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Covid-19 Pandemic and Food Security in the PAM region

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a tremendous impact on our societies, notably with severe strains on our healthcare systems, dramatic consequences on our economies, and serious disruptions to our daily lives. In this context, and following the warnings issued by relevant international organizations, it is essential to consider the effects that the pandemic may have on food security and for the international community to take appropriate and urgent action to mitigate the situation.

As of early April 2020, there has been minimal disruptions to the global food supply chain, but this may not be the case for long. Experts are suggesting that while the current global food supply is adequate to meet the demand, disruptions in the global supply chains and panic buying by wholesalers may lead to severe market disturbances, causing prices to rise and reduce access to food for the most vulnerable populations.

A number of countries have begun to put export restrictions on certain staple foods to protect domestic markets. This is a worrying sign, because such actions may have disruptive impact on supply chains. The Directors-General of the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the World Trade Organization, have issued a joint statement urging governments to refrain from taking trade-related measures that would disrupt global supply chains.

There are many countries that could suffer from market shocks and potential food insecurity. According to the World Food Program (WFP), countries in the PAM region which are at the most risk are Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Palestine, and Syria.

Furthermore, the WFP indicates that the most vulnerable countries are those which are considered low-income, those which are heavily dependent on imports, those which have limited foreign currency reserves, or those which are heavily dependent on the tourism sector.

Moreover, the report identifies Africa as the region most at risk, as it is home to the majority of the world's food insecure populations. In addition, many countries of the Sahel, southern neighbours of the PAM region, are indicated as the most vulnerable. Previous epidemics can give us a glimpse of impact on food security in Africa. For example, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 there was a dramatic increase on staple food prices, up to 150% in the affected areas. Additionally, there is currently an unprecedented plague of locust swarms in East Africa and surrounding regions which are destroying crops and may further severely affect food security in these countries.

In addition to the direct consequences on the food insecure populations, sharp spikes in staple food prices are known to trigger social unrest and violence, including food riots, anti-government demonstrations, and an array of anti-social behaviour. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this may result in the collapse of

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quarantine and social distancing measures, looting and other types of property crimes, or even larger political unrest, thereby exacerbating the epidemic and causing further instability.

There are several policy recommendations for countries to take, which can mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on food security:

- To closely monitor food prices and markets, and to disseminate this information transparently in order to guide government policy and [avoid public panic](#);
- To meet the immediate food needs of their most vulnerable populations and boost social protection programs, including direct cash transfer assistance, for those whose livelihoods are dependent on the [most affected sectors](#);
- To keep the flow of trade open and ensure that global supply chains continue to [function normally](#). This particularly includes the constant review of pandemic response policies and their potential impact, avoiding imposing measures that would restrict trade and mobility of commodities, removing logistical bottlenecks, and reviewing tariff and taxation policies. Countries must not use the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse to issue [disruptive trade protectionist policies](#).

Parliaments, through their legislative and oversight functions, play a key role in responding to the pandemic and in ensuring that governments properly address food security at the national level. On a regional level, PAM as a platform can assist, in cooperation with the UN, in identifying and sharing best practices and lessons learned in the event of food shortages.

PAM has always paid special attention to food security, as the Mediterranean region has particular vulnerabilities in this regard, notably associated with the effects of climate change and management of water resources. Most recently, PAM joined the Parliamentary Network for Food Security in Africa and the Arab World, which held its first meeting in Morocco in October 2019.//

