are win-win policy goals.³⁶

30. In the post-COVID-19 recovery plans, coherent food policies need to achieve a balance between promoting local food production (and short value chains) and pursuing an open trade policy that complement domestic food system strategies while recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of labor intensive and highly perishable foods needed for a healthy diet and highlighting the risk to maintaining good nutrition. Trade policies should secure diverse food sourcing from international markets, especially for imported goods that complement domestic food supply (including agricultural inputs and equipment) or enhance nutrition diversity, food safety and healthy diets. In order to maintain or improve export market shares, food surplus countries need to upgrade product quality standards or meet buyer traceability requirements in light of increased food-related health concerns. Expanding and diversifying food exports (fruits, live animals, dry fish products, etc.) requires enhancing country capacity for product testing, tracing, and ensuring product quality and standards required under international trade. These export enhancing measures apply to trade generally (as between Bangladesh and the European Union) but particularly in the context of trade preferential agreements, such as the Bhutan-India FTA, Vietnam-European Union EVFTA, and the Cambodia-China PTA to name a few.

31. Digitalization has become a key driver for trade facilitation by harmonizing procedures and standards, improving trade finance and food safety controls, lowering certification costs, and reducing delays from customs procedures and transport conditions. Digital technologies (including artificial intelligence, or AI) can greatly facilitate trade regulations by providing automatic checks for compliance with standards and creating a more transparent and efficient trade regulatory environment. Paperless trade, which enables electronic exchange of trade-related data and documents, requires not only ICT infrastructure but also agreements between border authorities on digital information standards.

Social Protection and Targeted Support to Vulnerable Groups

32. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth pre-pandemic vulnerabilities and showed that inequalities are not sustainable and need addressing by society as part of the strategy to “Build Back Better.” Based on the socio-economic impacts seen across countries, the recovery path calls for broadening social safety nets, universal health insurance, affordable access to digital connectivity, income and livelihood diversification, and building capacities for managing multiple risks as part of the new normal. The UN Socio-Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA) aims to guide recovery to a more sustainable future, enable low-carbon development, leverage new (digital) technologies, and

³³ FAO.2020. Policy Brief: Why export restrictions should not be a response to COVID-19: Learning lessons from experience with rice in Asia and the Pacific. FAO June 2020.

³⁴ <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/FINAL-Declaration-of-the-Special-ASEAN-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>

³⁵ UNESCAP. 2019. *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2019: Navigating Non-Tariff Measures towards Sustainable Development*. Bangkok, Thailand.

³⁶ World Health Organization. 2019. *Ensuring Synergies between Food Safety and Trade facilitation*. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/resources/ensuring-synergies-between-food-safety-and-trade-facilitation-en.pdf?sfvrsn=af751553_2. Geneva, Switzerland.

inform the development of National Response/Recovery Plans. As of June, there are 27 SEIAs in the region, of which 13 also involve IFI (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and IMF).

33. A guiding driver of SEIA is to identify and target vulnerable groups in recovery programmes. Vulnerable groups include women, youth, children, the elderly, people living with disabilities, informal workers, migrants (both internal and international) and indigenous groups, those engaged in the informal sector, daily wage earners, and the more than 365 million smallholder farmers. Many smallholders are part of the region's 400 million extremely poor (living on less than USD 1.9 per day).³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting all parts of society and livelihoods in Asia and the Pacific, with the disadvantaged segments of populations like rural young women and men being impacted harder. Women are uniquely impacted by COVID-19 due to increased domestic responsibilities from school closures and because of their roles as caregivers and performing informal sector chores including house-keeping, cooking and selling street food etc. The response requires critical interventions that combine new or expanded social protection schemes with agricultural support and occupational health and safety interventions and ensuring compliance with labour standards while promoting decent work.

