



Note

Food Sector Recovery and Resilience After the Covid-19 Pandemic

Lessons for Developing Countries

By Varun Bhagat

Summary

The objective of this note is to highlight relevant good practices and policy measures that can be initiated in low- and lower-middle income developing countries to mitigate the impact of future shocks on their food supply chains, learning from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. The note explores measures both for recovering from a crisis, as well as possible actions for ensuring more resilient agricultural supply chains.

Introduction

The significant disruptions to global food trade brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have raised concerns about the heightened possibility of the most vulnerable communities being severely affected by future shocks, particularly in developing and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) which are mainly net food importers. In the first quarter of 2022, the FAO's Food Price Index reached its highest-ever level,¹ and food import bills are increasing substantially. For instance, global grain prices in September 2021 were 27.3% higher than the previous year at the same period.²

In a post Covid-19 world, achieving the Zero Hunger target by 2030 will require profound changes in domestic and global agriculture policies and systems, to secure enough food in low- and lower-middle income developing countries. With their subsistence farmers (often women) being climate-reliant for their food, and mostly ill-equipped to tap into markets, rebuilding the food sector and making it more resilient for future shocks is a must.

The role of trade in the resilience of agricultural markets

Trade plays a crucial role in addressing both short- and long-term challenges facing agri-food systems. In the short term, trade can *inter alia*: (i) help balance supply and demand, preventing the exacerbation of rising prices (for this, it is important to continue keeping agri-food supply chains alive and refraining from trade-restricting measures); and (ii) Trade facilitation, including greater use of digital solutions, can improve efficiency and reduce the time and costs of trade. In the longer term, trade can *inter alia* help diversify sources of imports, particularly in net-food importing countries, to reduce vulnerability to market and policy shocks.

Governments must start taking a forward-looking approach to policy making and trade rules, keeping firmly in their sights the question of how their trade policy can help respond to and anticipate food system shocks. Moreover, governments should also be mindful of trade-related measures that other countries may take, which may have the indirect effect of adversely impacting their domestic agriculture and food sector. Global trade rules should be effectively leveraged and complied with, or, where they deem relevant, governments should seek to change them through the negotiating track of the WTO.

About this note

In this context, this note examines relevant good practices and policy measures that can be initiated in small developing countries to mitigate the impact of future shocks on their food supply chains, learning from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores measures both for recovering from a crisis as well as possible actions for ensuring more resilient agricultural supply chains.

In particular, it aims to: (i) understand some of the impacts caused by Covid-19 on their agricultural sector, e.g. on food supply and producers' livelihoods; (ii) identify policy interventions they can explore or have started exploring for rebuilding the food sector after the crisis; and (iii) identify long-term policy strategies they can or have started exploring to make the food sector more resilient to shocks in the future. In this regard, possible priorities for the WTO's agriculture agenda at MC12 and beyond are also discussed.

¹ [AGSIW](#), April 11, 2022

² [Middle East Institute \(MEI\)](#), Mar 3, 2022

Food Supply Chains after the Pandemic

Supply Side

Following national lockdowns and other Covid-19 containment measures, the agricultural sector in a number of developing countries suffered from a shortage of labour (e.g. seasonal workers). In India for instance, the timing of the lockdown coincided with the harvesting season and the unavailability of seasonal workers meant that farmers registered economic losses along with food wastage as crops could not be harvested.³ In addition to shortage of labour, greater risk aversion among local creditors to loan repayment failures by farmers made access to finance more difficult for them. This created bottlenecks for crucial inputs, as exemplified by Madagascar where supply of fertilizers and seeds was reduced.⁴

Where firms had enough production to engage in trade, movement of goods was hampered by logistical barriers such as additional sanitary checks, mandatory tests for drivers, stricter regulations at borders and ports, quarantine requirements etc. Besides bottlenecks in land and sea transportation, food trade was particularly affected by the drastic reduction in air cargo transport which is usually preferred for exporting perishable food products with a short shelf life. It can be noted that the rotting and decomposition of food crops releases methane, a greenhouse gas contributing to global warming.⁵

Recent analysis by CUTS has shown that governments in developing countries took measures to secure food supply chains. These mainly took the form of export restrictions (e.g. bans, quotas) and import relaxation measures (e.g. lower authorization and licensing requirements, tax exemptions), aiming to prevent shortages of essential staples as well as facilitate access to agricultural inputs (e.g. pesticides, veterinary medicines).⁶

