

# Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Health risks; safety of workers and food safety

Bulletin 4

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## 1. Editorial



In this new issue of the bulletin, we analyse health risks to people involved in the food system value chain – from workers to consumers – due to the COVID-19 crisis.

In this context of crisis, which affects the normal functioning of food systems' value chain, implementing measures to keep workers and consumers from contracting COVID-19 is not enough. It is also imperative to maintain high safety standards in order to keep the spread of foodborne diseases under control and thus prevent them from becoming yet another public health problem.

Therefore, all actions aimed at safeguarding the safety of workers and maintaining food safety are essential to minimize the chances of workers and consumers getting sick with COVID-19 or contracting foodborne diseases during this crisis.

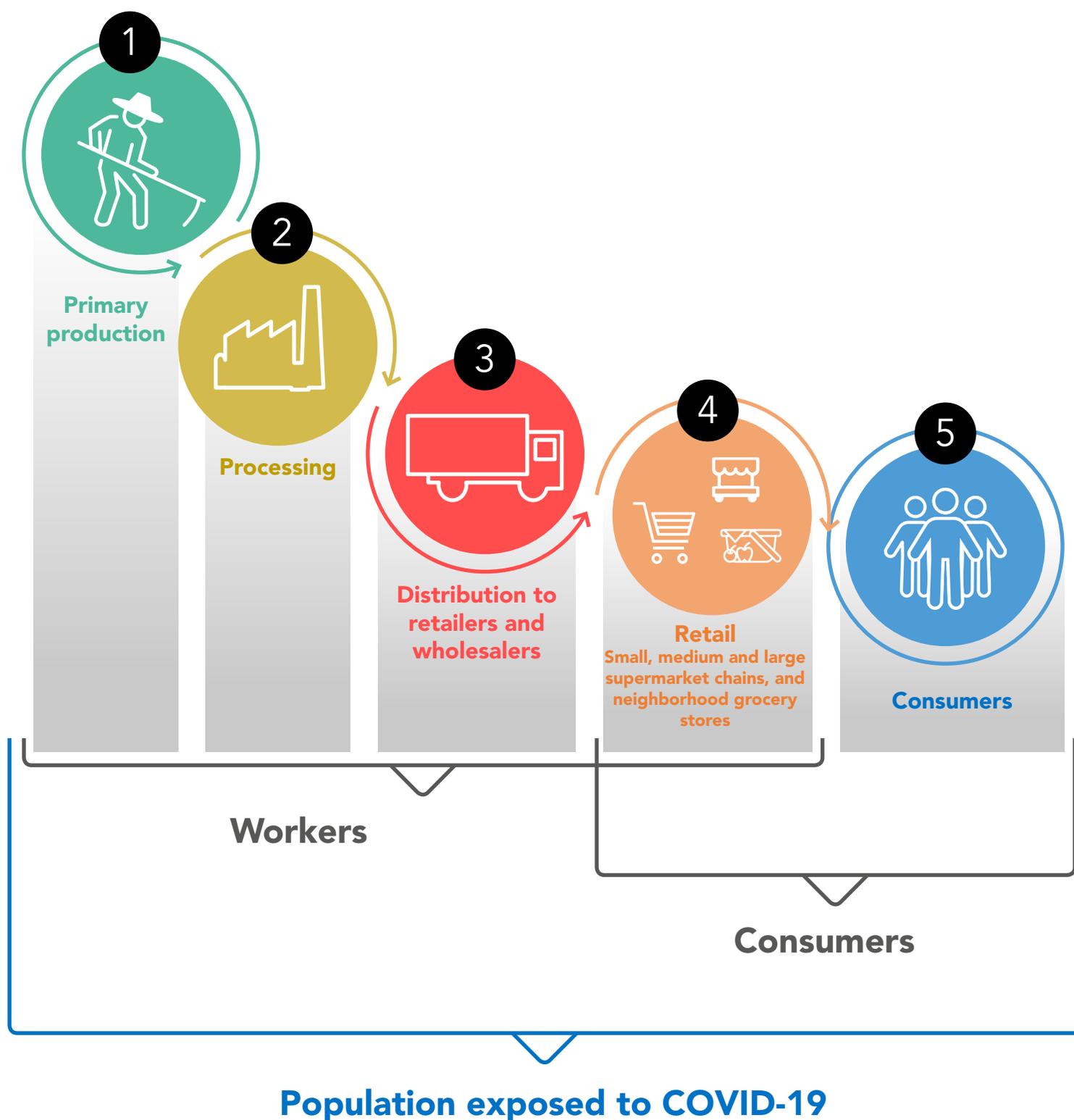


