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COVID-19 and Food Security: The World Is Facing Another Food Crisis

By Roman Romashkin and Pavel Krasilnikov

In the May Newsletter, we discuss the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and discuss the urgency of the world's response.

We invite you to join us for a discussion of the implications of the 2020 Global Food Policy Report for Eurasia. The annual IFPRI report launch conference is now virtual.

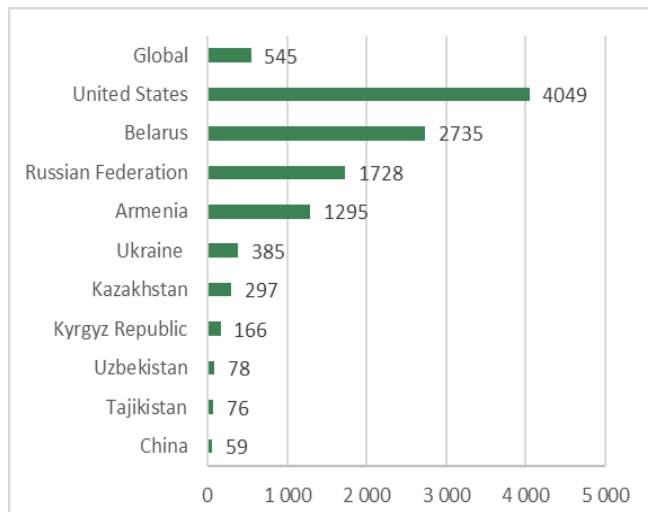
And we present the Q&A event introducing the next round of case studies for food security in Eurasia.

Upcoming events for 2020 and 2021 are listed in the updated calendar.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. As of May 14, 2020, 4.2 million cases of coronavirus infection in the world were confirmed and 292,000 deaths were recorded. Russia reached second place in the world in the number of infected people. Of particular concern is the situation in Armenia and Belarus, where the number of infected people per million inhabitants significantly exceeds that of the world as a whole. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused a crisis in health systems but has also severely affected economic activity and social stability. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates,

isolation measures, restrictions on the movement of people, and the stoppage of work has severely impacted many enterprises and organizations; together these are expected to slow the global economy by 3 percent in 2020. This number is much higher than the drop experienced during the financial crisis of 2008–09, when the world's gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 0.07 percent. At the same time, many countries of the Eurasian region will experience a stronger economic recession than it did in 2008–09. The GDP of Ukraine is projected to decrease by 7.7 percent, of Belarus by 6.0 percent, of Russia by 5.7 percent, and of

the Kyrgyz Republic by 4.0 percent. It is important to emphasize that Belarus's rejection of the quarantine and self-isolation measures that have been applied in many countries to reduce the spread of infection and reduce the burden on the health care system is not a deterrent to the decline of the national economy.



Number of coronavirus-infected individuals per million inhabitants. Source: United Nations (UN) and WHO data. Information is current as of May 14, 2020.

Rising unemployment and a drop in household incomes have led to an increase in the number of vulnerable groups and a decrease in the affordability and quality of food. In this regard, a proactive policy should be aimed at restraining the growth of prices for socially significant goods and providing livelihoods for the citizens most in need. However, many countries have quickly developed and adopted large-scale programs of direct payments for the population. For example, in the United States, a one-time payment of US\$1,200 was issued for most adults and US\$500 for each child. In Italy, households with children under 12 received US\$600 for each household. In Russia, it was decided to issue a single payment beginning June 1 to families with children in the amount of 10,000 rubles (US\$135) for each child from 3 to 16 years old. Direct assistance to the population will not only mitigate the economic downturn but will also provide opportunities for faster recovery of food systems after the pandemic.

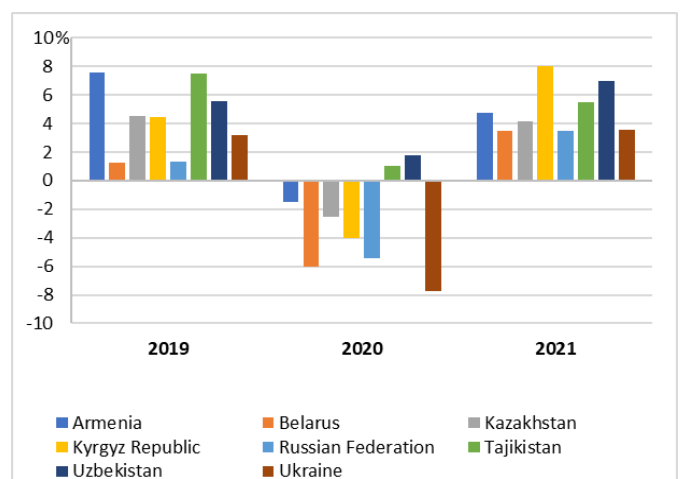
The deteriorating economic situation caused by the pandemic harms food systems, both on the supply side and the demand side. On the supply side, there are high risks of declining production and trade, as well as of breaking established supply chains. Several factors determine the presence in the market of the necessary mass of commodities. These include trade policy measures (such as export bans, import

restrictions, expansion of domestic procurement for stockpiling); the epidemiological situation at production facilities at various levels of agri-food systems; the restriction of seasonal labor migration for use in agriculture; and the possibility of forming alternative transport and logistics corridors and replacing traditional suppliers. This must all be done with adequate and timely state support for the agri-food sector. A pandemic exposes significant risks to the labor-intensive production of the food industry, trade and logistics, and catering.

Responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, international organizations have noted global challenges in agriculture, food security, and nutrition.

The effects of climate change may complicate the recovery of the global economy and food systems from the new problems caused by the pandemic. This year, Europe once again faced a severe drought. Abnormally hot weather is expected in some regions of Russia. A massive invasion of locusts threatens many countries in Africa and Asia. These facts indicate a high probability of a pandemic escalating into a global humanitarian catastrophe and a large-scale food crisis. In this regard, **David Beasley**, Executive Director of the UN World Food Program (WFP), [said on April 21](#) that humanity could face massive hunger because of the coronavirus pandemic if it does not ensure food security. Currently, 135 million people are starving in the world. Because of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the number of hungry people will increase by another 130 million people.

Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, President of the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly,



Dynamics of gross domestic product in the Eurasian region in 2019–21, % Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database data.

[noted](#) that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, putting immense strain on tenuous systems and plunging those in the most precarious contexts deeper into poverty and hunger. In many places, travel restrictions aimed at containing COVID-19 has reduced access to markets; the purchasing power of millions of people has been decimated as a result of an exponential increase in unemployment rates. Moreover, school closures have disturbed the primary source of nutrition for over 370 million children worldwide. Those suffering from hunger are at higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms as a result of associated health conditions, such as malnutrition and non-communicable diseases, which compromise the immune system.

Ismail Serageldin, former Vice-President, World Bank and Chairman, CGIAR, Founder & Director Emeritus of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) has prepared [an open letter](#) addressed to the UN, G-20, and National Governments in different countries concerning "COVID-19 and Agriculture for Food and Nutrition Security." The letter is written on behalf of the of the Central Asia and the Caucasus Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (CACAARI). It calls for a set of internationally agreed and locally relevant measures to address the medium- and long-term challenges associated with COVID-19 on agriculture, food, and nutrition security.

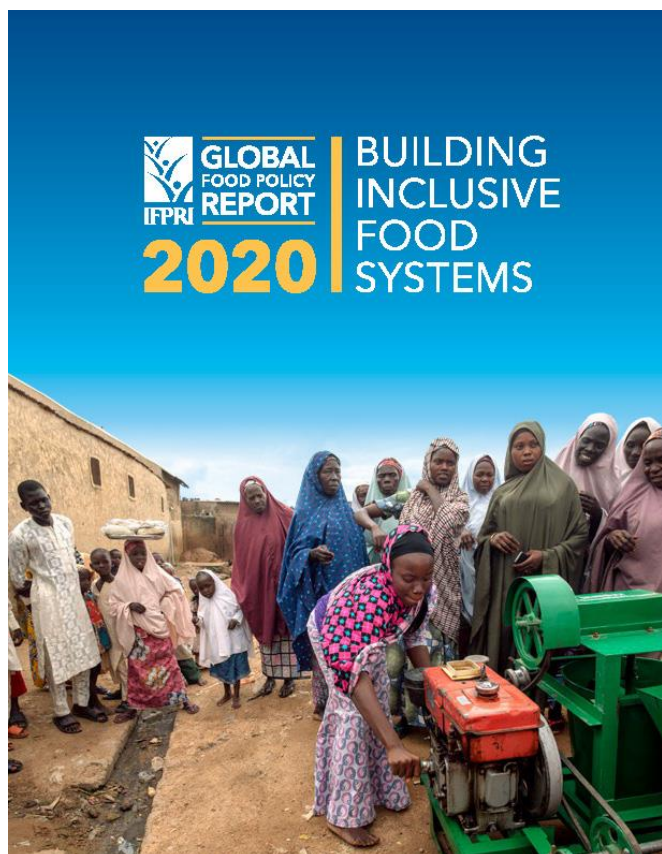
Serageldin predicts that the disruption of input supplies will affect agriculture adversely for the next 6 to 24 months. Urgent action is needed to ensure that adequate credit and agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides) are available when and where needed to strengthen the ability of the farmers to deliver. Transportation, storage, and distribution systems need to be enhanced, including the capacity to change production systems to meet shifting demands.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has prepared the first issue of the Bulletin "[Europe and](#)

