

SUMMARY

# Securing Food Systems in Asia and the Pacific Needs an Intersectoral Approach



The pandemic has disrupted food supply chains, causing prices to surge. Photo credit: ADB.

*The pandemic exposed gaps in food systems that call for integrating healthy diets with sustainable resource management and public health.*

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## Overview

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted the economic growth of countries in Asia and the Pacific. It has pushed around 70 million to 80 million people in the region into extreme poverty and exposed the fragility of food systems. Measures to contain COVID-19 have restricted the flow of supply chains, causing prices to surge, and further aggravating the prevalence of malnutrition. Without proper policies in place, the risk of another zoonotic spillover is likely to occur as the demand for energy-intensive diets grow.

The pandemic showed the urgency of making the food system in the region more resilient to risks and prevent another pandemic. Adopting an intersectoral approach can promote food and nutrition security without disrupting environmental ecosystems.

This article highlights the key points discussed in a webinar organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD)

on 26 August 2021.

# Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition

## Surging food prices

Both global and local food prices increased during the pandemic. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index recorded the 12th consecutive month of price surges in May 2021. The Consumer Price Index of Food also increased steadily in 2020 in all the subregions except in East Asia.

Disruptions of food supply chains and post-production activities, such as processing, packaging, and transportation, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas were disrupted, causing shortages and prices to soar. Informal, small, and medium-sized enterprises in the food sector, which employ many workers, were affected. For example, 58% of farm households were unable to sell products because of logistical disruptions in April 2020.

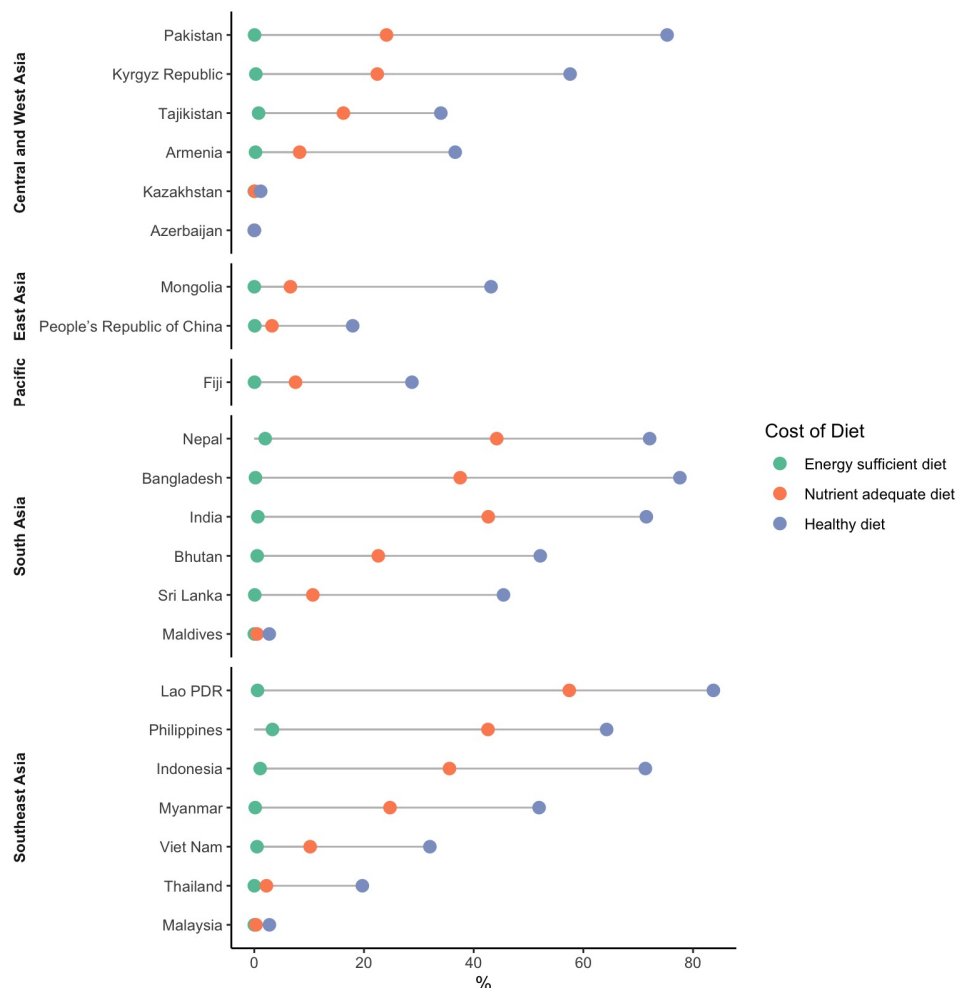
The situation is even more dire in vulnerable countries that are fragile and conflict-afflicted or at risk of disasters triggered by natural hazards during the pandemic. Insufficient food consumption is particularly high in these countries.

