



# Analysis and responses of Latin America and the Caribbean to the effects of COVID-19 on food systems

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## 1. Editorial



### Increasing the resilience of the food system and agricultural livelihoods to COVID-19

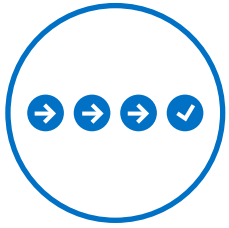
Today, as the whole world tries to cope with the most severe pandemic of this young century, it is vital to do everything possible to mitigate its effects on food production and livelihoods.

In our region, the spread of COVID-19 has deepened the vulnerability of millions of small producers and agricultural workers, intensifying uncertainty for this large part of the population. This new reality is even more intense in countries with high levels of food insecurity, since they are more exposed to the pandemic, are particularly vulnerable to a range of threats and have limited installed capacities to cope with additional risks. Consequently, if this situation is not effectively addressed in the region, the risk is that all the progress made in overcoming poverty and hunger and achieving Sustainable Development Goals will come to nothing.

Lessons learned by those who had to manage disasters indicate that it is critical to understand, monitor and anticipate the impacts of crises on agriculture and agricultural livelihoods early on. Timely and accurate monitoring enables evidence-based policy decisions to be made; acting in advance enables unwanted impacts on food security and nutrition to be avoided. To combat the effects of COVID-19 on food systems, management of this crisis requires a targeted and concrete – yet holistic – approach, focused on ensuring availability and stabilizing access to food. This approach, or any other, must give priority to the most vulnerable populations and ensure the continuity of the critical food supply chain.

The world is experiencing a health crisis unparalleled in recent history, and nations, with differences, have improvised measures based on the limited evidence available. However, we cannot ignore the fact that some ways of dealing with the virus can become cornerstones on which to build a more resilient and sustainable future. If we are strategic in the way we design policy responses, we can achieve short and long-term results that benefit both national and global interests, and that make agriculture in our region a driving force for green growth, new jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, and rural social inclusion.

