



# Small Island Developing States Response to COVID-19:

## Highlighting food security, nutrition and sustainable food systems

### KEY MESSAGES

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- The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening the food security, nutrition and climate resilience of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which share many traits, including a reliance on international trade and imported foods; vulnerability to climate change, natural disasters and external economic shocks; malnutrition; and high rates of diet-related non-communicable diseases.
- With SIDS and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concerned about achieving Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 (no poverty and zero hunger), meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable populations should be prioritized, by supporting emergency food assistance, nutrition interventions and enhanced safety net and social protection programmes to lessen the impact of reduced incomes, especially on the poor.
- Action is needed to boost domestic food production in the short and medium term, ensuring farmers have access to productive inputs and financing for the coming planting and harvesting seasons, and to promote the consumption of local, nutritious food to help improve diets and reduce reliance on highly processed imported food.
- Prompt policy and fiscal measures are needed to ensure food supply chains are kept alive, domestically and internationally, with food able to move across borders and between islands and with new suppliers sourced (in cases where countries have stopped exporting), in compliance with existing food safety standards.
- Local government authorities play an important role in making sure food systems are considered essential and function in line with COVID-19 health directives; businesses, workers and farmers are protected and supported; and populations are well-informed about eating healthily and following good hygiene practices (communicating clear messages via social media, apps, community radio, traditional networks).
- Like other countries affected by COVID-19, the current situation offers opportunities for SIDS to rapidly adopt digital platforms, enhance their digital capabilities (digitization of value chain actors, e-payments, Big Data analytics) and strengthen island and inter-island communication networks.
- Reliable statistics and timely data, including early warning systems, are needed to allow SIDS to better plan for and respond to crises and shocks.

- Due to the SIDS' similar economic and social challenges, support to SIDS-specific regional integration and solidarity mechanisms should be enhanced, and related technical assistance and financial instruments provided in the short term, with investments in more resilient food systems made in the longer run.

### Main policy issues

The world's Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face many similar development challenges, including limited land mass and arable land; small, and often scattered, populations; fragile natural environments; dependence on imported energy sources; high vulnerability to climate change, natural disasters and external economic shocks; heavy reliance on food imports; a limited number of economic sectors; distance from global markets; malnutrition (undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity); and high rates of diet-related non-communicable disease. The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging the food security, nutrition and climate resilience of SIDS even further.

Potential impacts of COVID-19:

- The Caribbean, the Pacific and many small islands in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans depend on **food imports**, with 50 percent of SIDS importing more than 80 percent of their food, and nearly all SIDS importing 60 percent of their food. As such, SIDS are particularly affected by disruptions in supply chains and international trade, including export restrictions imposed by countries to guarantee domestic supplies (flight cancellations, slowdowns in the shipping industry and logistic bottlenecks, among others). The fall in foreign exchange earnings will make it more difficult for SIDS to import food, exacerbating food availability in some countries.
- Remote nations highly dependent on **transported food** are particularly vulnerable. The potential impact of the appreciation of the US dollar and its implication on importing countries is unpredictable but likely to affect vulnerable countries and their populations. The reduced number of foreign fishing vessels anticipated in the Pacific will reduce government income from licenses.
- Many SIDS rely on incomes from **tourism**; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has grounded airlines and cruise ships and forced the closure of hotels and other tourist-dependent facilities, causing job losses and reductions in government revenues, including foreign exchange. The tourism downturn is expected to continue until the health crisis is over. The global economy is projected to contract by -3 percent (potential for greater contraction in SIDS) for 2020. For example, estimating a 27 percent reduction in tourists, Cabo Verde is expecting a recession, with a 2 percent decline in gross domestic product (GDP) (against a growth rate of 5 percent projected at the beginning of the year).
- Ten Pacific SIDS were still COVID-19-free as of 25 April 2020. Their smaller size and geographical isolation (especially the atoll countries) allow for greater impact of lockdown policies compared with the more densely populated and interconnected Caribbean Islands. However, the lockdown negatively impacts earnings and livelihoods.
- The **risk of severe illness** from COVID-19 is compounded by high levels of obesity and the prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and asthma. Most SIDS do not have COVID-19 testing facilities nor advanced healthcare facilities/systems to care for those with severe illness, especially those needing ventilators.
- Food consumption generally has shifted away from local staples and traditional foods in favour of highly processed imported foods, which are often cheaper, easier to store and

with a longer shelf life. The supply of [fresh and non-perishable produce](#) may be interrupted by disruptions in trade and restrictions on workers' movements.

