

# Food Security in the Mediterranean Region: Ensuring Food Supplies in Times of Pandemic

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COVID-19 has raised serious concerns about food security in the world. As early as June 2020, the chief economist of the World Food Programme (WFP), Arif Husain, titled an opinion piece published by the New York Times: "After the Pandemic, a Global Hunger Crisis."<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (April 2021), IFPRI has just published a report stating that "COVID-19 caused widespread loss of livelihoods and incomes, threatening the food security, health and nutrition of poor and marginalized people around the world."<sup>2</sup> Food security is indeed multidimensional and the pandemic has impacted several of these dimensions in multiple ways and will continue to do so. In addition, these impacts are quite variable in time and space, depending on the specifics of local situations. What about the Mediterranean region? The purpose of this essay is to answer this question. The main focus will be placed on ensuring food supplies in southern Mediterranean countries, because the political and geopolitical stakes involved are huge. But

in addition to these concerns about availability, we will also consider the issues linked to another "pillar" of food security,<sup>3</sup> namely access to food, because these issues are also important on both the North and South shores of the common sea. In addition, they may be even more important than availability issues in terms of human welfare. After a review of the impacts of the pandemic on these two aspects of food security, we will reflect on the future: what can we expect in terms of future threats and what policy implications should be derived from these threats?

## Impact of COVID-19

### *On Availability*

The pandemic has affected food supplies in various ways; the most immediate impact has been due to disrupted *logistics* caused by the various sanitary measures taken by governments restricting the movements of people and goods. These have directly affected agro-industries and the various food value chains. Such difficulties have been reported in the cases of Turkey, Albania, Morocco and Egypt in particular.<sup>4</sup> In Tunisia, a survey of agro-food enter-

<sup>1</sup> HUSAIN, Arif, "After the Pandemic, a Global Hunger Crisis?", *The New York Times*, 12 June, 2020. [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/coronavirus-global-hunger.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/coronavirus-global-hunger.html)

<sup>2</sup> SWINNEN, Johan and McDERMOTT, John, (eds.) *COVID-19 and global food security*, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 2020. [www.ifpri.org/publication/covid-19-and-global-food-security](http://www.ifpri.org/publication/covid-19-and-global-food-security)

<sup>3</sup> We refer here to the definition of food security formulated by the UN Committee on Food Security in 2009: *Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The four pillars of food security are availability, access, utilization and stability.*" This definition is the result of long debates, negotiations and compromises. It expresses the current international consensus on the multiple dimensions involved. All of them have already been, and will continue to be, affected by the pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Much of the empirical evidence quoted in this essay is derived from a report prepared by CIHEAM in 2020, based on a review of the literature, on the consultation of various documents and data available on the Internet and on interviews with knowledgeable experts from a selected set of southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey) [CIHEAM, *The COVID 19 Pandemic: Threats on Food Security in the Mediterranean Region*, 2020].

prises indicated that 80% of them had faced import or supply problems. With a progressive relaxation of the sanitary disciplines, in addition to the widespread exemptions from these given to workers in the food supply chains, these negative impacts of the pandemic have subsequently diminished. In addition, there are signs that consumers have adapted their behaviour to the new situation, in particular with the development of home delivery, notably in the case of Tunisia.

### Export restrictions imposed by traditional suppliers have been a major cause for concern in several southern Mediterranean countries, which are heavily dependent on imports for the supply of basic food stuffs

*Export restrictions* imposed by traditional suppliers have been a major cause for concern in several southern Mediterranean countries, which are heavily dependent on imports for the supply of basic food stuffs (cereals, vegetable oils and sugar in particular). And indeed in the spring of 2020, several “Black Sea” exporters, such as Russia, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, which are important suppliers of wheat for southern Mediterranean countries, notably Egypt, introduced or seriously considered introducing export restrictions. Even Romania, the second-biggest wheat shipper in the EU and one of Egypt’s main wheat suppliers, banned wheat exports to countries outside the EU. These measures were rescinded or liberally relaxed at the end of May. But they did raise fears in our selected countries. Accordingly, the government of Algeria, for instance, was able to purchase 2.55 million tons of wheat between December 2019 and April 2020, which was well in excess of what had been planned for the 2019-2020 campaign. And this was done during a period when the Algerian government had decided to reduce its overall import bill from 44 to 31 billion US dollars because of balance of payment concerns. On 22 March, it decided to exempt the food sector from that reduction imperative. *Mo-*

*rocco* also increased its imports of cereals, barley and wheat in particular. Similarly, *Albania* increased its imports of cereals, pulses, milk and eggs during the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same period a year earlier. Even *Turkey*, which is traditionally a net importer of wheat, managed to keep importing.

*Domestic agricultural production* has also been impacted by the pandemic. Input shortages during the planting season have been reported in some countries (e.g. Turkey). Similarly, the price of fertilizer increased in Albania, but this hike was also due to the devaluation of the Lek. In Morocco, the grain harvest was well below normal but this was due to a severe drought, not the COVID pandemic. Some impacts were positive. Generally the work force remained available at the farm level. It was even higher than normal in some places, notably Albania, because normal seasonal migration flows to Europe, mainly to Italy in the case of Albania, were disrupted. In remote areas of Algeria, customary organizations have been mobilized to contribute to the harvest.

