

➤ **Two specific questions will be posed to Minister Khodjaev:**

1) *Round 1: What types of innovation has Uzbekistan developed to respond to the recent pandemic & improve food security?*

2) *Round 3: How do you see the application of digital technologies in Uzbekistan contributing to improving food security and preventing further pandemics?*

Round 1: What types of innovation has Uzbekistan developed to respond to the recent pandemic & improve food security?

➤ Good morning dear colleagues and participants of this high-level Panel. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to share our experience in this platform.

➤ When thinking about this question, I found myself reflecting on what innovation actually means. It can mean the introduction of a new product or technology, but it can also be about a new way of doing something or even a new way of thinking.

➤ Indeed, the disruption of livelihoods and food supply chains in Uzbekistan due to the pandemic has inevitably had an impact on access to certain agriculture and food products for many Uzbek farmers and consumers. We have tried to respond to this challenge in several 'innovative' ways. This has included:

- Introducing a range of new social safety net programs to assist vulnerable groups with access to essential food purchases and expansion of existing social support programs to partially offset lost incomes;

- Targeted measures to stabilize consumer food prices, primarily through enhanced use of the national strategic food reserve;

- Upgrading of some of the existing 'green corridors' at the borders;

- Streamlining certain administrative procedures for agri-food traders;

- Reduction of some agri-food import tariff rates; and

- Introduction of payment holidays for some farm credit repayments.

➤ The pandemic has highlighted the inter-connectivity of agri-food trade and markets and the mutual inter-dependence of Uzbekistan, as a double land-locked country, and the need to work more closely with our neighbors to ensure regional food security, particularly in times of crisis.

➤ The pandemic has also highlighted the need to enhance national food security monitoring and surveillance systems and to revisit the role and future needs and requirements of our strategic food reserves system. These systems require investment in new digital systems that ensure more rapid data transfer and dissemination.

➤ Another important area is that Government of Uzbekistan has now committed significant resources to support the gradual upgrade our agriculture research systems, enhance agriculture education and training services, and establish an effective farm advisory services network to help farmers and agri-businesses to develop and grow their businesses.

➤ We are planning this in an integrated way, guided by best international practices in the development of agriculture knowledge and innovation systems, otherwise known as AKIS. We believe that this 'systems' approach will be the most sustainable way to promote the gradual modernization & innovation required in the Uzbek agri-food sector. Only through improving the knowledge of our farmers, we can ensure the safety and hygiene of our agri-food products.

➤ We are also investing in the upgrade of regional agri-logistics networks and services, to improve access to regional and local markets and other essential services, aiming to improve post-harvest technologies, reduce losses and enhance the quality and value of agriculture production, shortening supply chains and reducing transaction costs. And the recent pandemic has encouraged us to accelerate this investment programme.

➤ We also sincerely hope that forums such as this can also provide a platform to strengthen existing regional partnerships and build more robust international alliances to enable us all to more effectively respond to both the on-going pandemic & other, as yet unknown future crises.

Thank you for your attention!

Round 3: How do you see the application of digital technologies in Uzbekistan contributing to improving food security and preventing further pandemics?

Thank you for the question.

➤ In Uzbekistan, we are at quite an early stage in development of digital solutions to help improve our food systems and enhance national food security.

➤ One of the most immediate priorities which we are focused upon is improving our agri-food information, statistics and data management systems. If we can improve the flow of data on the sector and more effectively monitor any changes, we can use this information to better identify problems and guide the design of better policies and programmes to address them.

➤ Therefore, in 2021, we are planning to launch a range of initiatives to gradually upgrade our agri-food data collection systems and improve the quality of sector statistics and information, and also, in parallel, to develop a range of new public information services to provide farmers with the information that they need to manage their businesses and ensure the quality and safety of their production (i.e., agri-food market, crop forecasting, farm performance monitoring and AKIS related services).

➤ Currently, we are developing the Agri-food e-market place. We recognise that many of our small-scale farmers lack market information and lack access to markets for their produce. And through the creation of electronic agriculture marketplaces or platforms we will be able to provide more accessible, transparent information and trading spaces to bring producers and purchasers of agriculture goods and services together.

➤ The electronic agriculture market platform we are currently developing as a pilot (with EU and WB support) will be an online resource to be used by individual farmers and/or groups of farmers to identify and purchase essential farm inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc.) and to offer products for sale from their production.

➤ Users will be registered, enabling them to conduct electronic bidding, offer products for sale, post and receive marketing information about the products and services offered and other related services.

➤ We also plan to develop a specific section of the e-market place to be dedicated to the needs of small-scale producers and producer groups, to encourage smaller transactions and provide more targeted support to meet their specific needs in procurement, marketing of their products.

➤ The system will also be linked to available financial support mechanisms (including subsidies and credit programmes), enabling farmers to make on-line applications and hopefully to also allow us to establish an on-line approvals system for processing applications. The design of the small-scale farmers e-platform will be prioritized in the design and piloting phase which is being launched during this year.

➤ We believe that investment in the development of such e-market systems will, in the medium term, provide a much more robust and sustainable way in which we can help to stabilize rural incomes and improve access to food, ensuring the continuity of critical food supply chains between rural and urban areas and also ensuring that people along the agri-food supply chain are better informed and therefore reducing the risks of transmitting infectious diseases in the future.

➤ We are keen to accelerate this digital transformation process, but we also want to be realistic about the pace by which such change can happen, given the current knowledge and information gaps which exist, both in the private and public sector.

➤ Investing in digital technology is very attractive for many who are new to the agri-food sector. They often see it as some kind of magic 'silver bullet' that can transform our outdated systems and practices overnight. But as the Nobel prize winner Christian Lange (Кристиан Лэн) once famously said "Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master."

➤ And we want to be sure that we can drive the uptake of technology in the best interests of the Uzbek Agri-food sector and not allow the technology to drive us to find solutions that may not be compatible with our culture, interests or capacities. And we very much hope we can identify suitable and trusted international partners to guide and assist us in making the best choices.

Thank you for your attention!