Impact of COVID-19 on food security and agriculture

- The onset of the economic crisis during the last quarter of 2019, exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to an economic recession, compounding existing vulnerabilities and the already challenging situation the country is facing.
- The combined impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and the economic freefall on people’s livelihoods is catastrophic, particularly for the most vulnerable among the Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, such as youth, daily workers, female-headed households, the elderly and people with specific needs.
- Movement restrictions, loss of income and price inflation have led to declining purchasing power, increasing the food insecurity of vulnerable populations.
- The agriculture sector, which has already been disproportionately affected by the current economic and financial crisis, is seriously impacted by an increase in the costs of imported agricultural inputs (including seeds, fertilizers and fodder), thus putting in peril the coming cropping seasons.
- COVID-19 is also exacerbating pre-existing structural issues in the agriculture sector. Poultry and dairy producers are facing increased input costs, thus reducing their profitability. This is also affecting consumers as the price of eggs and dairy products is increasing.
Lebanon is currently at Level 3 of COVID-19 transmission scenarios. Between 16 March and 4 May 2020, the country was under full lockdown, including night curfews and restrictions on movement. Agriculture and food processing were exempt from these restrictions but were, nonetheless, impacted. The COVID-19 containment measures were relatively successful in flattening the curve of infections and encouraged the Government to gradually relax the restrictions and to reopen the economy. By early July, the Government of Lebanon extended the COVID-19 general measures until early August. However, the bulk of movement restrictions have been removed and almost all sectors of the economy are back to normal, including the reopening of the airport. The curve of infections has remained relatively flat with occasional spikes. Although movement restrictions have been removed, the impact of the financial and economic crisis, compounded by the impact of COVID-19, has recently escalated due to the rapid devaluation of the national currency, increasing inflation and deepening poverty. The expected combined effects on food security by the end of 2020 are as follows:

- Access to food is and will be a major concern among refugees and vulnerable Lebanese populations as a result of very high food price inflation, as well as reduced income and livelihood opportunities.
- Over 1.2 million refugees will not be able to obtain access to the Survival and Minimum Expenditure Basket in 2020, according to WFP.
- Referrals and requests for food assistance for refugees will continue to increase exponentially, compared with 2019. A similar trend is expected for vulnerable Lebanese households.
- The total cereal production in 2020 is predicted to be similar to the five-year average. However, domestic cereal production covers less than 20 percent of the consumption. Lebanon’s low foreign currency reserves will hinder the importing of food with direct implications on the replenishment of supplies. This will result in a further deterioration of the food security situation over the coming months.
- The agriculture sector has moved to a low input system, as most farmers face high input costs, and agri-businesses import most inputs. This is likely to result in a decline in yields and marketable production. Increasing difficulties in importing agricultural inputs could affect the sowing of the 2020/21 barley and wheat crops expected to begin in October.
- The impact of COVID-19 on wholesale markets remains unknown, but it is likely that markets will continue to operate on a smaller scale to avoid crowding of people.

Likely evolution of the impacts of COVID-19 on food security

In addition, given the restrictions on foreign currency transactions, in place since October 2019, agri-businesses and importers have had their credit facilities closed, restricting their ability to conduct business, resulting in potential shortages in imported goods. Furthermore, new imports need to be funded with United States dollars obtained after November 2019 and require advance payments to foreign suppliers due to the low credit rating of Lebanon.

In January 2020, a study by the Centre de recherches et d’études agricoles Libanais estimated that, on average, the value of the 2020 agricultural production would decrease by about 38 percent, including a 47 percent decline in plant production and 26 percent decline in animal production.
The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is supporting the increase of national agricultural productivity, thus increasing domestic food production.

Under the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19, FAO is aiming to distribute vouchers for agricultural inputs and livestock feed to 25,000 vulnerable Lebanese farming families. FAO will also support the food security and nutrition of small-scale farming households through the provision of productive assets, focusing on female-headed households.

FAO is also implementing longer-term food security programmes to support the agricultural livelihoods of vulnerable people. Under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan for 2017–2020, FAO is implementing the following initiatives:

- Enhancing the resilience of vulnerable refugee communities through cash-for-work programmes in Anjar Commune.
- Strengthening the livelihoods and food security of host communities and Syrian refugees through the promotion of sustainable agricultural development.
- Providing youth with access to means of production, as well as vocational training programmes. As a result, they could gain employment in the farming business and act as entrepreneurs for improved agricultural production.
- Promoting agricultural principles and good practices for associations/cooperatives, and improving farmers’ access to land, markets and agricultural inputs, focusing on women’s cooperatives.
- Enabling increased financial and technical support for Lebanese smallholder farmers, including access to innovative credit schemes that promote private agricultural investment.
- Improving vulnerable people’s access to temporary and seasonal labour opportunities in the agriculture sector, through cash-based interventions.
- Reducing agro-chemical pollution along the Litani river through the adoption of good agricultural practices and integrated pest management practices.

Other FAO initiatives to support vulnerable households include:

- Supporting the Ministry of Agriculture with updating the agriculture sector strategy with an action plan for 2021–2025, which includes a specific component on emergency response to the economic crisis and COVID-19 pandemic.
- Drafting a guidance note on agricultural health safety measures for farmers and seasonal labourers, in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Development Programme.
- Drafting a guidance note on agricultural input voucher schemes, based on the FAO publication entitled “Guidelines for input trade fairs and voucher schemes”, to share common and harmonized concepts among partners of the Food Security and Agriculture Working Group.
- Promoting agro-forestry and agro-sylvo-pastoral practices on private and communal lands, benefiting small-scale agriculture while conserving forest cover. This would improve livelihoods, conserve ecosystem services and decrease the risk of forest fires.
Funding

FAO requires
USD 75.6 million

- USD 18.7 million under the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19
- USD 56.9 million for 2020 under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan for 2017–2020

to assist
189 000 people

FUNDING GAP
USD 73.8 million
98%

Resource partners
the Governments of Belgium, Canada and Norway

USD 1.8 million

Coordination and partnerships

- FAO is coordinating with relevant Ministries and public institutions, including the Ministries of Agriculture, Energy and Water, Economy and Trade; the National Council for Scientific Research; the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute; the Green Plan; and the Directorate General of Cooperatives.
- FAO continues to work closely with partners in the Food Security Sector (including national and international non-governmental organizations).
- FAO is engaging with resource partners through an informal Donor Coordination Group on Agriculture, which held its first meeting on 30 June 2020.

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