## 2. Risks of contracting COVID-19 for people in the food system value chain



In this section, we will assess the risks of contracting COVID-19 for people involved in the value chain of the food system. To do this, we start by identifying the population exposed throughout the chain (see Figure 1).

Figure 1/ Population exposed to COVID-19, according to their location in the value chain.



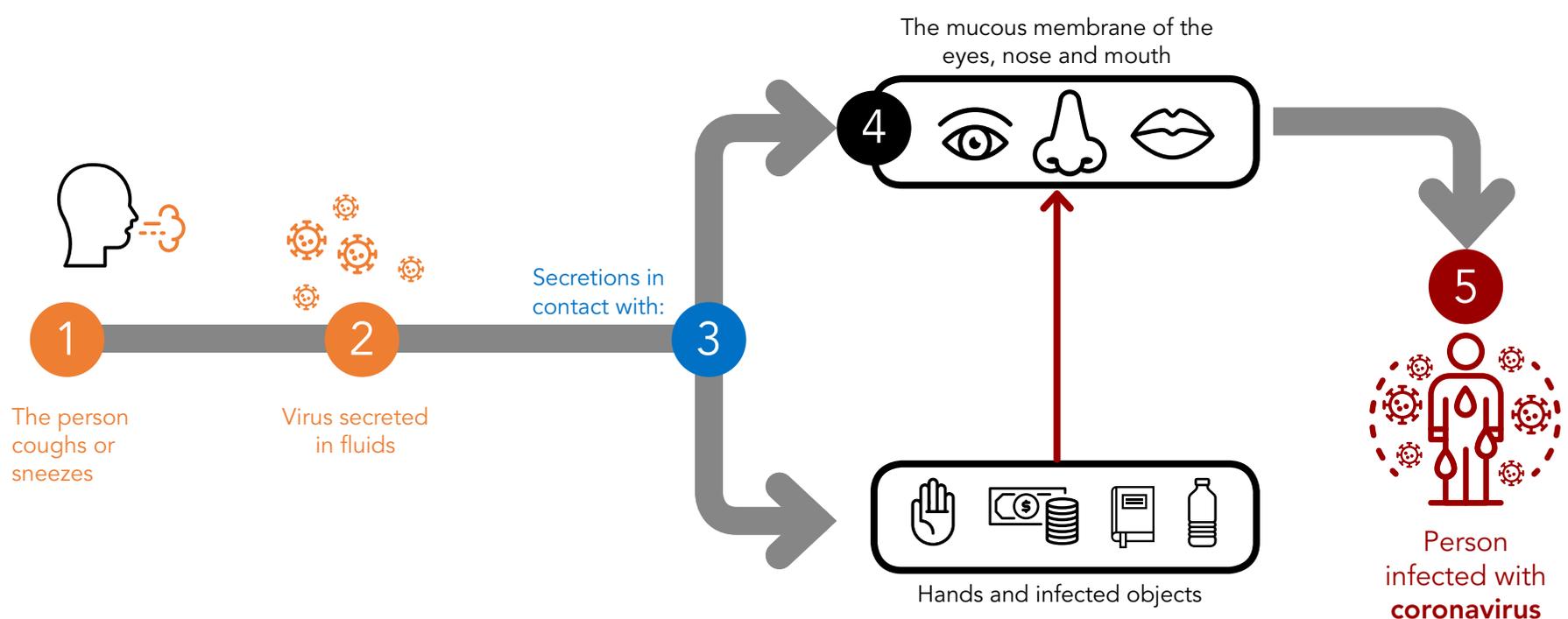
## 2.1. Worker exposure risk to COVID-19



### Contact between people is the main source of infection

Information on the origin and routes of transmission of the virus responsible for COVID-19 is and remains scarce. However, the behaviour and characteristics of the virus can be predicted from data on similar viruses, such as those responsible for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Given the behaviour of the above viruses, it is very unlikely that SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted through food. That said, precautions should be taken with the packaging used to protect or preserve food.

