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FOOD CHAIN DISRUPTIONS

Structural inefficiencies and exploitative labor are causing severe food chain disruptions in Southeast Asia, thus increasing food insecurity levels in this region. In Indonesia and Malaysia, many palm oil workers, who come from situations of poverty and hunger in their home countries (such as Myanmar), are subject to various forms of abuse and exploitation at work, while in the Philippines the number of households suffering from food insecurity steadily increased over the last three months, reaching a new record-high of 30.7% (around 7.6 million households). Finally, Nepal's lack of proper storage and transport facilities was further aggravated by the coronavirus lockdown, and now roughly 30% of all fruits and vegetables grown in the country go to waste.

Palm oil workers currently endure various forms of abuse in Indonesia and Malaysia

A recent investigation found that many palm oil workers in Indonesia and Malaysia, coming from the poorest countries in Asia, endure serious forms of abuse and exploitation, including child labour, rape and slavery. The workers that were interviewed during the investigation claimed that they were also regularly harassed by the authorities, and some of them belong to Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority, while some others were fishermen that escaped years of slavery on boats only to be trafficked onto palm oil plantations.

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Food insecurity increased in Philippines over the last three months

According to a new survey, more than 7 million households in the Philippines have suffered from food insecurity at least once in the last three months, reaching a new record-high of 30.7% (and surpassing the previous peak of 23.8% in March 2012). More specifically, hunger in September 2020 was up by 9.8 points from 20.9% in July 2020, and data were gathered through mobile phone interviews of adult Filipinos that were randomly drawn from a database of mobile phone numbers.

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Nepal's lack of adequate storage and transport facilities contributes to food waste

Nepal's structural inefficiencies, such as a lack of proper cold storage, transportation, irrigation and harvest technologies were further exacerbated by the coronavirus lockdown, and although precise figures are not available, around 30% of all fruits and vegetables grown in the country rot before they reach the consumers. Therefore, the Nepali government should set up a task force to assess the real losses in agriculture and to come up with a strategic plan with remedial measures.

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IMPACT ON COMMODITIES AND FOOD PRICES

Bangladesh, India and Nigeria are currently experiencing price increases for basic food commodities. In Dhaka's markets, the price of rice has increased due to the recent floods that determined a curtailed production in the northern part of the country, while the pandemic-induced disruptions to the poultry industry in India is still causing a supply shortage, which reflected on the soaring egg prices (despite a recent increase in demand). Finally, several issues related to a decreased production in exporting countries and to border closures caused a sharp increase in bread prices in Nigeria.

Floods in northern Bangladesh cause price hikes for rice

Rice prices have increased in Dhaka's retail markets, wholesale markets and rice mills over the last few days, due to the prolonged flooding in the country's northern area (which determined a supply shortage in rice mills) and to the end of the harvesting season (the next one will begin in around 45 days). Furthermore, the rice mill owners are warning of further price increases for rice, due to panic buying and to the fact that the already scarce amounts of the staple commodity in the mills will be running out within one or two weeks.

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Poultry industry still affected by production issues in India

Although the Indian poultry industry is slowly getting back on track after the pandemic-induced disruptions, thanks to an increased demand, the sector is still operating at about half its capacity, which determines supply constraints (production is currently down by nearly 40%) and egg price increases. Furthermore, between 30% to 40% of all the small players in the industry have been wiped out because of the negative effects of the coronavirus lockdown on production.

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Soaring price of bread in Nigeria caused by price increases for raw materials

Nigeria is still experiencing a scarcity of local bread (due to the high costs of production) and sharp price increases for bakery products. The cost of production is high because most of the ingredients used for the production of bread are imported in Nigeria, but the production in the exporting countries is still affected by the pandemic-induced disruptions. Furthermore, border closures and the activities of bandits in some states in the northern part of the country further aggravate this situation.

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COUNTRIES' RESPONSE

Three different initiatives to improve agricultural productivity in India, Ghana and the Philippines: the Indian Institute of Technology will use computer vision and spectrometry to develop an algorithm that will be capable of conducting quality assessment on agricultural produce in a very short amount of time; the Agricultural Development Bank of Ghana will provide more loans to farmers and to the livestock and poultry industries in order to reduce the country's reliance on food imports; the Department of Science and Technology of the Philippines is carrying out a study to assess the losses caused by the banana bract mosaic disease and create new varieties that are resistant to this virus.

AI used in India to conduct rapid quality assessment of agricultural products

The Indian Institute of Technology is using new artificial intelligence technologies, such as computer vision and spectrometry, to develop machine-learning algorithms that allow for a very rapid quality assessment of various farm produce. Thanks to these technologies, a simple picture of a sample (of rice, for example) will be digitised and in around thirty seconds it will be possible to analyse how many grains are broken, eaten by insects or opaque.

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ADB to commit 50 percent of loans to agricultural development

The Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) of Ghana has recently indicated that it will raise its agricultural loan portfolio to 50% by 2022, in order to enable the country's farmers to have access to more capital, and therefore to improve the agricultural production in Ghana and reduce the country's reliance on imports to attain food security. The Bank has also earmarked around GHS 500 million to revitalize the livestock and poultry industries under the ADB Broiler Outgrower Scheme.

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Philippines Department of Science and Technology set to study banana bract mosaic disease

A three-year program funded by the Philippines Department of Science and Technology's Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development aims at studying the effects of the banana bract mosaic disease (caused by the banana bract mosaic virus) on crops, in order to assess yield loss and to assist plant breeders in developing new banana varieties that are resistant to this virus.

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REGIONAL FOCUS

The main cocoa producing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are Ghana and Ivory Coast, where farmers enjoy a sustainability assistance that is not present in Nigeria, where (despite being a large cocoa producer) cocoa farmers have to source for production inputs, seedlings and fertilizers by themselves, and there is a general lack of encouragement for youth participation in farming. Some of the Philippines' coconut growers, on the other hand, opposed to the lifting of a coconut exports ban, which according to them would benefit only consolidators, rich institutions and middlemen, while farmers would not see a guaranteed fair share from the exporting scheme.

AFRICA – Nigeria's cocoa production is no match for that of Ghana and Ivory Coast

The international cocoa production data put Ghana and Ivory Coast ahead of Nigeria for what concerns the annual production of cocoa: according to the president of the Cocoa Association of Nigeria, this is to blame on the country's low production per hectare, neglect of extension services and lack of seedlings, agrochemicals and encouragement for youth participation in farming. While Ghanaian and Ivorian cocoa farmers benefit from a sustainability assistance, Nigerian farmers have to source for production inputs, seedlings and fertilizers by themselves.

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ASIA – Filipino farmer groups oppose to lifting of coconut exports ban

Coconut farmer groups from different parts of the Philippines expressed their opposition against allowing coconut exports to markets such as China and Malaysia, as it would allegedly result in the depletion of raw materials, loss of jobs and closing of small and medium-sized enterprises. According to such groups, by lifting the current ban on exports, coconut prices will be under the control of the world market, which does not guarantee a stable pricing for the years to come.

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