



RESILIENT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS AND WORKERS' HEALTH DURING COVID-19 – CFS VIRTUAL EVENT, 21 JULY 2020

CFS CHAIRPERSON'S SUMMARY

As the world continues to battle COVID-19, many countries are experiencing the negative impacts of the pandemic on the functionality of their food supply chains.

It has become particularly evident that workers in perishable sectors - including meats, dairy products, fish products, fruits, and vegetables – are particularly vulnerable as they are required to continue working in their usual workplaces, where risks of COVID-19 transmission are much higher, as these workstations are often positioned in close proximity (e.g., in abattoirs and meatpacking/meat processing plants), entail exposure to large numbers of customers (e.g., food markets, retail), and their environmental and climatic conditions may promote the survival and the transmission of the virus (e.g., in-door workplaces with low temperatures and high humidity).

In this context, on 21 July 2020 the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) convened a virtual meeting to discuss the health of workers and the safety of commodities in food supply chains (production, processing and retailing) to strengthen the resilience of food systems and protect the health of food workers.

The meeting was informed by a technical [discussion paper](#) drafted by the CFS Secretariat jointly with members of the CFS (ad hoc) Advisory Group and other stakeholders.

Presentation Summaries:

Mr Jimmy Smith, Director-General, ILRI, noted the interconnectedness of the food supply chains, where people, animals and their products interact in multiple ways within diverse environments, and highlighted the efficiency and effectiveness of the One Health approach (human, animal and environmental health) for building more resilient and safer food systems. He also criticized the closure of fresh markets as common solution to stop the spreading of pandemics, instead, in his words, informal markets are important for local economies and they could and should be made much safer sources of food, and so doing they could increase the resilience of communities. Last, he urged the setup of a global surveillance system to prevent the outbreak of future new pandemics from animals to human beings.

Mr Maximo Torero, Chief-Economist, FAO, underscored the centrality of food safety for achieving food security, and the need to ensure healthy diets affordable to all. He encouraged taking advantage of the crisis to rebuild better, and adopting proper incentives for this to happen, to keep food chains operating and to help move food across countries. He welcomed the collaboration between FAO, WHO, CGIAR and other stakeholders for the preparation of the background paper, and lauded at CFS as a global multi-stakeholder convener and inclusive platform where such issues can be discussed and practical solutions found. He hoped that CFS

would continue this initiative on promoting food safety and worker health as part of its response to COVID-19, and ensured that FAO would be ready to support it.

Ms Lystra Antoine, CEO Global Food Safety Partnership, World Bank Group, reminded all participants that, while global markets are well supplied and food prices stable, food security risks are high as local food chains have been hugely disrupted. She pointed out that a large number of food workers are at risk because the disruption of local food supplies has left them without income. Despite generally good harvests, lockdowns, depreciation of currencies, barriers to trade and closures of many food-processing plants are resulting in high economic losses. She then listed the priorities of the World Bank Group: (i) reducing disruptions of local food supply chains; (ii) protection of incomes through increasing social protection programmes; (iii) ensuring safe and nutritious diets for all; (iv) adoption of one-health approach; (v) enforcing logistical regulations and clear guidelines for food workers to reduce their risks. Last, she provided three concrete examples of Bank operations in West Africa and Bangladesh aiming to provide technical assistance to borrowers, build capacities, and finance investments.

Mr Peter K. Ben Embarek, Manager INFOSAN (International Food Safety Authorities Network), WHO, highlighted recommendations on food safety during COVID-19 jointly prepared by FAO/WHO, and encouraged their adoption by national authorities, business associations and food businesses through the development of localized versions and illustrated manuals. He described the overall goal to keep the COVID-19 virus out of food supply chains, and food safety regulations and working conditions of workers as two complementary objectives. In this regard, he stressed how workers need to have incentives to report their illnesses or symptoms and stay away from the workplace if they are sick; otherwise, they have few options other than working. Last, he reiterated that hand washing and physical distancing remain critical to preventing transmission, especially when sourcing food at markets/supermarkets.

The open dialogue also benefited from insights provided by the Private Sector (PSM) and the Civil Society Mechanisms (CSM) of CFS whose representatives shared in detail some of their responses and the impacts these interventions are having in supporting countries and communities in dealing with the pandemic.

Mr A.G. Kawamura, on behalf of the PSM, brought his experience as a third-generation fruit and vegetable grower and shipper from Orange County, California, USA. Mr Kawamura highlighted the unprecedented scale of disruptions brought by COVID-19 as well as the opportunities presented to re-think/reshape our present food systems. He recognized that food safety is an issue of primary concern in many developed country, with a lot of protection regulations and systems already enacted for food safety, but no equivalent system in place to protect food workers. In his view, it would not be too difficult to adjust as the infrastructure and the regulations exist, at least in many developed countries. He also stressed the importance of “resilience,” which is embodied in the 2030 Agenda, and requires more attention and scaling to be effective globally.