34. Expanding and properly targeting and removing barriers to access social protection schemes is central to inclusive recovery programmes³⁸. Social protection schemes cover social assistance (cash, food or other in-kind support, school feeding programmes), social insurance measures (contributory pensions, health insurance, or unemployment benefits), and labour market measures (wage subsidies, training, employment in public works). Rebuilding supply chains for resiliency requires greater attention to labour protection, training, and safety nets. For labour-exporting countries, rebuilding post-COVID-19 should integrate the provision of alternative livelihood options to displaced labour and return migrants. For example, Nepal is expanding guaranteed employment schemes and skills academies targeting migrant returnees. Assistance for the most vulnerable groups may include provision of direct in-kind support to poor and food-insecure people so they can access diverse and nutritious food (e.g. food banks, food kitchens). Nutritional needs of the most vulnerable such as women of reproductive age, pregnant and lactating women, and young children should be considered in the design of social protection programmes, either in-kind or cash-based. Pakistan's Ehsaas programme provides an example of horizontal expansion of cash transfers as a response to Covid-19: it initially provided cash transfers to 14 million families and then expanded by 15–20 million to cover the poor recently affected by COVID-19.

35. Expansion of social safety nets is vastly enabled by inclusive digital technologies, and countries are building capacity in these transformative innovations. Iran is leveraging digital technologies to expand social safety nets and universal health coverage. Bhutan is investing in IT infrastructure (such as broadband) and is implementing activities within the Digital Druknyul flagship programme to retain youth in its rural areas. Bangladesh and the Maldives have set up functioning online courts for small claims, while Cambodia, India, and the Philippines are piloting e-payment systems for social transfers. In Viet Nam, 'Rice ATMs' have been installed to provide free rice to people in need. 'Zero VNDong supermarkets' are also operational to give away up to five items for free to people in need twice a week. Clearly, digitalization is transforming social services including e-payments and e-services, virtual markets, employment e-platforms, and digital certification and traceability for household businesses, MSMEs and cooperatives.

36. Targeting men and women smallholder farmers and vulnerable groups in economic recovery programmes that boost agriculture productivity and sustainable natural resources management will be of vital importance for greater income and more diversified, resilient livelihoods. The Government of Myanmar COVID-19 Economic Relief Programme (CERP) includes a paddy seed production project,

³⁷ Lowder, S.K., Scoet, J. & Raney, T. 2016. The Number, Size, and Distribution of Farms, Smallholder Farms, and Family Farms Worldwide. *World Development*, Volume 87, pp.16-29 [online]. [Cited 31 July 2020]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.10.041>. The authors estimate that 75 percent of the world's 475 million small (less than 2 hectares) farms are located in Asia and the Pacific.

³⁸ FAO. 2020. Social protection and COVID-19 Response in rural areas. A COVID policy Brief, April 2020.

establishing a capital fund managed by the rural people to develop small-scale infrastructure, the provision of fish fingerlings and the distribution of agriculture machinery. In India, the Kerala Forest Department launched a “Break the Chain” campaign to raise awareness of the virus, provide food supplies to forest communities, arrange regular drinking water supplies to families in areas where water sources have been depleted, arrange community kitchens and procure forest products to lend economic support to tribespeople. These measures will not only safeguard the most vulnerable but also promote transformational economic recovery toward greener, more productive and resilient agriculture.

37. The combined impacts of COVID-19, natural hazards (cyclone, flood, drought) as well as pests and diseases (i.e. locust) on a number of Asia and the Pacific countries also highlight the need for enhanced capacity to manage multiple risks to food systems. COVID-19 recovery provides an opportunity for agriculture sector disaster risk management (DRM) and climate change adaptation (CCA) policies to incorporate a better understanding of these interrelated risks. A better understanding will help create integrated risk management measures for smallholder farmers, especially women who have limited access to productive resources and opportunities.