Demand Side

Many small developing countries are reliant on imports for their food consumption,⁷ often with low diversification of import sources. In the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) for instance, 94% of food imports originate from the USA.⁸ The global trade disruptions and rising prices led some countries to deplete their foreign exchange reserves to purchase essential items, resulting in higher retail prices for consumers on the domestic market.⁹

Furthermore, in absence of the mid-day meals usually provided in schools (which had to be closed), food intake by children from humble backgrounds was sometimes limited to one meal a day.¹⁰ Moreover, the situation resulted in an increased risk of children being employed in the agriculture sector given the shortage of traditional farm labour. During the pandemic, comparatively easier access to highly processed food combined with diminished physical exercise also increased risks of obesity and diabetes across the world.¹¹

³ FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb1020en>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Siti Rubiah Lambert, et al. (2021) Build-Back-Better from COVID-19 with the adoption of Sustainability Standards in Food Systems. UNCTAD. Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ser-rp-2021d4_en.pdf

⁶ Grollier, J. (2022). Securing Food Supply and Livelihoods in Pandemic Times: Developing Countries' Experience and Thoughts for the Trade Rulebook. Available at https://www.cuts-geneva.org/pdf/KP2022-RRN-Securing_Food_Supply_and_Livelihoods_in_Pandemic_Times.pdf

⁷ Siti Rubiah Lambert, et al. (2021) Build-Back-Better from

COVID-19 with the adoption of Sustainability Standards in Food Systems. UNCTAD. Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ser-rp-2021d4_en.pdf

⁸ IICA (2021). Post-COVID-19: Resilience building and new opportunities for Caribbean businesses. Available at: <https://www.iica.int/es/node/23613>.

⁹ World Bank (2022). Food Security Update. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update>

¹⁰ FAO (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on agriculture, food systems and rural livelihoods in Eastern Africa: Policy and programmatic options. Available at:

<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb0552en/>

¹¹ Ayako Ebata, et al. (2020). Food Systems and Building Back Better. Institute of Development Studies. Available at:

Analysis by CUTS showed that the bulk of efforts by developing country governments to secure consumers' food consumption during the pandemic consisted in ensuring food affordability through various forms of income support measures (e.g. wage subsidies) to secure.¹²

Post-crisis Recovery: Rebuilding Supply Chains

As discussed above, the Covid-19 crisis disrupted food systems and supply chains in many developing countries. Farmers lost harvests, processors reduced their activity, transporters paid a high cost for logistical bottlenecks, retailers were faced with scarcer supply, and less consumers could afford food at the higher price levels. Recovering after the crisis requires governments and their partners to swiftly take effective measures to rebuild food supply chains.

Already, developing countries can access support by international financial organisations such as the World Bank and IMF, e.g. through grants and concessionary or subsidised loans. This can help them undertake emergency monetary and fiscal policy reforms. For instance, the World Bank's Emergency Action Plan allowed Bangladesh to contribute USD87.8 million in cash transfers to more than 400,000 local dairy and poultry farmers, thereby providing them with the requisite capital flow to continue with their operations.¹³

A number of developing countries have already started to implement recovery measures aimed at rebuilding food supply chains, which can inspire others for possible good practices and policy measures post-crisis. Some selected measures are reviewed below, including country case examples from low- and lower-middle income

developing countries.

Estimating Damage and Loss: First Step to Rebuilding Supply Chains

In order to rebuild supply chains following a crisis, governments must first evaluate the extent of the damage suffered and prioritise actions for recovery. Undertaking a realistic *ex-post* assessment of the supply chain would require collecting production and market information from producers, agri-food firms and other stakeholders on the ground on the damages they have incurred and their urgent needs (e.g. for extension services).

Design of stakeholder surveys could find inspiration in FAO's City Region Food System (CRFS) Assessment Toolkit, which proposes 210 possible indicators, along with sampling guidelines, data collection guidance as well as sample questionnaire surveys.¹⁴

Case Example: Madagascar

In Madagascar, the government responded to Covid-19 by prioritising a food supply chain recovery strategy focused on immediate solutions. The strategy included an effort to identify potential production areas within the capital city region for poultry, dairy and vegetables. This was complemented by an assessment of their production capacity, as well as the creation of a product flow diagram which identified daily territorial needs.