[Central Asia: Regional food market situation and policy bulletin in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)" In regard to agricultural production, favorable conditions are noted for the region despite the pandemic, thanks to record grain stocks from previous years and an increase in grain yields in 2019. It is assumed that the yield of winter wheat exceeded the average values in Russia. The COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on the availability of transportation, storage, sales, food finance, and inputs. Overall, the value chain affected most in terms of transportation, storage, and sales is the fish value chain, followed by the milk and dairy, livestock, grains, and pulses value chains. Different scale problems arise during the transportation and storage of various food products. Many food chain participants note scant access to finance and resources. In response to the increased risks of food shortages, Russia and other large grain exporters have imposed quotas or even a ban on the export of certain crops. In order to avoid a rise in food prices, a number of political measures have been taken. These include authorizing food distribution; providing loans and financial resources to agricultural producers; exercising administrative control of prices and market interventions; and providing social support to vulnerable groups of the population, including migrants' to access food.

In order to adapt food systems to possible external shocks, the Eurasian countries should now work out a set of measures to ensure the sustainable functioning of agri-food areas and strengthen food security. Emphasis should be placed on forming production, transport, logistics, and marketing systems, taking into account the requirements of social distancing; increasing the degree of local value chains; and supporting the incomes of agricultural producers and the most vulnerable groups of the population. New challenges are becoming an unprecedented test for national food systems. Delay in developing and applying adequate response measures brings not only social upheaval but also political risks.

Virtual Event – Discussion on the Implications of the 2020 Global Food Policy Report for Eurasia



We are inviting you to the Virtual Event – Discussion the Implications of [the 2020 Global Food Policy Report](#) for Eurasia hosted by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the World Bank, the Eurasian Center for Food Security (ECFS), and Westminster International University in Tashkent.

IFPRI's 2020 Global Food Policy Report [was officially launched](#) in April and highlights the critical role that inclusive food systems can play. It looks specifically at obstacles and opportunities for building inclusive food systems as well as tools and technologies for building inclusive food systems, taking into account the interests of small farmers, youth, women, and people affected by conflicts as well as representatives of other poor and marginalized groups.

In connection with the novel coronavirus pandemic, the need for more active actions to stimulate the development of inclusive food systems is increasing.

Follow information of the event on the [ECFS website](#).

Q&A Case Study Session: Insights from Experts

World Bank and ECFS experts met online with case study applicants on May 25 to answer questions about the [Call for Proposals: Case Studies on Food and Nutrition Security Policy in Eurasia](#). This is [the fifth collection of case studies](#) addressing food security issues in Eurasia. About one hundred participants were registered for the event. This means that the Eurasian region has many researchers who are ready to address the COVID-19 crisis and help policy makers develop measures aimed at assisting food systems to recover after the shock. The purpose of the webinar was to provide more information about the selection criteria and give directions on how to prepare a good

proposal, as well as to answer any other questions related to the application process. A recording of the one-hour session and the webinar materials are available in Russian at [the following link](#).

Proposals for case studies on various topics that address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food and nutrition security in the Eurasian region are invited. This call is open to researchers, lecturers, and professors from Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan with an active research agenda in food and nutrition security. **Applications are accepted [online at this link](#) until May 31, 2020.**

Event Calendar 2020/21*

Date	City, Country	Event
May 27	ONLINE	Virtual Event – Discussion on the Implications of the 2020 Global Food Policy Report for Eurasia
May 27 – August 26	ONLINE	Virtual Seminars on Applied Economics and Policy Analysis in Central Asia
June 3–5	ONLINE	GSP (Global Soil Partnership) Plenary Assembly - Eighth Session
June 24–26	ONLINE	IAMO Forum 2020 Digital Transformation: Towards Sustainable Food Value Chains in Eurasia
September 15–17	Utrecht, Netherlands	ICOS Science Conference 2020 (Registration ends on July 19)
September 22	Moscow, Russia	International Scientific and Practical Conference Dedicated to the 200th Anniversary of the Moscow Agricultural Society In Russian only
October 12–16	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Global Symposium on Salt-Affected Soils: FAO event
October 19–20	Moscow, Russia	International Scientific and Practical Conference "Poverty of the Rural Population of Russia: Genesis, Overcoming Ways, Forecast" (website is not available yet, send questions by email: nikonovskie-chtenia@mail.ru)
October 20–23	Rome, Italy	4th GLOSOLAN meeting: GSP Event
December 6–9	Montpellier, France	4th International Conference on Global Food Security

Date	City, Country	Event
Second half of 2020	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC 32)
February 2–4, 2021	Rome, Italy	The FAO Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity (GSOBI20) Registration is open until May 22
Postponed until 2021	Kraków, Poland	16th International Conference on Soil Micromorphology
Postponed until 2021	Syktyvkar, Russia	VIII Dokuchaev Congress of the Society of Soil Scientists. and the School of Young Scientists on Soil Morphology and Classification (in Russian only).
23–27 August 2021	Geneva, Switzerland	EUROSOIL 2020

* Information is current as of May 24, 2020. Check the event's website for updates.