Employment and Business Continuity – in agri-food sectors and rural economies, with focus on youth

38. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hardest the informal sector, and youth in particular. Public Employment Programmes that provide means of livelihood especially to those hit hardest would reduce the severity of food insecurity and poverty. Furthermore, the youth unemployment rates are about three times as high as those of adults (ILO, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis will increase this already tough scenario and intensify their unemployment rates and possibly their labour market vulnerabilities. The youth cohort aged 15-17, may experience heightened barriers to prepare and access decent employment opportunities with the crisis and be more vulnerable to child labour if exposed to hazardous work as a negative coping mechanism. Overall, young people represent a large majority of the workforce in the informal sector and therefore may not be able to access COVID-19 social protection measures put in place by countries.

39. A recent global survey³⁹ indicates that over one in six young people surveyed have stopped working since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous cases show that younger workers are often the first to have their working hours cut or to be laid off (ILO, 2020). A total of 178 million (40 percent of youth employed) youth were in hard-hit sectors when the crisis began, while 328 million (77 percent) of the world’s young workers were in informal jobs, compared with around 60 percent of adult workers (aged 25 and above)⁴⁰. In Asia and the Pacific, the informality rate is 84.4 percent in (cf. in Africa: 93.4 percent), while the actual number of adults and youth in informal labour of the hardest hit sectors were the highest in the world (597 million, and 102 million, respectively). Rural youth are often unheard and not consulted. Although it is increasingly recognized that youth participation has an important role in decision-making, including during the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, too often their participation remains symbolic or passive.

40. Testing and Tracing of COVID-19 has shown strong correlation to the reduction in working hours. Challenges remain on how to ensure testing and tracing in already-informal work in agricultural sectors and rural economies, especially given the seasonal nature of the work. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates suggest that testing and tracing is associated with a reduction in working hour losses by as much as 50 per cent. In case of the Republic of Korea where a rigorous Testing and Tracing was in place, it has shown lower probability, duration and severity of confinement

³⁹ “Global Survey on Youth and COVID-19” by ILO and partners of the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth (including the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, AIESEC, the European Youth Forum, the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.)

⁴⁰ ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition: updated estimates and analysis (27 May 2020)

and lockdown measures, which reduces the economic toll of these measures. According to the ILO, the number of hours worked in the first quarter of 2020 declined by 6.5 per cent in Asia and the Pacific (driven by an 11.6 percent decrease in East Asia). The lack of capacity to impose Testing and Tracing in agriculture may widen the work condition gap with other economic sectors.

41. Both technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and on-the-job training are suffering massive disruption. A joint survey by the ILO, UNESCO, and World Bank reveal that ‘around 98 percent of respondents reported a complete or partial closure of technical and vocational schools and training centres’ Many training programmes have converted online, but only a few countries have the infrastructure and connectivity to do so, notwithstanding the wide accessibility. According to the same survey above, only few low-income countries have actually made that transition. This will also have long-lasting, scarring effect on students and entry-level works, as students who were job-seeking during a recession have been shown to remain in lower income levels that lasts over ten years, according to some studies. Also, young entrepreneurs and youth cooperatives will face similar problems, because the overall difficult economic situation can make it harder for them to find resources and financing while lacking the know-how to cope with the ongoing difficult business conditions. Social protection schemes linked to schools (e.g. school feeding) are presently blocked, hampered or limited by the closures.

42. Many countries aim for ‘green recovery’ plans to COVID-19⁴¹, as it exposed and acted as a threat-multiplier to the existing vulnerabilities in rural areas and agricultural sectors: the lack of public and private investment, especially in rural areas which led to poor health and sanitation infrastructure; Also, the lack or dysfunction of schemes to ensure social protection and livelihoods has disproportionately impacted the rural economy, combined with the perennial lack of decent, green jobs opportunities in rural areas. The impact of COVID-19 has shaken up not just the rural economy but also the urban and national economies overall through the hit taken by the food systems. Therefore, the effectiveness of COVID-19 recovery will depend on whether these underlying structural issues would be addressed, and the creation of green jobs is fundamental towards this effort. However, in Asia and the Pacific region, only the Republic of Korea and New Zealand have included salient green measures in their recovery plans as of date.