Source: FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LcatTO>

<https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15677>

¹² Grollier, J. (2022). Securing Food Supply and Livelihoods in Pandemic Times: Developing Countries' Experience and Thoughts for the Trade Rulebook. Available at [https://www.cuts-geneva.org/pdf/KP2022-RRN-Securing Food Supply and Livelihoods in Pandemic Times.pdf](https://www.cuts-geneva.org/pdf/KP2022-RRN-Securing_Food_Supply_and_Livelihoods_in_Pandemic_Times.pdf)

¹³ World Bank (2022). Food Security Update. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update>

¹⁴ FAO. City Region Food System Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/in-action/food-for-cities-programme/toolkit/introduction/en/>

Rebuilding and Encouraging Local Food Production

Besides harming food production through workforce and input shortages, disruptions from the pandemic extended to the rest of the food value chain to cooperatives, aggregators, food processors, packhouses, retailers etc. After the crisis, bottlenecks to rebuilding supply chains remain, as global prices for transport, fuel, fertilizers and other inputs remain high.

While the crisis laid bare key vulnerabilities of globalised food supply chains (e.g. relying on long

distance transportation and access to foreign markets for inputs), localised and self-reliant biocultural food systems showed remarkable resilience.¹⁵

In this context, recovery strategies in a number of countries are promoting shorter supply chains, diversification of import sources, and more local production of basic foods. Among measures adopted in support of such efforts, governments are supplying local farmers with inputs (e.g. through e-vouchers or directly); facilitating finance for smallholder farmers through flexible micro-finance products and promotion of mobile financial transactions etc.¹⁶

Case Examples: Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)

The Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) are heavily reliant on food imports for dietary needs, with their top 5 primary food imports amounting to approximately 50% of the total dietary consumption in several parts of the region. To cope with the shock, PSIDS provided assistance and support for the promotion of indigenous food production.

In places such as Fiji, Solomon Islands and Tonga, governments distributed essential raw materials particularly in the urban and peripheral neighbourhoods and encouraged the production of short duration crops. In Vanuatu, in addition to the above stated programme, the government also launched an initiative named “Commercial Food Basket”. Under this initiative, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) engaged with the key local producers and their produce was sold to the government warehouses at affordable prices, the benefit of which was passed on to the final consumers.

Source: FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems.

Securing Markets for Domestic Producers

During the pandemic, containment measures such as closing of markets and local hospitality businesses, prohibitions on selling food in public spaces and restrictions on people’s mobility left producers with reduced opportunities to sell their produce and caused significant wastage of perishable foods.

A recent FAO survey found that, in response, many

cities have taken action to secure avenues for producers to sell locally. These have included expansion of delivery services, creation of temporary food hubs, logistical support, facilitation of direct purchases from local producers etc.¹⁷

In Madagascar for instance, the food supply chain recovery strategy included planning for the creation of new markets for local products in the capital city region, linking them to stocking and processing centres in the capital region.¹⁸

¹⁵ <https://www.iied.org/indigenous-food-systems-prove-highly-resilient-during-covid-19>

¹⁶ https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Agriculture-and-Food-Security/news/Documents/2020_05_26_webinar_CRFS_%20COVID-19_en.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb1020en/CB1020EN.pdf>

¹⁸ FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LcatTO>

Case Example: Ecuador

Urban agriculture has always been a key facet of the food sector in the country. The effect of closure of markets in Quito, where urban producers, as a whole, would normally sell 43% of their total produce was detrimental for the region. The remedy adopted in this case was the selling of goods by urban producers to neighbourhoods in close proximity. Such a measure had positive food security effects, with about 11 tonnes of food items sent to the city's vulnerable neighbourhood.

Source: FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems.

Case Example: India

India's Ministry of Agriculture, along with the National Informatics Centre, launched an app "Kisan Rath App" in April 2020 to assist the farmers and traders in connecting with transport facilities for the distribution of their goods. Such a measure can aid the farmers to reap greater returns on their produce and reduce the possible food wastage in times of bottlenecks in transportation.