## 2. Phases in managing the impact of COVID-19



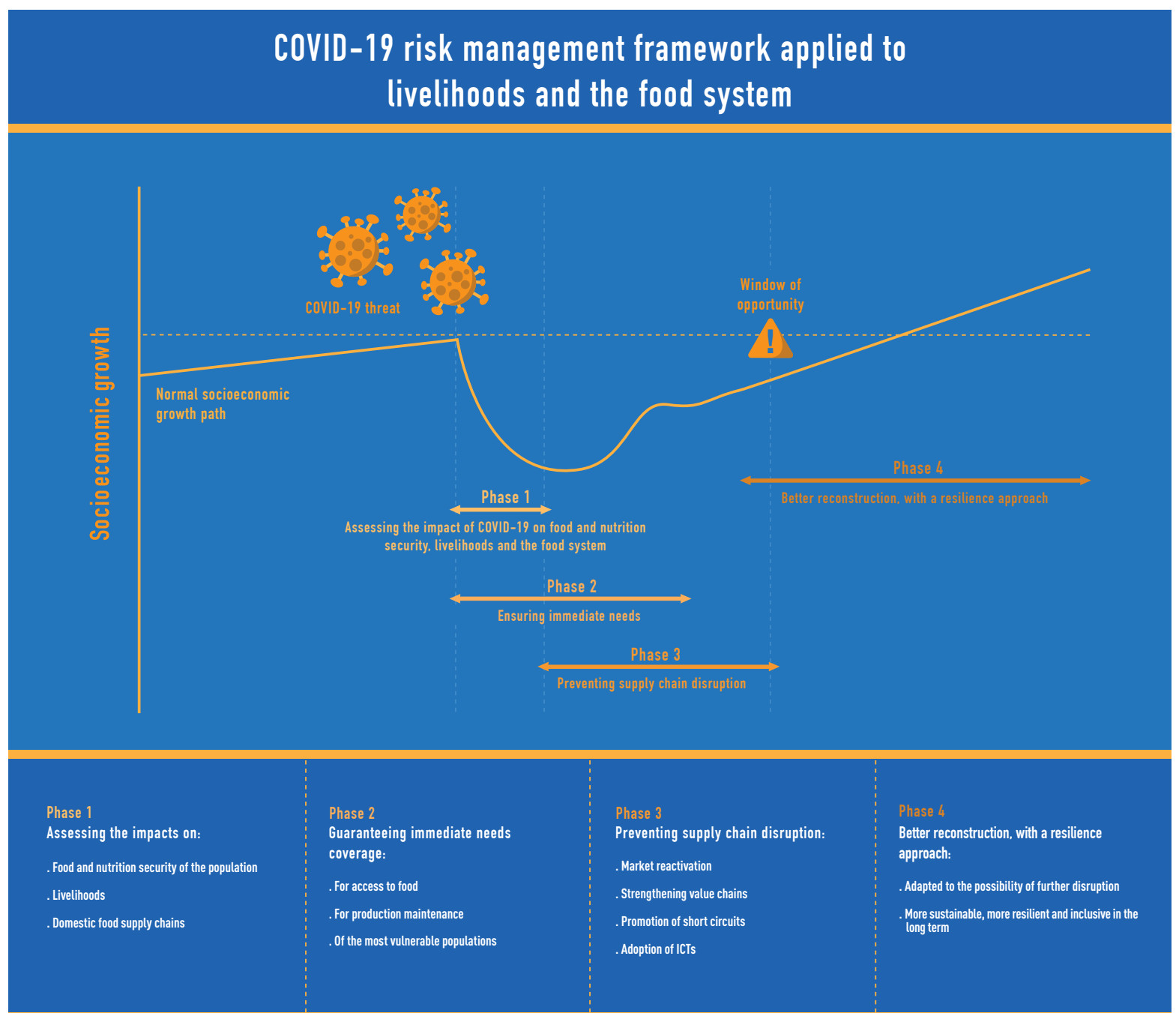
Health measures adopted in response to coronavirus around the world – border closures, restrictions on the movement of people and goods, isolation measures, among others – have impacted production, processing and marketing chains in various ways. The food supply chain may face challenges in the coming weeks or months in terms of logistical constraints and/or disruptions in food supply chains.

The effects of this virus mainly affect the most vulnerable populations (indigenous people, women) and economic activities (small producers, rural populations whose livelihoods depend on tourism, workers in the informal sector, among others), which are less equipped to deal with the disruptions that the pandemic may cause in the food system. The impact of COVID-19 on them is much more than a momentary loss of income: it challenges their food and nutrition security.

Therefore, this threat is different from the emergencies that these populations usually face, by virtue of its unprecedented global scale and the fact that it affects both elements of food supply and demand.

To increase the resilience of livelihoods and the food system, actions need to be implemented in four stages, which are summarized in Figure 1 and described in detail below.

Figure 1/ Phases in managing the impact of COVID-19



## Phase 1.

### Assessing the impact on food and nutrition security, livelihoods and the food system

Countries are encouraged to create a response committee exclusively dedicated to deal with the impacts of this pandemic on food systems and food security. This committee should be composed of the ministries of health, agriculture, livestock, transport, economy, trade, planning, among others, as well as an advisory group that incorporates the private sector. This response committee is destined to play a critical role in monitoring and proposing response and recovery strategies to COVID-19.

Subsequently, it is essential to carry out an assessment of the impact on food and nutrition security and the functioning of food systems at national and sub-national levels. The consequences of the pandemic continue to unfold, and it is vital to understand, monitor and anticipate the impacts of the crisis on agriculture and agricultural livelihoods. This is particularly the case in countries already experiencing food crises. Timely and accurate monitoring will enable evidence-based decisions to be made, early action to prevent impacts on food and nutrition security, clear messages and targeted efforts to be generated and maintained in those countries where acute food insecurity is a constant threat. This assessment should address both the current situation and projections for the coming months, identifying gaps or excesses in food supply or access.