Figura 2/ Routes of transmission of COVID-19



So far, experts have indicated that there are two main routes of infection: (i) direct contact between people, and (ii) contact with contaminated inanimate objects (fomites).<sup>1</sup>

According to laboratory studies, the virus can survive, and maintain its infectious power on certain surfaces. The survival time varies according to surface and can be maintained for a few hours on copper objects, and up to three days on stainless steel and plastics (WHO, 2020a). It should be noted that coronaviruses cannot multiply in food, as they need an animal or human host to do so (FAO and WHO, 2020a).

Hence, in order to reduce the transmission of the disease, most countries have decided to tackle COVID-19 by implementing strict physical distancing measures, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b). One of this measure's consequences is that many workers have stopped working in offices to telework from their homes. However, for the vast majority of workers in the agrifood sector, working from home is not possible; consequently, it is critical to put in place a series of security measures that will allow them to perform their functions in the food production and supply chain without putting their health at risk. Only with healthy and safe workers can food products move along the chain and be available to final consumers.

<sup>1</sup> A fomite is an inert and lifeless object or material capable of carrying pathogenic organisms (bacteria, fungi, viruses, and parasites). For example, fomites are clothing, bed sheets, unsterilized hospital equipment, etc.



### **Markets, where it all started.**

One hypothesis is that the spread of the virus started in a wet market, where live animals are kept, slaughtered and dismembered. That said, as far as the spread of COVID-19 is concerned, zoonotic transmission – from animals to people – is not the main means of infection, but contact between people, as mentioned above. These markets pose a particular risk of transmission of other pathogens between workers and customers. Thus a strict application of practices that ensure food safety is recommended. Common disinfectants and sanitizers (such as soap, chlorine or quaternary ammonium, among others) can eliminate most pathogens, including coronaviruses.

## **2.2. Consumer exposure risk to COVID-1**



### **Is there a risk of transmitting COVID-19 through food?**

As mentioned above, despite having little specific information about the virus responsible for COVID-19, it is assumed that its behaviour and characteristics are similar to those of other viruses responsible for respiratory diseases (such as SARS and/or MERS). As noted above, SARS-CoV-2 is very unlikely to be transmitted through food, since the virus needs an animal or human host to do so.

Although genetic material (RNA) of the COVID-19 virus has been isolated from stool samples of infected patients, no cases have been reported, nor is there evidence of faecal-oral transmission, which is particularly important for food handlers.

### **Is COVID-19 a zoonosis?**

According to nucleic acid sequence analysis, bats are presumed to be the most likely reservoir of SARS-CoV-2. However, to date, there are no documented cases of direct transmission from bats to humans, so other wildlife species may have acted as intermediate hosts between bats and humans; nor is there evidence to identify with certainty the involvement of other wildlife species. Although disease transmission has only been reported as a result of human-to-human transmission, identifying which wildlife species contributed to animal-human transmission at the start of the outbreak remains a critical task to prevent the virus from re-emerging once the current pandemic is under control (FAO, 2020).

### **The risk of going shopping**

We know that the main agent of transmission of the COVID-19 is direct contact between people, either when a healthy person is exposed to contaminated droplets emitted by an infected person (sick or asymptomatic), or by contact with fomites contaminated with SARS-CoV-2 (FAO and WHO, 2020a). As a result, consumers are exposed to the disease when they attend spaces where many people circulate and where it is not possible to maintain physical distance.

In most parts of the world, food sale is considered an activity that cannot be interrupted by sanitary measures. Therefore, supermarkets, food markets, retail trade, and free trade fairs continue to operate, despite quarantine and restrictions on trade operation in general.