Source: DD News (2020). 'Kisan Rath App' launched to facilitate transportation of foodgrains & perishables during lockdown. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3xugub0>

Rebuilding Transport, Storage and Logistics Chains

Effective recovery would also require concrete steps in improving the accessibility of local produce to relatively far-off marketplaces. This could entail promoting matchmaking between producers and transporters, initiating infrastructural projects for enhanced connectedness etc. Where the virus continues its spread, developing countries could consider measures similar to EU's "Green Lanes" guidance for smooth border-crossings, providing for health checks on drivers taking maximum 15 minutes.

Storage capacity is another important factor in food systems recovery, to avoid produce waste and ensure production is adequately conserved and distributed. Yet, investing in in-house storage facilities is costly for small agri-food businesses, hence the need to ensure availability of competitive storage and logistics services for rent or through public support. In this regard, the World Food Programme (WFP) as part of its Covid-19 response has been providing mobile storage units to public authorities (e.g. state governments in India) to reduce post-harvest losses and facilitate food security responses.¹⁹

Planning for Resilience and Building Back Better

Beyond short-term responses for recovery, governments must start taking a forward-looking approach to ensure better resilience of food supply chains in the future. Indeed, shocks of the magnitude of Covid-19 are likely to occur again, particularly in a context of worsening climate change.

Lack of policy preparedness led both developed and developing countries to resort to *ad hoc* measures to protect their food systems, economies and people's well-being. While large economies may be able to adopt massive stimulus packages in crisis situations, smaller developing and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) can often not afford such options. Rather, they would need to find ways to adapt their policies and food systems in order to make them more resilient to potential future shocks, including to minimise disruptions in supply chains which underpin the livelihoods and food security of millions of their people.

Systemic shocks like Covid-19 and their impact across an economy are however difficult to anticipate, which make traditional risk management approaches ill-suited to address

¹⁹ <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000117304/download/>

them. Instead, resilience-based approaches could be better suited, as they aim to create an effective cushion regardless of the type of shock rather than trying to anticipate particular threats.

Some possible avenues to be explored by small developing countries to build back better through increased resilience are explored below. Among areas where actions could be undertaken are harnessing digitalisation, developing market intelligence and early warning systems, as well as leveraging intra-regional trade.

Ramping up Technology and Digitalisation

During the pandemic, agricultural B2B and B2C e-commerce platforms blossomed in various developing countries thereby improving consumers' access to food, particularly perishable items.²⁰ Such innovations have hinted at the significant potential of technology and digitalisation for a more resilient agriculture sector. In East Africa for instance, the "Wefarm" app which connects input retailers with sellers (2.5 million users), was reported to have recorded an increase in requests during the pandemic pertaining to transportation options and availability of inputs at nearby retailers.²¹

Furthermore, advancing towards "Industry 4.0" in the food supply chain could reduce the dependence on migrant labourers while improving traceability and transparency as well as stock, cost and waste management. For instance, track-and-trace systems can allow companies to easily identify and analyse supply chain bottlenecks.²² Some developing country regions are already promoting uptake of smart agriculture, as exemplified by the ASEAN below.

Case Example: Smart Agriculture and Industry 4.0 in ASEAN

In its 2021 Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the ASEAN emphasised stimulating the adoption of smart agriculture as a priority. According to the strategy, "smart agriculture is imperative for improving agricultural yields and traceability, reducing potential environmental risks, and automating field management" towards saving time and costs across agricultural value chains. It recommends the adoption of such policies should be coupled with incentives to alleviate the high cost of technologies and make them affordable for the majority of farmers (e.g. grants, subsidies, preferential loan rates, usage-based payments, tax deductions).²³

Source: ASEAN (2021). Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution for ASEAN. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39jypqV>

Diversifying Trading Partners

Food supply in many low- and lower-middle income developing countries rely on food and input imports from a limited number of trading partners. Such dependence places them in a situation of high vulnerability to external shocks originating from their main trading partners.

During Covid-19 for instance, some developing countries (e.g. Botswana, Mexico, Jamaica) were at major risk as they relied on the top-3 exporters most affected by Covid-19 for over 95 per cent of their rice, wheat and corn imports. Also, countries such as Jamaica, Bosnia and Herzegovina and The Gambia were dependent on the top-3 most affected Covid-19 countries for almost the totality of bovine meat imports.²⁴

²⁰ IICA (2021). Post-COVID-19: Resilience building and new opportunities for Caribbean businesses. Available at: <https://www.iica.int/es/node/23613>.