In the short term (first weeks after the initial confinement and physical distancing measures), the assessment can be carried out using secondary information and a small number of interviews with key actors. It can be supplemented with primary information, as circumstances allow<sup>1</sup>. To facilitate the process, avoid duplicating efforts and enrich the analysis, we recommend to coordinate the exercise with different government authorities, agencies of the United Nations System and international cooperation with experience in the humanitarian and emergency field - ministries such as social development, health, agriculture; and organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Red Cross, among others.

Three main aspects need to be evaluated:

- How has access to food been affected for the most vulnerable groups, including agricultural livelihoods?
- What have been the impacts on domestic supply chains?
- What is the availability of food supplies and stocks at the national level, considering disruptions in imports and exports?



Only continuous monitoring and updated evaluations will allow us to keep track of how the situation is evolving and make the necessary adjustments. Consideration must also be given to possible changes in consumption patterns, which may lead to increases in all forms of malnutrition (undernutrition, deficiencies of certain micronutrients or overweight and obesity).

Finally, it is essential to collect data on the state of the most vulnerable populations (indigenous peoples, children, women, migrants, refugees, the sick and the elderly, among others), populations that have seen their incomes threatened (for example, rural populations dependent on tourism or remittances), and small producers or workers in affected small businesses. Key to this is to take into consideration that these populations may be underrepresented in available statistics, as in many cases they do not have access to information and communication technologies, and may work in informal sectors of the economy.

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<sup>1</sup> A wide range of digital-based options are now available, including macro-data, applications and social networks that allow a greater number of samples and information to be reached remotely without putting pollsters at risk.

## Phase 2. Ensuring immediate needs

### a) Ensuring availability and access to food

The potential combined impact of COVID-19 on household purchasing power<sup>2</sup> – mainly as a result of increased unemployment – and the availability of food on local markets could seriously jeopardize access to food in the most vulnerable countries and populations. To ensure availability and access to food for affected people, minimize the negative impacts of the outbreak and improve the nutritional status of the most vulnerable, it is of utmost importance to take action as soon as possible.

Once the impact of COVID-19 has been assessed or, instead, the main risk factors have been identified, policies must be adapted and, for example, alliances sought with development banks to make investments in line with them, giving priority to projects that aim to support agricultural production – especially fresh food –<sup>3</sup> and safeguard essential supply chains (while ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected). Governments, for their part, are responsible for coordinating the response across sectors, incorporating health and safety measures. Finally, it should be noted that international cooperation also plays a strategic role in crisis management. Data on food stocks and production confirm that there is enough food in the world; so putting in place mechanisms that encourage cooperation can alleviate local problems.

To ensure that production value chains are maintained, it is important to facilitate the movement of seasonal workers and transport operators at the national and international level, advocating that trade corridors remain open, provided that the sanitary conditions established by the authorities are met. It is also crucial to support the continuous operation of local food markets, for example by encouraging the use of information technologies, which can become an innovative mean of promoting fresh products supply from the farm to the consumer. It is therefore important that the private sector has room to innovate in these areas; measures should also be implemented to help local producer groups preserve their bargaining power and access to markets. Finally, in order to guarantee consumers' access to food, local markets should be allowed to remain open, applying the corresponding physical distance and hygiene protocols. All these actions need to be reinforced by information, awareness and support campaigns that provide people with security and tell them how to carry out their activities and provide themselves with food safely.

### b) Food and agriculture-related income support

The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial effects on employment, livelihoods and consequently on incomes, which have declined dramatically (or in some cases, disappeared). Thus, for much of the world's population, the chances of falling into poverty and hunger are greater today than ever before. One of the groups sensitive to this crisis is the rural poor, as most people in this group do not have insurance, either health or income protection (such as paid sick leave or unemployment benefits). Rural population in the region, which is already vulnerable, has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, becoming even more vulnerable.

In order to address this situation, it is necessary to increase social protection measures immediately. These measures can play a critical role in protecting the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable people, whether by ensuring income, access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food, providing support through vouchers, cash or other subsidies, acting as insurance against risks of illness or death, or facilitating access to health services. Social protection systems, including in low-income countries, must be expanded in response to the pandemic.

