



## المنتدى العربي للتنمية المستدامة

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2 ZERO HUNGER



# SDG 2 ZERO HUNGER

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Food security in the Arab region was already fragile prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the outbreak has exposed further vulnerabilities. The region relies heavily on food imports, making it vulnerable to the unpredictability and inequities of global trade (SDGs 1, 8, 10 and 17). Moreover, agricultural productivity is low in most Arab countries, and agricultural practices are often unsustainable, diminishing the medium- and long-term availability and affordability of food (SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 12). The pandemic's impact on food security has been exacerbated by pre-existing factors, including water scarcity, climate change, rapid population growth, and increasing urbanization (SDGs 6, 7, 11 and 13). Even before the pandemic, hunger and undernourishment were increasing in some Arab countries, mainly because of protracted conflict, while pockets

of severe forms of malnutrition were also found across the region. Women and children are particularly affected by persistently high levels of stunting and wasting, and growing levels of overweight and obesity (SDGs 3 and 5).

Structured and tailored investments in sustainable agriculture and in the wider use of knowledge and technologies are vital to increasing agricultural productivity and resilience. Ending conflict is also a necessary prerequisite. Regional cooperation is essential to shore up resilience and to advance a common agenda to improve the governance of global trade. Furthermore, improvements in nutrition practices, including breastfeeding, and diets, are essential to accelerate progress in reducing the different forms of child malnutrition and population obesity.

## Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 2 in the Arab region



When the pandemic hit, the region was already witnessing fragile food security in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability. The pandemic further revealed weaknesses in food value chains and the region's vulnerability to food system shocks.

**Agricultural production has dropped, access to markets has been restricted, and small farmers have suffered.** In 2020, agricultural and food processing exports were reduced by 8 per cent and imports by 14 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Lockdowns and movement restrictions prevented farm workers from accessing fields and disrupted local agri-food production. These measures have severely affected smallholder producers' access to markets, undermining their income-generating activities and forcing many to sell assets. The immediate effects were more severe for perishable products, which are often produced by smallholder farmers. There have also

been disruptions in collecting and transporting agricultural products to consumption areas. Moreover, many street markets and farmers' markets have been temporarily closed to limit public gatherings, and declining demand for their products has led to heightened food waste and income loss.

**Access to food: both quality and quantity have been impacted.** The compounded impact of the crisis has restricted access to food for some, leading to a further drop in caloric supply, with an estimated recovery by 2030 that will however remain below pre-pandemic forecasts. As the purchasing power of households decreases owing to the economic downturn, the most vulnerable are downgrading the quality of their diets and decreasing their consumption.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, continued over-reliance on cereals from outside the region poses a systemic risk to the food supply. Arab countries import 50 per cent of calories consumed, while demand for food is expected to rise because of an estimated 53 per cent population increase by 2050.<sup>3</sup>

1 ESCWA, The impact of COVID-19 on Arab economies trade and foreign direct investment, 2020.

2 UNICEF, The impact of COVID-19 on children in the Middle East and North Africa, 2020.

3 ESCWA, Food security in the Arab region: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

## **Inflation is projected to make things worse.**

A projected increase in the Consumer Price Index suggests that inflation will add pressure to food prices, making food less affordable in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen to varying degrees, especially in low-income countries. In terms of stability, macroeconomic projections in the Arab region show a deteriorating trend by 2030 in some countries, which will hamper efforts to respond to food supply/demand challenges. A 10 per cent agricultural price hike owing to trade restrictions will result in a \$30 billion trade deficit by 2030.<sup>4</sup> The global disruption caused by the pandemic, international travel restrictions, the full or partial closure of businesses and related job losses have led to a drastic drop in remittances flowing into the region, further challenging food security for millions.

## **Restrictions on humanitarian aid are threatening the availability of food for 55 million people.**

Reductions in aid owing to the crisis will directly impact

## **Impact of service disruption**

*Along with the closure of education institutions, most school nutrition programmes in the region, especially school meals, have been suspended, with negative effects on the nutrition of millions of students, especially those from disadvantaged households.*

*Delivery of nutrition services to health facilities for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, newborns and young children has also been disrupted, which has had a detrimental impact on the nutrition status of the region's population, with long term consequences.*

around 26 million refugees and internally displaced persons, of which nearly 16 million are moderately to severely food insecure.<sup>5</sup> According to FAO-WFP,<sup>6</sup> 5 out of 20 countries grappling with acute food insecurity globally are in the Arab region.

## **Measures taken by Arab Governments**

- 1. Many Arab countries have provided stimulus packages, including social protection measures, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and address its socioeconomic consequences.**<sup>7</sup> For example, the United Arab Emirates announced a \$27 billion stimulus plan to boost the economy, including water and electricity subsidies for citizens and commercial and industrial activities. Saudi Arabia announced a \$13 billion stimulus package, and extended funds to small and medium enterprises.
- 2. Some Arab countries reallocated funds and revised strategies to meet food demand during the pandemic.**<sup>8</sup> For example, Algeria pre-positioned five months of stocks to prepare for supply chain disruptions. In Jordan, the Ministry of Agriculture prepared a strategic plan to secure the country's demand for basic foodstuffs, both plant-based and animal-based. In addition, the Ministry decided to suspend the export of potatoes, onions, tomatoes,

cucumbers, eggplants and courgettes. In Qatar, the Ministry of Municipality and Environment declared that the National Strategy for Food Security 2019-2023 could meet 90 per cent of the country's food demand during the pandemic by increasing storage capacity for general food items, and enhancing local production of perishable goods. In Saudi Arabia, 2 billion riyals were allocated to import agriculture products and secure food supplies.