²¹ Judy Payne, Marcella Willis (2021). Digital Solutions Used by Agriculture Market System Actors in Response to Covid-19. Feed the Future, US Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative. Available at: https://www.dai.com/uploads/Rapid%20Analysis_External%20FRMT2.pdf

²² Deloitte. COVID-19 has broken the global supply chain. So now what? Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/ch/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/covid19-has-broken-the-global-food-supply-chain.html>

²³

²⁴ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/41717158991207>

To ensure greater resilience in the future, countries should evaluate their import dependence for essential inputs and foodstuffs, and where relevant identify additional supply sources towards greater import market diversification.²⁵

Shorter, Localised Supply Chains

Low-income countries devote 37% of their merchandise export revenue to food imports, making them vulnerable to external shocks and global supply chain disruptions as was the case during COVID-19.²⁶ In order to reduce such risks associated with over-reliance on other countries for essential foods, UNIDO's Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) initiatives propose to rebalance the relationship between long and short food supply chains to increase their resilience.²⁷

Such options aimed at boosting self-sufficiency can rely on local systems such as farm-gate sales, farmers markets where farm products are sold directly by farmers themselves, consumers' managed shops, linkages with local tourism sector, public procurement of food etc. They require adequate State support for local food producers and redesigning of existing supply chains.²⁸ This could include, *inter alia*, adoption of zoning laws, local food policy councils, certifications, incentives (including financial) for farmers and fishers' markets/retailers sourcing locally etc.²⁹

6742/pdf/Covid-19-and-Food-Protectionism-The-Impact-of-the-Pandemic-and-Export-Restrictions-on-World-Food-Markets.pdf

²⁵McKinsey & Company (2022). Supply-chain recovery in coronavirus times—plan for now and the future. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Operations/Our%20Insights/Supply%20chain%20recovery%20in%20coronavirus%20times%20plan%20for%20now%20and%20the%20future/Supply-chain-recovery-in-coronavirus-times-plan-for-now-and-the-future.ashx>

²⁶ <https://unctad.org/news/covid-19-and-food-security-vulnerable-countries>

Case Example: Colombia

In Colombia's Sapuyes region, the government took considerable steps in promoting local production of items such as lettuces, milk, potatoes etc. It ensured the requisite inputs are available to farmers, devised mechanisms to ease local procurement by traders, and involved indigenous populations in planning towards improving their food security amidst growing threats of climate change-induced hazards on their livelihoods.

Source: FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems.

Harnessing Regional Integration

As discussed above, Covid-19 revealed the relevance of strategically diversifying import sources and shortening value chains for essential products. On a related note, recent UNCTAD analysis found that trade taking place within regional trade agreements (RTAs) "was relatively more resilient against the global trade collapse" caused by the pandemic.³⁰ For instance, trade under RTAs performed better than trade under no-agreement for Asian developing economies and Latin American and Caribbean countries.

The relevance of regional integration for supply chain resilience was also among the issues discussed at the UNCTAD15 conference. Discussions highlighted, *inter alia*, that regionalism can foster harmonisation of policies and regulations, creating larger "domestic" markets and opportunities for local businesses, and are part and parcel of an enabling environment for a more resilient, inclusive and

²⁷ <https://tii.unido.org/news/strengthening-resilience-food-systems-role-short-food-supply-chains>

²⁸FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb1020en>

²⁹ https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1920/Nutrition_Food_System/Negotiations/CFS_VGFSyN_Chairs_Proposal_October2020_FINAL.pdf

³⁰ https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ser-rp-2021d13_en.pdf

sustainable future.³¹

Marketing Intelligence and Early Warning Systems

Effective marketing intelligence and early warning systems are essential to the timely detection of food security risks, e.g. due to price surges, supply chain disruptions or climatic conditions.