Some policy options in this regard include:

- complementing and increasing CTPs;
- providing food rations or take-home baskets to affected people;
- implementing food stamps; and
- public purchase of food from small producers.

In addition, it is crucial to adapt school-feeding programmes, for example, through direct transfers of money or food to families whose children depend on these programmes.

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<sup>2</sup> Purchasing power includes price and income. Generally, a decline in income is due to the loss of employment (whether formal or informal).

<sup>3</sup> The non-perishable ones must be guaranteed in the first weeks – or months – by the country's reserves or its import capacity.



### **Phase 3.** **Continuity and recovery**

Phase 3 seeks to ensure the continuity and/or rapid recovery of critical foods supply chain (for the most vulnerable populations and areas) and foods crucial to food systems. It is not yet clear how long the disruptions caused by the novel coronavirus will last, what their magnitude will be,<sup>4</sup> how long the subsequent economic recovery will take, or whether there will be new outbreaks of the disease. Therefore, this recovery has to include adaptation measures to the possibility of further disruptions.

In the short term, it is essential to reactivate markets and agricultural operations to ensure sufficient food supplies and not to jeopardize production in the next season. To this end, plans for rapid recovery of agricultural livelihoods should be developed or incorporated into national recovery plans. In any case, no plan will succeed if workers are not provided with the necessary equipment and sanitary conditions to carry out their tasks safely according to the protocols determined by national authorities.

To revive markets, the authorities can organize production and retail networks in the territories, as well as look for innovative food storage and processing options. Strengthening value chains with short marketing circuits can minimize losses of perishable products and ensure income, as well as being less sensitive to disruption if new restrictions on movement are faced. These can be supported by recovery plans. In addition, associations and collective schemes (not necessarily formalised) should be encouraged for production, marketing and purchase of inputs, as well as for transport and logistics. Finally, the adoption of information and communications technologies to bring supply and demand closer together will be key both during and after the crisis. Digital literacy will be critical for rural populations to reap the benefits of e-commerce and Information and communications technologies (ICT's). For this to happen, it must be considered that the most isolated populations and informal actors often do not have access to these tools, so alternative strategies must be developed to reach them.

At the same time, financial support programs should be implemented for agricultural enterprises, prioritizing small ones because of their greater vulnerability, and measures should be taken to guarantee that agricultural producers have timely access to quality inputs to maintain their production and ensure that it will be available next season.

### **Phase 4.** **Better reconstruction, with a resilience approach**

In the medium to long term, governments, the private sector, producer organizations and community institutions will need to increase their capacities to better respond to multiple threats and systemic risks, and to make decisions and provide services to build inclusive and employment-generating value chains. Economic recovery would benefit from an approach that privileges resilience, promoting policies to shift to more sustainable production systems that better address future risks, based on multi-sectoral strategies, with a strong focus on innovation. The ultimate goal is to achieve the most inclusive economic recovery possible, which requires explicit policies for small producers and small and medium enterprises along food system value chains that include their views and visions.

The health crisis has highlighted the interactions and cascade effects that threaten complex, hyperconnected and interdependent systems. The response, therefore, must generate systems that are more resilient to these complexities. It is important that risk management ceases to be done by silos or sectors, and moves towards a vision of systems with a global perspective. Other threats involving systemic risks, such as extreme weather events, armed conflicts, forced migration, food system disruptions, food and water shortages, unregulated digitalization, biodiversity loss and other zoonotic pandemics, represent potentially catastrophic impacts cascading through financial, ecological and social systems. This is why this crisis should be taken as an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the way our food systems work, and to adopt recovery measures that will enable a transition, in the long term, to more inclusive, sustainable and disruptive agricultural economies.