43. COVID-19 has put in the spotlight the vital role migrants play in agriculture and food systems. Measures affecting the movement of people and resulting labour shortages are having impacts on agricultural value chains, affecting food availability and market prices globally. At the same time, business closures and restrictions to movement, combined with lack or limited access to all forms of social protection, increase migrants’ vulnerability to poverty and food and nutrition insecurity. Loss of jobs and unstable incomes will hinder their capacity to access and purchase adequate and nutritious food for themselves and their families. The reduction in remittances sent home as a result of the pandemic, has considerable impact on rural livelihoods and food and nutrition security in areas of origin. Besides alternative livelihoods options for those migrants returning to their rural villages, safe movement of agricultural workers to meet labour demands needs to be ensured. In addition, many agricultural migrants who, during the pandemic, continue to work in essential services linked to the food sector, face poor housing and working conditions. It is key that migrants are not only included in the pandemic response, including social protection measures, but also that occupational safety and health measures are put in place and accessible to all migrants.

Data and Statistics – Examples of Regional and Country Support and Future Needs

44. Designing recovery plans requires real-time and accurate data over time on the evolution and consequences of COVID-19 and its containment measures in order to anticipate and mitigate potential impacts on food systems, food security and livelihoods. It is essential to identify the most vulnerable

⁴¹ For instance, EU and UK have been actively coupling the recovery plans with greening measures. See the following:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/recovery-plan-europe_en

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/23/uk-public-supports-green-recovery-from-coronavirus-crisis>

populations and geographic areas at risk or under stress and design and monitor targeted programmes and policies to mitigate risks and reduce stress. For example, FAO Pakistan carried out a COVID-19 assessment and used various existing data sources to identify and address vulnerability. National data-collection processes already facing data gaps, however, are further challenged by COVID-19 social-distancing measures and national budget constraints, which affect not only food and agricultural statistics but also the entire data system. An FAO Policy Brief⁴² found that out of 35 countries with ongoing agricultural census activities in Asia and the Pacific, over half have seen their censuses affected. Agricultural census activities have been postponed (26 percent of the countries), delayed (23 percent) or suspended (3 percent). Most of the remaining countries that reported that their censuses had not been affected yet are at very early planning stages. These challenges are particularly acute in countries with subregions facing conflicts or security issues, or prohibitively high data collection costs due to remote areas, such as the Small Islands States of the Pacific.

45. In line with the UN Secretary General’s “*Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere*,” FAO recognizes that data permeates all aspects of our work, and its power—harnessed responsibly—is critical to the global agendas we serve. A new vision of the data system is a key element in the UN reform.⁴³ As a response to these challenges and in light of the pandemic, FAO is re-orienting and upscaling its work on data, information and analysis to address the challenges above, while protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individual persons, households and enterprises. It includes: an FAO geo-spatial portal to enable sharing of national and international data sources, integrated with available earth observation data, as part of the FAO Hand-in-Hand Initiative;⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ establishment of an FAO Data Lab, which gathers, organizes and disseminates daily internet-scraped news and Twitter feeds on new events and crisis; produces a daily news digest; scrapes the internet for alternative and non-conventional data sources to fill data gaps, improve the timeliness and increase the detail level of current statistics; uses crowd-sourced food price data to monitor food system impacts; and rapid assessments of the evolution of food security using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale.⁴⁶ Given the differential impacts of this pandemic on different groups, it is crucial that age and sex disaggregated data be collected when possible and relevant.⁴⁷