Ms Sue Longley, Secretary General, IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations), speaking on behalf of CSM, expressed serious concerns for food workers who – already poorly treated - during the pandemic are squeezed between serious risks to their health and the risk of losing their jobs. She underscored the increasing risks to health, food security and employment caused by the pandemic, and emphasized application of ILO standards to ensure that basic human rights of food

workers are met – already among the three top most dangerous sectors in which to work. She urged rebalancing the discussion to look more closely at the problems of food workers and some essential measures for protecting their health and lives (protection clothing; social distance; rhythm of production; paid sick leave; etc). She advocated the adoption of formal regulations, legally enforced by governments, and more compliance inspections in the agriculture/food sector, as other voluntary measures have proven not to be successful, in her view. Last, she called for more and better collaboration and coordination among UN Agencies to ensure workers' rights are protected - as a key step to addressing COVID-19.

Open discussion:

Despite all the available resources, guidance, and policy papers issued on these matters by authoritative organizations, the resounding message during the open discussion was that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the many problems and weaknesses of food systems, hence the urgency to build resilience into our food systems to maintain them safely and operationally even during crisis periods.

Mr Martin Frick, Deputy Special Envoy UN Food Systems Summit also addressed the concept of strengthened resilience against shocks as an important entry point for addressing COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on food security and nutrition

Ms Virginia Siebenrok of WFP described the Program's experiences with the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems, listing key complications like restrictions in mobility and delays in supply chains, hampered performance of laboratory services, government services, transportation and distribution problems - all of which are essential to the delivery of food assistance. Meanwhile, food assistance needs have heightened, forcing WFP to purchase an additional 500,000 metric tons of food in 2020 when compared to the same period of 2019. With the objective of mitigating heightened food safety and food fraud risks, WFP has implemented a number of innovative contracting and payment methodologies.

Generally, the discussion recognized that the issues of food safety and workers' health are distinct but complementary for ensuring the functionality of reliable food supply chains. While food safety protocols are regulated and largely applied/enforced in developed economies, both investments and technical assistance are necessary to adopt adequate food safety protocols in LMICs. Staff of food safety regulatory authorities need training, for which digital technologies might be helpful.

This discussion highlighted that, in developing countries, informal markets are where most food is bought and sold. Unfortunately, infrastructure investment for such markets is very low, as the attention of policy makers is often more focused on large stores and supermarkets. Solutions will require local authorities to provide informal markets with essential infrastructure (electrification, sanitation, etc) to make them healthier and safer places for workers and consumers.

The discussion turned to incentives to help food production continue without disruption. An example of blueberry farms in the USA was offered, where business operators are protecting workers with gloves and masks. Broadly, the discussion highlighted the nexus between food safety, workers' health and supply chain resilience, with emphasis on the importance of a rights-based approach to protecting food workers while ensuring food supplies. Participants acknowledged the importance of improving the rights of workers, ensuring them decent work and better livelihoods. The plight of migrant workers and temporary workers was cited as already a

problem before COVID-19, where undocumented and illiterate workers are often vulnerable and their rights not protected. The response by Germany to protecting the rights of migrant workers in the meat industry by giving them full contractual labor protection was cited as a model approach.

Elvis Beytullayev of the International Labor Organization reported that 170,000 agricultural workers are killed each year, with millions of agricultural workers injured or poisoned. Despite these tragic numbers, only 18 countries have ratified Convention 184 (2001) for Safety and Health in Agriculture. All workers have the right to work in safe and healthy conditions, he said, and significant governmental policy changes are necessary. We must turn this challenge into new opportunities to build back better, focusing policy attention and investments for achieving better food safety, healthier people and planet, he concluded.

Mr Michael Fakhri, Special Rapporteur Right to Food, provided closing remarks at the event, summarizing the main concepts and ideas discussed. He focused on three core areas: substantive issues, issue framing, and global governance. On the first, he highlighted worker safety and informal markets, noting that if CFS focuses on food worker safety, unions and the ILO should be part of that conversation, with CFS developing partnerships with the ILO and IUF. On informal markets, he emphasized a need for more research on such markets, as this is where most people in the world get their food. Governments should look into investing in infrastructure for these markets, and draw upon CFS' policy tools on this subject. On issue framing, Fakhri believed COVID-19 reflects a bigger problem of biodiversity loss from habitat destruction, hence CFS should collaborate with entities like the Secretariat of the Convention on Biodiversity. Last, on global governance, Fakhri believes that CFS must "step up" to meet the COVID challenge, and serve as the preeminent space for governments, civil society, private sector, and all relevant international institutions to collaborate and coordinate.

In his concluding remarks, **Mr Thanawat Tiensin**, CFS Chairperson, called upon everyone to work to make our food systems healthier and safer, including practical solutions for ensure formal and informal markets are healthier and safer places for both producers and consumers. He pointed out that the conversation would continue during a CFS Special Event scheduled for 13-15 October, where Covid-19 and its impacts on global food security and nutrition will be addressed specifically at the 14 October plenary session. The Chair's Summary from this event will be circulated as one of the background documents for that discussion.

In advance of this event and discussion, participants were informed of a number of published guidance documents from CFS member organizations, including the WHO, FAO, CGIAR system, ILO, the World Bank Group and others. Some of those documents are available at the links below:

- FAO: <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/en/>
- WHO: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- CGIAR: <http://a4nh.cgiar.org/covidhub/>
- ILRI: <https://www.ilri.org/tags/covid19>
- WFP: <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/covid-19-pandemic>
- UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19>
- The World Bank Group: www.ifc.org/foodsafety
- ILO: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742023.pdf