- 3. Other Arab countries provided low interest loans, in-kind or in-cash transfers or food vouchers.**<sup>9</sup> For example, the Mauritanian Government bore all customs taxes and fees on wheat, oils, powdered milk, vegetables and fruits in 2020. In the Sudan, direct economic support with in-kind items and ration cards started in Khartoum where COVID-19 cases were concentrated. Tunisia is providing 4,000 low-income families with food parcels through the Tunisian Union for Social Solidarity, for a total amount of 250,000 dinars.

<sup>4</sup> ESCWA, Food security in the Arab region: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> ESCWA, Mitigating the impact of COVID-19: Poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> FAO-WFP, Early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> ESCWA, Regional emergency response to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> ESCWA COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker. Available at <http://covdata.unescwa.org/RPT/RPTDSH4.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Measures taken to shield domestic food markets in Egypt

Egypt has prioritized food supplies to help shield its domestic market from short-term global supply risks associated with the COVID-19 crisis. As at April 2020, Egypt had already imported substantial quantities of food to cover its needs for the year, particularly wheat. It had also doubled its modern grain silo capacity, from 1.5 million tons in 2014 to 3 million tonnes in 2019. This favourable supply environment is supported by the following government measures to ensure food availability in the country for several months:

- The Government imported significant quantities of basic staples including wheat, yellow corn, soybeans and legumes;
- The cultivated wheat area this season exceeded 3.4 million feddan (1.38 million hectares), and production levels remain stable with a focus on a large variety of winter crops and on increasing domestic sugar supplies;
- The Central Bank of Egypt has expanded its industry stimulus initiative to include SMEs dealing with fish, poultry and livestock.

## Most at risk of being left behind

A detailed review of the Arab region revealed that SDG 2 targets will not be met by 2030 for the following social groups,<sup>10</sup> whose vulnerability has been amplified by the pandemic.



**Poor and vulnerable groups:** the pandemic is expected to increase poverty levels among poor and vulnerable groups, who were already suffering from compromised access to quality food and nutrition. The pandemic is projected to push 14.3 million people below the poverty line, following the loss of 17 million full time jobs in 2020. More research is needed on the distribution of food and the quality of consumption within households, especially among women, children and poor groups.



**Refugees and displaced people:** protracted conflicts have increased food insecurity in the region. Of the 52 million chronically undernourished people in the Arab region, 34 million live in conflict-affected countries. Moreover, the region has witnessed the displacement of 11.7 million people and 2.7 million refugees as a result of conflict.



**Women and female-headed households:** women across the region have less access to employment. They make up 60 per cent of the informal labour work force in the Arab region, with no access to job security

or health-care services to mitigate the effects and losses caused by the pandemic. Given their limited access to employment, land ownership and growth opportunities, women also have less access to food and nutrition. The pandemic has also had various secondary impacts on women, including loss of earnings, food insecurity, added burdens of unpaid work and childcare, and domestic violence.



**Arab least developed countries:** these countries already faced higher levels of hunger and malnutrition, and greater risks from trade imbalances because of their considerable reliance on food imports. According to recent data, the current hunger level in Yemen is unprecedented. Around 16 million Yemenis are food insecure, and malnutrition rates among women and children are among the highest in the world, with 2 million children requiring treatment for acute malnutrition.<sup>11</sup>



The global and domestic economic challenges caused by the pandemic have made **small-scale enterprises in the agri-food sector** particularly vulnerable to supply and demand shocks, resulting in higher production costs and lower revenues. The severe losses and financial burdens faced by young agri-entrepreneurs have undermined their livelihoods.<sup>12</sup>

10 ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

## Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 2 by 2030

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identifies the following recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 2 in the region and support

action on other SDGs. These recommendations also facilitate the COVID-19 recovery, and enhance resilience to future shocks and crises.<sup>13</sup>

Shift towards more sustainable agricultural systems

Invest in rural transformation and development, especially initiatives led and/or focused on women and young people

Promote dietary changes and support healthier consumption patterns

Build capacity through knowledge and technology transfer







Build the region's capacity in trade negotiations

Bridge humanitarian and development objectives to support sustainable agriculture

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of these recommendations, see ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.



# Key facts on SDG 2

	ARAB REGION	WORLD
<p>Undernourished population in 2018</p>  <p>Undernourishment</p>	<p><b>13%</b> in 2018 0% since 2000</p>	<p><b>11%</b> in 2018 -2% since 2000</p>
<p>Children moderately or severely stunted</p>  <p>Stunted children</p>	<p><b>19%</b> in 2019 -2% since 2000</p>	<p><b>21%</b> in 2019 -2% since 2000</p>
<p>Children moderately or severely overweight</p>  <p>Overweight children</p>	<p><b>9%</b> in 2019 +1% since 2000</p>	<p><b>6%</b> in 2019 +1% since 2000</p>
<p>Children moderately or severely wasted</p>  <p>Wasted children</p>	<p><b>8%</b> in 2019</p>	<p><b>7%</b> in 2019</p>
<p>Plant breeds for which sufficient genetic resources were stored</p>  <p>Genetic resources from local breeds</p>	<p><b>116,000</b> in 2018 +15% since 2000</p>	<p><b>5,310,000</b> in 2018 +2% since 2000</p>
<p>AOI for government expenditures</p>  <p>Agriculture Orientation Index</p>	<p><b>0.2</b> in 2018 -7% since 2001</p>	<p><b>0.3</b> in 2018 -2% since 2001</p>

Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor. <http://arabsdgmonitor.unescwa.org>. (Figures have been rounded).