- The [employment, income and food security](#) of the millions of traders, roadside vendors (mostly women), small restaurants and others in the more informal food systems are at great risk. Many islands have seen open markets and roadside stands close; small shops continue to provide plentiful food stocks, though not as nutritious as the variety available in markets and larger stores.
- The negative impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition in the region are further compounded by the effects of [climate change and climate-related disasters](#). The humanitarian response to the current emergency caused by Tropical Cyclone Harold in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga is limited and cautious due to the COVID-19 threat. The recent measles outbreak in Samoa has left the country's economy in a vulnerable state, now further threatened by COVID-19. Other disease-related threats such as African Swine Fever are worrying in a region that places high value on pork.
- Most SIDS rely significantly on [remittances](#), with at least 20 countries where remittances account for 5 percent or more of GDP. Reduced remittances from abroad are affecting the purchasing power of countries and communities. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as of 2014, SIDS remittances accounted for the largest share of external financing, at 45 percent. COVID-19 restrictions on movement and on businesses involved in money transfers may impede cash flows, negatively affecting some families' ability to procure food and other essentials. Also, many people may depend on direct shipments of food, medicines and other essentials from family members.
- Some relatively larger islands with more developed commodity export economies such as the Solomon Islands' wood exports and Papua New Guinea's oil and minerals, or high value export economies such as Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, are experiencing [a collapse in their export markets](#) in terms of demand and prices. This places greater strain on fragile island economies.

### Current measures and good practices

Given the fast-evolving nature of this crisis, SIDS governments are likely to face increased financing needs driven by both direct costs of crisis mitigation in terms of health interventions, and lost revenue from the economic downturn. Governments are already developing contingency plans and identifying financing options available from international financing institutions, including redirecting funds from ongoing projects.

- In most cases, island countries and regional organizations have collaborated to support common policies for the free flow of medicines, food and other essential goods. They have also cooperated in sharing good practices on food security and nutrition and workers' safety.
- In a joint declaration, 25 Latin American and Caribbean countries agreed to coordinate support to ensure that food systems function effectively during the COVID-19 crisis. This will involve technical and financial assistance to small and medium-sized producers and agro-industrial producers, as well as support to local, regional and national wholesale markets, by ensuring their liquidity, access to products and workers, and coordinated actions with private sector food importers and distributors.
- FAO and ten other international organizations agreed to joint work to secure food systems, agriculture and trade during the COVID-19 pandemic. FAO is heading up their online webinars, which are averaging over 10,000 people per session and feature the

region's Ministers of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, on measures to strengthen food production amid COVID-19.