Leveraging such tools was a key part of FAO's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, based on existing models such as the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) and the Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS).³² For instance, the latter monitors, *inter alia*, food supply and demand to assess the food security situation in all countries of the world, allowing FAO to issue early warnings of impending food crises at country or regional level.³³

Assistance from International Organizations

Like in the case of recovery planning, support from international organizations in the form of grants, loans and technical assistance projects can play a pivotal part in formulating resilience for developing countries. For instance, World Bank's Food Systems Resilience Program (FSRP) recently provided USD570 million to complement and enhance ongoing efforts to reduce food insecurity and improve the resilience of food systems in West Africa. The first phase of the project aimed to increase agricultural productivity through climate-smart agriculture; promote intraregional value chains and trade; and build regional capacity to manage agricultural risk.³⁴

³¹ <https://unctad.org/news/regional-integration-offers-path-resilient-future-unctad15-hears>

³² FAO (2020). COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme - Trade and food safety standards: Facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade during COVID-19 and beyond. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb0299en/cb0299en.pdf>

³³ <https://www.fao.org/policy-support/tools-and-publications/resources-details/en/c/449296/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Information%20and%20Early,all%20countries%20of%20the%20world.>

³⁴ World Bank. (2021). Addressing Food Insecurity and Boosting the Resilience of Food Systems in West Africa. Available at:

Thoughts on the Role of WTO

The WTO has an important role to play in ensuring that the multilateral trade system is able to effectively respond to global trade shocks affecting food supply chains, as well as support recovery and resilience. In this regard, certain avenues are suggested below.

Redefining Conditions for Food Export Restrictions

In the wake of post-pandemic efforts to restore and strengthen national supply chains, several key exporting countries imposed restrictions on food exports thereby contributing to higher global prices. Such restrictions could be particularly harmful for import-dependent developing countries. Even though the current discussions at the WTO focus on discourse of enhancing transparency of such restrictions,³⁵ it could be beneficial, particularly for net food-importing developing countries, to clarify the WTO definition of what constitutes a "critical shortage at the national level". Indeed, it is only under such a condition that a member state may impose food export restrictions.³⁶

Public Stockholding

Another area of interest for many developing countries is the possibility of procuring farm produce at government-set prices as part of their national public stockholding programmes, regulated under the WTO's agricultural trade rules. An interim "peace clause" solution was reached on the matter at WTO's Bali Ministerial Conference in 2013, whereby members agreed

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/11/18/addressing-food-insecurity-and-boosting-the-resilience-of-food-systems-in-west-africa>

³⁵ WTO (2021). Agriculture Negotiations. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc12_e/briefing_notes_e/bfagric_e.htm

³⁶ Jonathan Hepburn et al. (2021). How Could Trade Policy Better Address Food System Shocks. International Institute for Sustainable Development. Available at: <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2021-04/trade-policy-address-food-system-shocks-en.pdf>

not to challenge developing members' existing public stockholding programmes as long as certain conditions were fulfilled (e.g. periodic release of information pertaining to the programmes).³⁷ However, this exemption only applies to programmes existing at that time, and many developing countries have been calling for its extension to newer ones. This year's 12th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC12) should be used as an opportunity to make advances towards a permanent solution in this regard.

WFP and humanitarian assistance

In January 2021, a group of around 80 member-states jointly announced their commitment to not impose export restrictions for food items purchased by the World Food Programme (WFP) for humanitarian assistance.³⁸ Extending this decision to the full WTO membership through a multilateral decision at this year's MC12 would be important, in light of the high risk of increased hunger worldwide brought about by the current all-time-high food price levels.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic induced severe shock waves across food supply chains and affected demand and consumption patterns across the world, especially in low- and lower-middle income developing countries.

On their road to recovery, countries have adopted a combination of approaches entailing, *inter alia*, *ex-post* sectoral assessments, encouraging local food systems, securing markets for domestic producers, and rebuilding storage and logistical capacities. Governments have also engaged in providing food to vulnerable people, distributing inputs and raw materials to producers etc.

But beyond recovery, governments must start taking a forward-looking approach to ensure better resilience of food supply chains in the future. In this regard already, some are adopting strategies and measures towards better harnessing technology and digitalisation, trade regionalism, as well as shorter and more local food supply chains.

WTO too has a critical role in this respect. It should aim to adopt appropriate decisions at MC12 for some immediate actions as well as energise the agriculture negotiations towards concrete outcomes by MC13.

³⁷ WTO (2021). Agriculture Negotiations. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc12_e/briefing_notes_e/bfagric_e.htm

³⁸ WTO (2021). Group of Members Issue Joint Pledge on

Humanitarian Food Purchases. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news21_e/agri_21jan21_e.htm



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