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Update on the FAO Response to COVID-19: “Building to Transform” implementation, including an update on the FAO Food Coalition

Executive Summary

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, global hunger continued to increase. An estimated 720 to 811 million people were facing hunger in 2020 – as many as 161 million more in one year. The sharpest increases in 2020 occurred in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, increases were also seen in North America and Europe. The gender gap in food insecurity has grown even larger in the past few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity being 10 percent higher among women than men in 2020, compared with 6 percent in 2019. Essential nutrition services coverage declined by 40 percent, and globally nearly half of the countries reported a drop of 50 percent or more for at least one nutrition intervention. Nutrition programmes in schools were the most affected.

In July 2020, in response to the pandemic, FAO launched the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. Through this Programme, developed in close consultation with national stakeholders, FAO adopted a comprehensive approach to proactively address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, in addition to the humanitarian response, and to provide demand-driven support to its Members. In this context and as a complementary component, the Food Coalition was introduced to coordinate a multistakeholder, multisectoral mechanism to mobilize political, financial and technical assistance to address and recover from the challenges faced. The Food Coalition immediately became a vital element of the G20 food security agenda under the Italian Presidency, as well as a key FAO initiative.

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I. Background

1. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, global hunger continued to increase. An estimated 720 to 811 million people were facing hunger in 2020 – as many as 161 million more in one year. The sharpest increases in 2020 occurred in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, increases were also seen in North America and Europe.

2. The *2021 Global Report on Food Crises*¹ estimated that 155 million people in 55 countries and territories were classified as being in crisis or worse levels (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Phase 3 or above); this represented an increase of around 20 million people from 2019. While it is difficult to disentangle the precise effects of COVID-19 from those of other stressors, the report's analysis shows that the pandemic has had a compounding effect on the pre-existing and ongoing drivers of the food crises, mainly through the COVID-19 restrictive measures that negatively impacted the economic activity, leading to income losses and reduced household purchasing power.

3. Smallholder farmers and their families, and food workers in all sectors, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Furthermore, the pandemic has challenged the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, gender equality and empowering all women and girls; rural women have been bearing a disproportionate burden in the COVID-19 crisis, with the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity being 10 percent higher among women than men in 2020, compared with 6 percent in 2019. The pandemic is also negatively impacting other groups, such as agricultural producers, processors and traders, responders and caregivers, and other excluded, marginalized and vulnerable groups such as the poor and extreme poor, informal workers, youth, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, and others. Essential nutrition services coverage declined by 40 percent, and, globally, nearly half of the countries reported a drop of 50 percent or more for at least one nutrition intervention. Nutrition programmes in schools were the most affected.

4. During the past two years of the pandemic, agrifood markets and trade proved to be resilient, and agriculture emerged as a robust economic sector. With COVID-19 entering a new phase, there is proof that collective efforts and multilateral cooperation have played key roles for agrifood systems and trade to remain open and flowing without major disruption. The containment measures had a short-term effect, and ample global food supplies ensured the resilience of the sector.

5. While global agrifood systems remained resilient during this crisis, income losses and food price spikes caused inequality to rise. Per capita, incomes contracted in more countries than at any time in the recent past, leading to exacerbated inequalities especially in rural areas. The containment measures significantly impacted on the middle class due to its high level of involvement in informal works and economy, and affected its economic activities and income earning. The lack of a united global governance for a coherent approach to the challenges posed by the pandemic, combined with the inequality of access to vaccine at a global level, had extremely negative impacts for vulnerable countries and generated many new challenges.

II. COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme

6. FAO has been intensively working on its COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme (launched in July 2020) and has mobilized financial and technical support to reach rural populations and to relaunch economic activities. With operational requirements of USD 1.32 billion, this Programme has, as of February 2022, received, confirmed and pledged contributions for USD 466 million, more than 35 percent of the target. Voluntary contributions – which are destined to both development and emergency-oriented projects – amounted to USD 435 million, of which USD 329 million were in approved contributions and USD 106 in forecasted contributions. FAO's core (Technical Cooperation Programme - TCP Projects) resources currently invested in the programme amount to approximately USD 31 million, with an additional USD 1.85 million from FAO's Multidisciplinary Fund specifically allocated to the elaboration of COVID-19 data and statistics.

¹ <https://www.fsplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC%202021%20050521%20med.pdf>

7. Following the evolution of the pandemic, the share of the approved development-oriented voluntary contributions has shifted from an initial 9 percent to the current level of 32 percent of the overall approved contributions. This suggests that contributions to the Programme are gradually evolving from an emergency- to a development-based approach.

8. In terms of regional focus, Africa has so far received the largest (and increasing) amount of voluntary contributions and FAO's resources (38 percent of the total), followed by Near East and North Africa (30 percent), and Latin America and the Caribbean Region (13 percent). Of the overall resources, 5 percent were allocated to projects with global reach. On the other hand, the share of funding allocated to Asia and the Pacific Region (11 percent) and Europe and Central Asia (3 percent) has been decreasing and therefore suggests a need to further balance regional focus.

9. In 2021, the Programme's efforts included: innovative data sources to monitor and rapidly assess the impact of COVID-19; scaling up and expansion of national social protection programmes across different regions; analytical work on the impact of the pandemic on agrifood trade, including e-training on food safety and early warning systems, together with the World Organisation for Animal Health, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme, to monitor the animal-human interface while advancing on a comprehensive One Health approach; and contingency planning for pastoralists' safe transhumance to winter pastures (e.g. in Afghanistan).

10. The Programme further demonstrated the critical importance of robust monitoring systems for real time data collection and analysis, including early warning systems, price monitoring and identification of vulnerability hotspots and bottlenecks. It stressed the relevance of a strong link between short-, medium- and long-term policy decisions and measures, with emphasis on women as the group hardest hit by the pandemic in agrifood systems. It also highlighted the need for policies and strategies that address structural issues related to inequalities and provide immediate and concrete responses required to ensure decent work and economic undertakings in the informal economy.

III. Food Coalition

11. Proposed by the Government of Italy and led by FAO, the Food Coalition, created in November 2020, is a global voluntary alliance and coordination mechanism open to all stakeholders who are interested in supporting coordinated action to safeguard food security and nutrition and promote sustainable agrifood systems transformation in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. As a flexible coordination mechanism, the Food Coalition provides innovative ideas, advocacy opportunities, technical expertise in response to national needs and priorities – horizontally across thematic areas of work, and vertically from local to global levels, including relevant UN Agencies, International Organizations, and non-State actors – thus also facilitating innovative multiactor and multicountry initiatives.

12. In this spirit and in the context of the G20 Call to Action for Food Security, the Food Coalition launched a call for proposals on 29 June 2021. Through this call, FAO has invited its Members to unite their efforts and build alliances among countries and with Non-State Actors, who have mutual interest in addressing concrete challenges on the ground. Forty Members' institutions submitted proposals in response to the call that was closed on 18 September 2021, on the occasion of Florence G20 Agriculture Ministers Meeting. As a result, a portfolio of ten selected proposals has been finalized as an operational component of the Food Coalition Mechanism. The portfolio will be presented to the G20 Member Countries and other interested Members. These projects will be implemented by FAO's concerned decentralized offices with the support of its technical divisions.

13. Other major Food Coalition components are being implemented at country, regional and global levels to facilitate and support multicountry and multistakeholder dialogues: raise awareness and advocacy; mobilize the required financial and technical resources for the most pressing global priorities; offer innovative multiactor and multicountry solutions; provide the right technical experts and expertise to concretely respond to national needs and timely deliver actions on the ground, while continuing to raise the global attention to key thematic areas.