In many markets and free fairs, there is still a large influx of people, so the authorities are implementing measures to reduce infection risks. On the other hand, supermarkets and retail stores have limited the number of people who can shop at the same time in the stores. However, this type of measure has had negative side effects – mainly in supermarkets – by displacing the concentration of people from inside

to outside the premises, where they accumulate waiting their turn to enter, as has been observed by FAO's national offices in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Most hotels, restaurants, and cafes have closed, as almost all governments have prohibited them from serving customers in person. In any case, the relevant authorities have generally not placed restrictions on the online sale and home delivery of their products, which has reduced the risk of infection to consumers.

### 3. Reducing the risks of contracting COVID-19: some recommendations



Measures related to the safety of workers, and consumers who are going to buy food products are listed and described below, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

#### 3.1. Measures to prevent infection in workers

The vast majority of countries have implemented restrictive measures that seek to reduce contact between people, to minimize the health risk of contracting COVID-19.

Yet, since food is a basic input for people, many of these standards are not mandatory for workers who produce and distribute food. Health and safety protection for all those working in food production and food supply chains is therefore essential. All parties involved in this chain must contribute to safeguarding the health of workers. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020a), and the Andean Community General Secretariat, the Standing Veterinary Committee of the Southern Cone (CVP, by its initials in Spanish), and the International Regional Organization for Plant and Animal Health (OIRSA, by its initials in Spanish) (2020), recommend implementing a series of measures to protect workers in the food industry and agricultural sector, respectively:



**Knowing the symptoms of COVID-19:** To reduce the risks of transmission in the workplace, workers must know and recognize the symptoms of the disease, so that they know when to seek health care and get tested.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- Fever (temperature of 37.5 degrees Celsius or more);
- Coughing (of any kind, not just non-productive coughs);
- Dyspnoea;
- Breathing difficulties;
- Fatigue.

**Physical distancing:** Physical distancing is crucial to stop the spread of the new coronavirus. Distancing seeks to minimize contact between potentially infected and healthy people. All food businesses should put in place physical distancing measures. WHO recommends maintaining a distance of at least one meter (three feet) between workers.

Companies can implement the following measures to maintain physical distance:

- Taking workers temperature, and disposal of alcohol-based hand sanitizer at the entrance or entrances to the work place, as well as in several strategic places of the company.
- Moving workstations around production lines so that workers are not located next to each other or in front of each other.
- Providing staff with a personal protective kit that includes items such as masks, disposable gloves, coveralls, and clean boots every day.

- Increasing the space between workstations, regardless of whether this measure may affect the speed of production lines.
- Organizing staff into smaller groups or teams to reduce interaction among people.

### Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace

All employees who do not feel well or have symptoms should not go to or remain in the workplace. When coughing or sneezing, an infected worker could contaminate company facility surfaces and thus transmit the virus to other workers.

It is not excluded that there may be people infected with the virus in workplaces who have no symptoms (asymptomatic). To minimize the risk of infection, all workers in food businesses must strictly follow safety protocols, hygiene rules, and make appropriate use of personal protective equipment.

Finally, to avoid all kinds of face-to-face meetings, it is necessary to implement means allowing workers to communicate with their bosses and peers either through phone calls or emails.

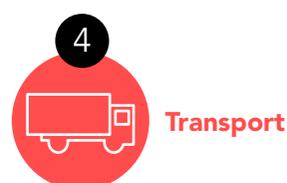
Good hygiene practices in the workplace:

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| <p>Good hand hygiene by washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (as recommended by WHO), as often as necessary.</p> | <p>Frequent use of hydroalcoholic gel, which should be available at several strategic points in the workplace.</p> | <p>Good respiratory hygiene (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissues after use, and wash hands). Discarded material must be constantly removed and disposed of.</p> | <p>Regular washing or disinfection of work surfaces and contact points (for example, door handles).</p> | <p>No close contact with anyone who has respiratory symptoms (for example, coughing or sneezing).</p> |

### In agricultural facilities, limit access to people

People who work and live on farms or rural production units must avoid exposure to potential areas of infection, such as cities and population centres near production units. They must also restrict as much as possible the access of personnel from outside the farm, ensuring that the entrance door to the property remains closed, thus preventing the free entry of people, animals, and vehicles to the production unit.