46. FAO is creating stronger partnerships with countries, the private sector, and across the UN system to ensure sharing of data and expertise. This work includes helping countries build capacities in multiple areas: sharing and using earth observation data to monitor crop production and soil health; application of internet scraping and crowd-sourced data in national and local languages, and use of Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) and other nutrition-security indicators. To address social distancing constraints cost-effectively, FAO supports data collection using computer-assisted interviewing and crowd-sourced mobile data, as well as the adaptation of COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 issues into existing household and enterprise surveys. FAO has encouraged using e-learning tools to train census trainers, supervisors and enumerators and exploring the use of administrative records to complement field data collection. Other efforts include making more data readily available to policy users and researchers through appropriate micro-data anonymization techniques. Most importantly, FAO ensures that data are turned into insight and action through timely and targeted analysis to understand what happened, why it happened, and what may happen next. This data includes information on agriculture production, food supply and market sales provided via government portals and district farm services centres. Data-driven, timely and targeted analysis will enable FAO to respond with insight, impact and integrity.

⁴² FAO. 2020. *Impact of COVID-19 on national censuses of agriculture (Status overview)*. Rome.

<http://www.fao.org/3/ca8984en/CA8984EN.pdf>

⁴³ United Nations, 2020. United Nations Secretary General’s Data Strategy. New York.

⁴⁴ <http://www.fao.org/partnerships/resource-partners/covid-19/en/>

⁴⁵ <https://datalab.review.fao.org/about.html#>

⁴⁶ Data for decision-making - Ensuring quality data and analysis for effective policy support to food systems and Zero Hunger (link to the brief:

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/faoweb/Resource_Mobilization/resources/covid19/01DataForDecisionMaking.pdf)

FAO Country and Regional Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Impact Assessment, Response and Recovery

FAO Support to Countries: Rapid Assessment, Engagement with Partners

47. Rapid assessments have been conducted in nearly 20 countries as well as in the Pacific subregion. FAO quickly provided specific advice on rolling out food security and social protection measures, ensuring the functioning of supply chains and addressing disruptions in sectors such as transportation and marketing. For example, in the early days, as the pandemic began to worsen across the region, the FAO Regional Office's technical and communications teams worked together on a series of public messages to reassure governments, food producers, retailers and consumers that food remained safe to eat. The messages also provided guidance on food production, handling and preparation. Those messages were illustrated, translated into local languages, and disseminated via social media by FAO Representations in Members across Asia and the Pacific. Governments have largely responded quickly and minimized the adverse impacts on food systems.

48. FAO activated multiple technical cooperation projects in response to country requests to support mitigating measures in 10 countries (three in the Pacific) in areas such as local food production, food and nutrition security, livelihoods, animal health and food safety in fresh markets. For example, FAO is working in Indonesia to develop a food systems roadmap and is working in the Solomon Islands to strengthen local food systems impacted by COVID-19 by promoting climate-resilient and sustainable urban and peri-urban agriculture value chains. For early warning early action, we are working to minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural livelihoods in Afghanistan. In the area of food safety, FAO is helping to develop safer fresh markets and street food in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic. In terms of animal health, FAO is strengthening coordination capacities in ASEAN at the animal-human health interface and providing support to livestock farmers. FAO is further working to strengthen food production by helping to expand and improve double rice-cropping systems in Myanmar. To help with the recovery of farmer livelihoods, FAO has helped to distribute agricultural production input packages (e.g. seeds and planting materials, livestock, fishing implements). The packages have been distributed to vulnerable households in more than a dozen Asia and the Pacific countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kiribati, Mongolia, Pakistan, Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka, and Tuvalu.

49. Several COVID-19 policy briefs on the regional impact of COVID-19, the impacts of export restrictions and the impacts of the virus on fisheries and aquaculture as well as natural resource management were prepared and disseminated online. All of these briefs provided policy recommendations for mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition, as well as keeping food supply chains functioning and building resilient food systems. They also offer recommendations on ways to counter or mitigate the wider economic collateral damage the pandemic can cause in the food, agriculture and fisheries sectors. The Asia United Nations Network on Nutrition, comprising FAO, WFP, the World Health Organization and UNICEF, issued a statement expressing its concern about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nutrition status of those most affected, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

Collaboration with Regional Groups (ASEAN, IRRI, Academia, etc.)

