

Monthly News Report on Grains (MNR)

End-of-Year Message from the FAO Grains/AMIS Team

December 2020

By now it is evident that 2020 has been a defining year in every sense of the word! A “tumultuous” year says The Economist, though in reality no single interpretive word can fully describe a year so full of surprises, albeit mostly unpleasant. How different a place our world was this time last year! For those wishing for a common enemy against whom humanity could at last unite, the legendary COVID-19 pandemic must have met the criterion, but did we unite? Perhaps it is too soon to draw a firm conclusion but the evidence so far seems to suggest not. Instead, we see signs of ever-growing division, evidenced by inward-looking behaviour not just within countries but across society at large. Such tendencies risk paving the way for more instability and tension, opening the door to even greater uncertainty and hardship ahead.

Among the many hard lessons learned this year, one is critical: never walk away from unresolved problems. The state of global health, as measured by the widespread burden of the pandemic, has put into clear focus the fragility of healthcare systems even amongst the most advanced economies, let alone in poorer and vulnerable countries. Years of warnings about insufficient, or even a total lack of, investment in the development of adequate health protection measures were seen to have fallen on deaf ears. The price is the catastrophic human loss that must be painfully endured for still many more months if not years to come. This makes addressing the issue of global food insecurity even more arduous than at any time in recent history. The world hunger situation has quickly taken a turn for the worse as pandemic-driven lost incomes continue to hamper access to food, consequently adding millions more to the already unacceptably high number of hungry people around the world.

All this while global food markets remained generally well supplied and, unlike most other sectors, scarcely affected by the adverse impacts of the pandemic and the devastating economic fallout. Global grain markets have proved particularly resilient in the face of the pandemic. Export availabilities have remained at comfortable levels, markets well supplied and trade kept on a growing path. While this level of resilience would have been hard to predict at the onset, the proof of the matter is that the need for well-functioning agricultural and food systems has never been greater. Indeed, providing timely information and analysis on developments in international markets for grains, which overwhelmingly make up for most of global staple foods, has never been more crucial. However, this pandemic also reminded us of another important lesson; it is not enough just to ensure well-functioning markets and information systems at the global level, we must continue to improve and work together to make sure the system is also reaching and addressing localized food system needs, particularly in vulnerable countries.

Against this background, the FAO Grains Team with its lead role in the Secretariat of the G20-Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), while striving to achieve all its customary outputs, despite the sudden transition to a remote work setting since early 2020, took on several special activities to address heightened needs posed by the pandemic. The [FAO monthly Supply and Demand Briefs](#) were published regularly, as was the [bi-annual FAO Food Outlook](#) (published June and November). The [Monthly News Report on Grains](#) were released punctually for the fifteenth consecutive year, while reporting on price movements in international markets, via [FAO's monthly Food Price](#)

[Indices](#) also continued unabated. The team's contribution to the annual [OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook](#) remained intact as did AMIS related activities, including the monthly publication of [AMIS Market Monitor](#) and the servicing of the [AMIS Global Food Market Information Group](#) and [AMIS Rapid Response Forum](#), meetings of which, along with many other special events, were held successfully through videoconferencing, zooming to be more precise. In fact, zooming allowed greater participation in such meetings than usual and, despite some inevitable shortcomings associated with all virtual events, the overall experience proved positive and, above all, extremely cost-effective. As in previous years, team members continued to participate actively, as speakers or panelists, in many events held by FAO as well as by other organizations and the private sector.

While we hope 2021 will slowly bring some normality back to our day-to-day lives, another important lesson from this year is worth bearing in mind: no matter how good or skillful we are, or think we are, we can never predict the future. Therefore, as with health, we must never allow food systems to be exposed to unexpected events. This puts huge social responsibility on all those involved in agriculture and food markets, public as well as private - academia, research institutions and international organizations - to pursue collaboration and build enduring partnerships. In 2021 we must all aim to do more than simply strive for a return to the normal that we knew. We need to build a new normal that can withstand any unexpected threat to livelihoods.

Our warmest thoughts and best wishes for a Happy New Year,

FAO Grains/AMIS Team