If the entry of trucks or outside persons is necessary, take precautions of distance, hygiene, and disinfection at the entrance of milk collection trucks, animal feed, seeds, or other input suppliers. Schedule the visit in advance and separate the staff that receives the products from the rest of the workers (Andean Community General Secretariat et al., 2020).



### Transport and delivery of ingredients, and food products

The virus can only enter the facility through infected persons or contaminated fomites. Carriers must take special care when moving physically to areas with high rates of infection. Among the measures, recommendations are:

- Do not get out of your vehicles when delivering goods to food business facilities.

- Respect physical distancing rules.
- People can get the virus by touching a contaminated surface or by shaking hands with an infected person. Surfaces that are most likely to be contaminated with this virus are those most frequently touched, such as steering wheels, door handles, or cell phones, as well as cargo door handles.
- Take scrupulous care of hygiene and use clean protective clothing.
- For feeding on the road, ideally bring your food from home.



#### **Food centers:**

These centers should make every effort to ensure high standards of hygiene, protect their workers from risks of infection, maintain physical distancing, remain open to the public and ensure that they receive sufficient supplies.

Some measures to put in place among workers are:

- Workers must respect the safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (masks, gloves, hygiene measures).
- Limit the number of customers entering centers to prevent workers from being exposed to potential vectors of the virus.
- Promote contactless payment methods so that workers do not have to handle money when consumers buy their products.

Since this is a space shared with consumers, the following point describes in detail the measures to take in various food centers.

### 3.2. Measures to prevent infection in consumers



To prevent the transmission of COVID-19 to food consumers, special care must be taken at the final links of the value chain, especially with people who handle food, whether they sell it or cook it at home, and directly touch the unpackaged food. This also includes any other person or worker who may touch food contact surfaces or other surfaces in areas where unpackaged food is handled.

**If you suspect you are sick, stay home.** The first thing a food handler should do is to stay home if he or she suspects any of the symptoms of COVID-19. To do this, food handlers should be aware of the symptoms, notify their superiors, and have the necessary tests performed. The manager's duty is to train his workers on the symptoms of COVID-19.

**Common measures:** Many times, infected people do not have signs or symptoms of the disease because they are in the early stages of infection. They may also have only mild symptoms, which can easily go unnoticed. This is precisely why this group of people may have contributed to the spread of the disease. Therefore, all employees in food businesses, regardless of their apparent health status, should follow strict practices that ensure food hygiene in their facilities, in accordance with existing food safety management systems. As mentioned throughout this bulletin, common disinfectants and sanitizers used in food processing are likely to destruct most pathogens, including coronaviruses.

These measures are (FAO and WHO, 2020a):

- Good hand hygiene by washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (as recommended by WHO), as often as necessary.
- Frequent use of hydroalcoholic gel, which should be available at several strategic points in the workplace.
- Good respiratory hygiene (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissues after use, and wash hands). Discarded material must be constantly removed and disposed of.
- Regular washing or disinfection of work surfaces and contact points (for example, door handles).
- No close contact with anyone who has respiratory symptoms (for example, coughing or sneezing).

The application of sound principles of environmental sanitation, personal hygiene and established food safety practices will reduce the probability of COVID19 transmission.

#### **Food retail centers:**

In retail food centers, physical distancing is essential to reduce the risk of transmitting disease. These are some practical steps that can be taken (FAO and WHO, 2020a):

- Limited number of customers present at the same time inside the center.
- Signs at the entrance to ask clients not to enter the facility if they are not feeling well or if they have symptoms associated with COVID-19.
- Respect of physical distance ensured in the rows, both inside and outside the center; drawing marks on the floor can make it easier to maintain physical distances, especially in busy areas such as counters and checkouts.
- Hydroalcoholic solutions disposal to encourage hand washing, spray disinfectants, and disposable paper towels at the entrance of the center.
- Plexiglas screens at checkouts and counters to further protect staff.
- Promotion of contactless payment methods.
- As a growing number of customers bring their own shopping bags, it is suggested to put messages in centers (shops, warehouses, supermarkets) advising them to clean their bags before each use.

COVID-19 transmission risk should diminish by identifying which parts of the center are most frequently touched and by cleaning and disinfecting them regularly. In this regard, the following measures can be considered (FAO and WHO, 2020a):



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