### Retail stores were, on the whole, well prepared for the surge in demand. The stabilization of prices was also made easier by the numerous closures of hotels, restaurants and cafés and the drastic reduction in the number of foreign tourists

In several countries, Algeria and Turkey in particular, serious actual or feared disruptions have been reported in the livestock sector: shortages in Algeria of pasteurized milk sold in plastic bags, a product popular among the poor; the devaluation of the Turkish lira, which coincided with the COVID crisis, led to increases in the cost of imported livestock feed, a major input for this sector. The magnitude of the actual impact on domestic production is not clear. In Tunisia, it was reported that the harvest of fruits and vegetables, notably apricots,

peaches and tomatoes, in coastal areas such as the Cap Bon and Sahel regions had been threatened by labour shortages.

#### *On Access and Price Stability*

At the beginning of the pandemic, many countries experienced a phenomenon of panic buying by consumers fearing the disruption of food supply chains. This led to massive and unreasonable purchases of storable products such as flour, pasta, rice, semolina, pulses, milk powder, sugar and oils. Temporary shortages and consumer price hikes were reported in several countries. Generally, however, these did not last long<sup>5</sup> as governments intervened quickly to stabilize prices through different actions,<sup>6</sup> and they advertised these actions in order to reassure consumers. In addition, this period coincided with the beginning of Ramadan, traditionally a time of increased purchases of food in the countries considered here. As it happened, retail stores were, on the whole, well prepared for this surge in demand. The stabilization of prices was also made easier by the numerous closures of hotels, restaurants and cafés and the drastic reduction in the number of foreign tourists.

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The situation in *Lebanon* has been and continues to be particularly critical. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated a very deep general economic and now political crisis. To illustrate one example: prices of food included in the “Survival Minimum Expendi-

ture Basket” (SMEB), monitored by the World Food Programme, increased by more than 40% between September 2019 and March 2020, the prices of sunflower oil and sugar having increased respectively by 72% and 66%. The crisis is so severe that the exchange rate of the Lebanese pound has exploded on the black market reaching up to 12,500 pounds per dollar at the beginning of April 2021, as compared to 1,540, which had been the fixed rate for a long time, making imports much more expensive. As a result, the food security of the poor and, in particular of the many Syrian refugees, has deteriorated considerably.

**Several countries of the region are extremely dependent on food imports and this situation will worsen**

But the greatest impact of the pandemic on demand is the result of drastic reductions in incomes through multiple channels related to the major global economic crisis: reductions in remittances from family members working abroad, reductions in export revenues, reduction in domestic employment particularly in the informal sectors as well as in some very vulnerable economic sectors, such as tourism and air transportation. The most vulnerable sections of the population are most affected. Their food security is most at risk, as they spend a disproportionate share of their income on food expenditures. These impacts have been felt on both sides of the common sea. In the North, the most dramatic development has been the explosion in the number of people using various forms of food banks (“e.g. “Restos du Coeur” in France, FESBAL in Spain, Rete Banco Alimentare in Italy). In the South, governments responded to these shocks in a variety of ways, as illustrated by the various examples mentioned in the CIHEAM report quoted above.

<sup>5</sup> None of our seven countries were among those where, according to the FAO, “prices of one or more basic food commodities are at abnormally high levels in main markets, which could negatively impact access to food at national level” [www.fao.org/giews/food-prices/home/en/](http://www.fao.org/giews/food-prices/home/en/)

<sup>6</sup> For examples of specific measures in various countries, see the CIHEAM report quoted above.

## Future Threats and Policy Implications

It is impossible to predict how long the pandemic will last and how deep the economic crisis and its various impacts on food security in specific countries will be. One thing is for sure however: the orders of magnitude involved are unprecedented. Public authorities will need to monitor these developments very closely and be prepared to intervene, perhaps massively, bearing in mind the fragility of public finances in many southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. So, effective public policies to ensure food security will be called for. Undoubtedly, governments will legitimately strive to secure adequate supplies of food through domestic production and imports.

But the main policy challenge for public authorities will be to ensure access for the most vulnerable sections of the population in both urban and rural areas. As already indicated, governments of the region have a rich experience in this domain. Yet, effectively targeting the poor is always difficult. Useful lessons can be learnt from recent innovative policy experiments in other regions, notably in sub-

Saharan Africa. These are based on the recognition that the livelihood systems of poor households are complex and often change rapidly. They need to be monitored closely and frequently. In this respect, the use of new “high frequency” household survey instruments has proven to be very effective in several cases. Similarly, IFPRI has reported that a host of diverse innovations, involving governments and private actors, have been observed in food supply chains around the world in recent months.

In conclusion, southern and eastern Mediterranean countries have weathered the pandemic crisis relatively well. The number of cases and the number of deaths appear quite moderate when compared to other countries and other regions. Several countries, notably Israel and Morocco, launched vigorous vaccination campaigns and, globally, the food security crisis has not been very severe. Yet, the concern for the future remains very serious. Several countries of the region are extremely dependent on food imports and this situation will worsen. And the weakest sections of the population are very vulnerable. Strong and innovative public policies will be called for to ensure food security for all.