- The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and the World Food Programme, with support from FAO, conducted a rapid online *Caribbean COVID-19 Food Security & Livelihoods Impact Survey* in early April. Findings show widespread disruptions to livelihoods, driven primarily by imposed movement restrictions and concerns about leaving the house. Further, CARICOM, with support from development partners, prepared a COVID-19 Agri-food Risk Management Framework to guide risk planning and management at the regional level. In addition, several Caribbean countries have developed national COVID-19 agrifood risk management plans to protect food security and nutrition (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Barbados, Bahamas, Dominica).
- The Pacific Community has noted that for their Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees, the COVID-19 pandemic might have immediate and longer-term impacts on food security in the region. The Centre can, to a certain extent, mitigate these impacts by maintaining enough stocks to keep food systems stable and adaptive to the rapidly evolving situation in the Pacific. As such, it stands ready to reorganize its teams and workload to respond to these challenges.
- With schools closed, countries such as Jamaica, Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana are providing food cards, food vouchers and cash vouchers to ensure vulnerable children have access to food. Trinidad and Tobago is discussing options for takeaway hot meals, while St Lucia plans to distribute food baskets to parents to prepare meals at home. Cuba has prioritized providing food assistance to the elderly and school children, and is boosting local production via the national plan for urban and peri-urban agriculture. The private sector in Trinidad and Tobago has scaled up online ordering systems, while supermarkets in Grenada have enabled groceries to be ordered via email and WhatsApp.
- In the Solomon Islands, the Government has launched the Livelihood Sector Committee (LSC), comprising ministries, local government, leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector, to ensure food security and nutrition. The LSC plans to mass produce root crops and distribute seeds and planting materials for backyard gardens and box farming to residents in the capital of Honiara. The LSC is also working with SIG NET (a mobile phone provider) to create a Facebook site to share easy, step-by-step gardening advice via video clips for Honiara residents, as well as communities in provinces with access to the network.
- In Fiji, the Ministry of Agriculture has introduced a home gardening initiative to encourage urban households to use at least 49 m<sup>2</sup> of their property to plant vegetables. Farmers, through the Farm Support Programme, have received free seeds and planting materials to plant fast-growing crops on small plots. The Ministry intends to continue the distribution of free seeds and planting materials. Municipal markets are open and operating under strict guidelines (e.g. using protective gear and adhering to 2m of physical distancing). Municipal Councils have been working with the Government to decentralize markets by setting up temporary 'mini markets' around the country to avoid overcrowding.

### International and regional financing institutions' response

International and regional financing institutions have launched a series of immediate and medium-term programmes to support SIDS and others to respond to COVID-19. Most of the initial measures focus on current health and macro-economic concerns.

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved (as of April 22) USD 205 million to seven SIDS as emergency assistance under the Rapid Credit Facility, Rapid Financing Instrument and augmentation of existing financing arrangements, as well as debt relief grants financed by the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust.
- The Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) approved up to USD 140 million to tackle the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and to support economic growth and poverty reduction through policy reforms. The CDB has also approved USD 3 million for the purchase of personal protective equipment.
- The InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) is providing immediate public health response support, expanding safety nets for vulnerable populations and providing assistance to small and medium enterprises (which account for 70 percent of the region's jobs) through financing programmes and short-term liquidity guarantees, foreign trade financing and guarantees, loan restructuring and support for strategic supply chains.
- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) announced a USD 20 billion response package for Asia and the Pacific and approved measures to streamline its operations for quicker and more flexible delivery of assistance, with a focus on the poor and vulnerable. The package includes USD 2.5 billion in concessional and grant resources. Enhanced microfinance loan and guarantee support and a facility to help liquidity-starved small and medium-sized enterprises, including those run by female entrepreneurs, will be implemented alongside direct financing of companies responding to, or impacted by, COVID-19.
- The World Bank has activated USD 100 million to support four Latin American and Caribbean countries. It has disbursed an additional USD 170 million after redirecting ongoing operations in several countries.
- FAO and the World Bank are collaborating on diagnostic agriculture investment assessments in 60 priority countries affected by COVID-19 and completing thematic studies for the agriculture and rural development sector to help guide post-COVID-19 investments. One study is on livestock/One Health in Asia and the Pacific. The studies and assessments will support the design of part of the World Bank's USD 180 billion new package.
- The International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) has just launched the COVID-19 Rural Poor Stimulus Facility as a multidonor fund. The objective is to ensure that farmers in the most vulnerable countries have timely access to inputs, information, markets and liquidity.

## Policy recommendations

### *Immediate actions*

- With SIDS and FAO concerned about achieving Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 (no poverty and zero hunger), meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable populations should be prioritized, by supporting emergency food assistance, nutrition interventions and enhanced safety net social protection programmes to lessen the impact of lost jobs and reduced incomes, especially on the poor and most vulnerable. This should include, among others, increases in cash transfers for families with children who receive school meals, greater support to food banks and the support of NGO involvement.
- Although every government will prioritize and coordinate actions based on their assessment of the situation, food systems should be seen as essential services that will continue to operate during periods of lockdown, emergency, curfew or other health containment measures.
- Prompt policy and fiscal measures are needed to ensure food supply chains are kept alive, domestically and internationally, with food able to move across borders and new suppliers

sourced (where countries have stopped exporting), in compliance with existing food safety standards.