50. FAO convened a joint roundtable meeting with the Senior Officials of the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (SOM-AMAF) to discuss actions and support for ASEAN in the wake of COVID-19. The Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry Meeting (AMAF) referred to FAO's policy brief⁴⁸ in its Ministerial declaration⁴⁹ on actions in response to the pandemic. FAO provided six specific proposals to provide technical assistance. These proposals include establishing a seed bank to complement the ASEAN Rice Reserve and become a resource to support local food production of rice and vegetables; strengthening the technical capacity of the Food Security Information System to

⁴⁸ FAO.2020. COVID-19 and the risk to food supply chains: How to respond? [<http://www.fao.org/3/ca8388en/CA8388EN.pdf>]

⁴⁹ ASEAN.2020. Statement of ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry on COVID-19 [<https://bit.ly/3fcSRqO>]

collect and analyse data, and strengthening the capacity of agricultural cooperatives and rural small and medium enterprises. Other proposals included exploring the establishment of a food and agriculture trade information system; initiatives to adopt a sustainable food-systems approach to implement the ASEAN guidelines on promoting responsible investment in food, agriculture and forestry⁵⁰; and supporting capacity development in the digitalization of trade to improve traceability and lower transaction costs. These proposals are being elaborated and will be provided to SOM-AMAF for consideration at forthcoming meetings. IFAD and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) are partnering with FAO on these initiatives. The proposals will also be incorporated into the Joint Work Programme for 2019-2024 that was developed subsequent to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with ASEAN in 2018 to strengthen cooperation in agriculture and forestry.

Resource Mobilization

51. Immediate Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) support of USD 5.7 million has been developed for countries in Asia and the Pacific region of which USD 3.6 million has been operationalized by the end of July. Over 40 ongoing FAO Trust Fund projects have re-oriented almost USD 20 million in their budgets to support COVID-19 response. Additional donor support of USD 19.4 million has been secured or identified through new programming and top-up, including additional mobilization of USD 3 million in Afghanistan, USD 5.5 million in Bangladesh, USD 5.5 million in Pakistan, and USD 3.3 million in Papua New Guinea for FAO COVID-19 response and recovery activities.

52. FAO has launched a comprehensive global response to COVID-19 under an Umbrella Programme that contributes to the Global UN response to COVID-19. The comprehensive response seeks to minimize COVID-19's damaging effects on food security and nutrition while transforming global food systems to make them more resilient, sustainable and equitable. FAO calls for immediate action in seven key priority areas:

- a. Reinforce a global humanitarian response plan for COVID-19.
- b. Improve data for decision-making.
- c. Ensure economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty.
- d. Bolster trade and food safety standards.
- e. Boost smallholder resilience for recovery.
- f. Prevent the next zoonotic pandemic through a strengthened One Health Approach.
- g. Trigger food systems transformation.

53. The new programme is also supported by the COVID-19 Food Coalition, launched by the Government of Italy and led by FAO, which will mobilize political, financial and technical assistance in support of countries affected by the crisis. RAP has developed regional action sheets for each of the priority areas and will convene further roundtables with stakeholders in the region. FAO's country-level engagement under the Umbrella Programme will be coordinated with other United Nations agencies, donors, other development partners as well as with the humanitarian sector, and be in line with governments' responses and systems.

Conclusions

54. COVID-19 will be with us for some time to come. Even if a vaccine is developed in the near future, the severe economic downturn that has already happened will have lifetime effects on the educational attainment, health status, and income earning capacity of many poor, food insecure and vulnerable households. COVID-19 will also lead to important changes in food systems. FAO will support Members in adapting to the pandemic and building back better to create more inclusive, resilient and sustainable food systems that lead to improved food security and nutrition, and help countries achieve the SDGs.

⁵⁰ ASEAN.2018. The ASEAN guidelines on promoting responsible investment in food, agriculture and forestry [<https://bit.ly/3gi9oLy>]