*The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed humanity's instinct to transform itself in the face of a universal threat, and it can help us do the same in order to create a habitable planet for future generations.*

**Christiana Figueres.**

<https://www.carbonbrief.org/coronavirus-what-could-lifestyle-changes-mean-for-tackling-climate-change>

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<sup>4</sup> In March, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reduced its forecast for global economic growth in 2020 from 2.9 to 2.4 per cent, which would be the lowest level since the financial crisis a decade ago, warning that a prolonged and more intense epidemic of coronaviruses could even reduce this figure to just 1.5 per cent. The COVID-19 pandemic could also have negative effects on social and political stability (for more information, see: FAO (2020).

### 3. Good practices in policy implementation by phases in Latin American and Caribbean countries



#### Phase 1.

Assessing the impact on food and nutrition security, livelihoods and the food system

Figure 2/ Countries that have implemented policies regarding Phase 1



Based on what has been gathered from the national offices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on the policies and initiatives implemented by countries to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, we can see that some have already made the effort to evaluate its impact. It is understood that this is not a priority policy, given that emergencies, mainly of the most vulnerable, require the concentration of public administration's efforts on other types of initiatives.

The countries that have carried out evaluations have implemented them at the sectoral level, focusing on those sectors that are essential for the country and, in some cases, on the entire productive sector.

Import-dependent countries have made efforts to quantify their food reserves. Others have focused their impact assessment on the vulnerable sectors, since these will first require the help of public administration.

Source: UN World Map, February 2020, modified by the authors.

**Phase 2.**  
**Ensuring immediate needs**

**a) Ensuring availability and access to food**

**Figure 3/** Countries that have implemented policies regarding Phase 2a



Source: UN World Map, February 2020, modified by the authors.

The vulnerable sectors of Latin America and **the Caribbean** will be the first to see their food security affected by COVID-19. Consequently, many countries have implemented different types of measures to ensure food availability and access.

In the Caribbean, policies focused on self-production stand out, distributing seedlings, seeds and other inputs to small farmers and vulnerable families for growing basic products – such as beans, vegetables and tubers– in their own homes. In addition, some countries have made available public land for the cultivation of these types of products for public consumption.

Similarly, the state is providing food to quarantined communities and a public-private partnership agreement has been established to control domestic prices of the basic food basket.

**Mesoamerican** countries have also provided aid for self-production, such as support for vegetable production and pig insemination programs, as a strategy to ensure access to pork at the national level.

However, at the subregional level, the effort has been focused on continuing the social programs dedicated to the delivery of food to soup kitchens and schools, but delivering it to the homes of the beneficiaries or allowing them to withdraw it from the

establishments, taking the recommended sanitary precautions. Attempts have also been made in the subregion to keep borders open for international food trade. Thus, during the quarantine decreed for national territory, persons carrying these loads can move freely.

In order to facilitate access to food, hoarding and increasing the price of some products, such as grains, is not recommended (and in some cases prohibited). In some countries, sales of agricultural products have been organized on state agricultural markets, where they are traded at prices below market rates to facilitate people's access to food.

Some countries have authorized the purchase of food (meat and grains) to maintain basic food stocks and ensure food security in the country. However, the outstanding policy is the delivery of a family food basket, a "solidarity bag" or food packages to the most vulnerable families who find themselves with restricted access to markets because of quarantine.

In the South American subregion, policies relating to feeding children through the school curriculum were the most frequently mentioned: children were allowed to withdraw food from school, food was delivered to their homes or their card was credited digitally. Food delivery systems were also organized for vulnerable people who could be affected by restrictive health measures. In a few cases, price control measures on basic inputs were seen.

## b) Food and agriculture-related income support

Figure 3/ Countries that have implemented policies regarding Phase 2a



Among the policies that in one way or another seek to ensure immediate needs, is income support related to agriculture and food.

In **Mesoamerica** and **South America**, policies have been implemented to increase companies' liquidity with the aim of subsidizing costs for a few months. Some of these are the moratorium on credit payments for three to four months, the cancellation of debts with the state or the reduction of the tax burden of the affected companies, mainly if they are micro and small enterprises.

Another package of policies aims at subsidies or direct transfers of resources to individuals and/or enterprises for subsistence or productive purposes.

In order to specifically support small producers, a subsidy has been provided to ensure the supply of agricultural products such as beans, corn

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