- Local government authorities play an important role in making sure food systems function in line with COVID-19 health directives; businesses, workers and farmers are protected and supported; and populations are well-informed.
- For open markets, roadside stands and informal markets, marketing measures tailored to local contexts should be implemented observing COVID-19 protocols for physical distancing and hygiene practices as advised by the World Health Organization.
- Providing consumers with reliable information on how to purchase and consume a healthy diet is important. While no foods or dietary supplements can prevent COVID-19 infection, a healthy diet supports a strong immune system. The information should cover how to select the right combinations of foods, guided by country food-based dietary guidelines or the Pacific Guidelines for Healthy Living for the Pacific SIDS.
- Immediate action should be taken to boost agricultural production in SIDS now and for the coming planting season. This includes providing financial services to enable small-scale producers and small and medium enterprises to overcome cash flow crises; distributing inputs for primary agricultural production to ensure food availability in the poorest areas; and providing digital services for agriculture and education. Pacific SIDS may actually see an increase in small-scale fishing activity, contrary to what is happening in other parts of the world. Some countries have begun to plan for this, particularly in the atolls, to ensure food security. This should be complemented by adequate management of fisheries to ensure pressure on already degraded areas is not exacerbated, as well as training and equipment use in line with regulations.
- Emphasis on small backyard gardens and functioning local supply chains is essential, targeting nutritious foods needed for a healthy diet.
- The COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate the current challenges of the cyclone season in the Pacific as well as the upcoming hurricane season in the Caribbean. National preparedness measures for COVID-19 and natural disasters need to be stepped up and early warning information systems for food shortages in place.
- Urgent attention should be given to promoting climate-resilient agricultural technologies such as hurricane-resistant shade houses, drought-tolerant seed and other modern technologies to sustain local production.

#### *Structural policy actions*

- Investing in SIDS means investing in more than 70 million people; investment is needed to scale up the SIDS Global Action Programme, which helps countries identify and carry out priority actions to improve nutrition and well-being, reduce poverty and inequalities and foster economic growth.
- Donors and other partners should work with SIDS-specific regional organizations and financial institutions on policy and investment to assist SIDS in strengthening their food resilience in the face of COVID-19.
- Pacific Island countries traditionally provide informal social protection systems through community and church groups to ensure that citizens receive support in times of need, including labour exchange and gift-giving to mark special feast days, births, weddings and deaths. Governments should develop policies and programmes to support both formal and community-based social protection programmes.
- The COVID-19 crisis presents opportunities to SIDS to enhance their digital preparedness (digitization of value chain actors, e-payments, Big Data analytics). Digital solutions can allay

concerns about physical contact, ease payment schemes between buyers and sellers and, using Fintech, address ongoing liquidity and funding issues associated with COVID-19. Many SIDS, especially in the Pacific Island countries, use community radio and public broadcasting to communicate essential messages to improve health, nutrition and livelihoods.

- International financial services for remittances and other transfers should be designated as essential and supported as a means of providing families with liquidity to maintain their livelihoods.
- Key investments are needed in infrastructure and institutions to help farmers and fisher folks comply with international food safety standards, and to improve traceability, production efficiency and market access for high-value food products.
- Better data and statistical capacities are needed to inform decision-making, planning and investment.

### Role of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

During this crisis, FAO will continue to advocate for the food security and nutrition of vulnerable populations in SIDS and for more sustainable food systems. Action, policy options and investment plans need to be tailored to the countries' realities and address their specific needs. The results from the diagnostic agriculture investment assessments FAO is conducting with the World Bank, alongside its partnerships with SIDS-specific organizations like the CDB and CARICOM and regional IFIs like the IDB, will help develop tailor-made solutions.

FAO has published policy briefs on a wide range of subjects to help member countries respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will continue to support an enabling environment for greater public and private sector dialogue, provide technical assistance and share knowledge and lessons on policy options for food security, nutrition and sustainable, inclusive food systems. Specifically, FAO will mobilize its technical expertise to design projects and programmes targeting populations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including smallholders, small and medium enterprises, markets and seasonal migrants and their families at origin.

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