## More cases of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases

The Asia–Pacific region is struggling with multiple burdens of malnutrition, which is the coexistence of undernutrition (stunting and wasting) and micronutrient deficiencies along with overweight and obesity. All the countries in the region suffer from at least one or more forms of malnutrition. Undernourishment in most countries is not improving, and in some cases, worsening. In all countries in South Asia except Bangladesh, undernourishment has increased over the last few years. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults, adolescents, and school-age children is also rising more rapidly in Asia and the Pacific than in any other region in the world. Economic growth, urbanization, and globalization increased the prevalence of obesogenic food environments (e.g., via fast-food outlets, supermarket chains), characterized by the availability and promotion of highly processed, low-cost, and energy-dense foods that lead to unhealthy eating patterns paired with sedentary lifestyles.

Only 42% of the population in the region can afford a healthy diet. Infrastructure constraints (e.g., lack of farm-to-market roads) make production, storage, and distribution more expensive for perishable foods like fruits, vegetables, eggs, and dairy. The adverse impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods, food systems, and food prices further reduced the ability of consumers to access healthy diets. While the true impact of the pandemic may not be known for years, evidence suggests that behaviors adopted during the pandemic due to lockdowns and accessibility of food will exacerbate all forms of malnutrition.

## **Percentage of the Population that Cannot Afford a Healthy Diet**



Source: A. Herforth et al. 2020.

## Increased Risk of Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, and Zoonotic Spillover Events

Agricultural production in Asia and the Pacific grew rapidly because of new technologies, mechanization, increased chemical use, policies, and subsidies to boost food production. However, conventional agricultural production systems revealed many adverse effects, such as soil erosion; reduced soil fertility and health; overexploited water resources; increased water, soil, and plastic pollution; deforestation; and biodiversity loss, threatening long-term food security.

Food supply chains are under immense environmental pressure from the way food is produced and the demand for energy-intensive diets. Countries undergoing a nutrition transition tend to see increased consumption of food from animal sources, which have, on average, larger environmental footprints due to high greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and water usage. Increased food and agriculture production play a large part in the rise of zoonotic diseases. Animals live close to humans because their natural habitat has shrunk or has been destroyed. In Asia, the proximity between humans and animals in wet markets can increase the risk of pathogen transmission and the outbreak of new zoonotic diseases.

# Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to build resilient food system in the region. As part of recovery plans, food system actors must consider the risk landscape and develop mitigation measures to reduce their vulnerability. There is a clear need to take an intersectoral approach that integrates nutritious and healthy diets, sustainable natural resource management, and public health; and that enhances resilience to climate change and mitigates its effects. The lessons from the pandemic imply the following short and medium-long term key actions.

## Short-term actions

- **Ensure open trade.** The pandemic has shown that a running food trade is critical to ensure food security. The risk of nutrient deficiencies under a no-trade scenario is particularly high in Asia and the Pacific. Logistics and storage systems must be strengthened as domestic trade disruption remains a risk for many communities.
- **Enact social protection measures.** Food and cash assistance targeting the most marginalized and vulnerable populations should be supported during and after the pandemic. A few governments in the region adjusted their existing social protection programs to support the needs of mothers and children.
- **Protect food system workers across supply chains.** All workers in the food supply chain are critical in keeping the system moving and functioning. They need personal protection equipment, COVID-19 testing and vaccines, spaces with strict social distancing implementation, and proper infrastructure for hygiene.

## Medium- to long-term actions

- **Enhance the accessibility of healthy and nutritious food through more targeted investments.** Initiatives to make healthy food more accessible to consumers is essential in addressing the double burden of malnutrition. Public–private partnerships can play a role in scaling up investments in infrastructure. Build capacity to support the ability of small-scale producers to grow nutritious foods and not lose or waste them along the way to markets. Invest in “last mile” infrastructure, such as roads, cold storage systems and other postharvest storage facilities, wholesale and retail markets, and logistics information systems.
- **Leverage institutional markets.** Many low-income families and communities are increasingly reliant on social protection or school meal programs. The quality of foods in these programs can be better served through locally sourced foods. Having institutional markets reduces investment risk and creates a strong market incentive to grow nutritious foods. Reallocating a small percentage of farm subsidies to staple crops or edible oils can have a significant impact. Another option is setting targets for food procurement from women and women-only farmer organizations as they tend to participate in more horticulture and are custodians of nutrient-rich biodiverse landscapes.
- **Enhance natural capital, public health, and climate resilience.** Farmers have little incentive to pursue sustainable agriculture and the protection of natural assets. Policies should provide market-

based incentives through regulations, payments, or levies to private resource users to enhance ecosystem services; open trading between private resource users with a regulatory cap or floor for the level of use; self-organized private deals between the off-site beneficiaries of natural capital and the resource owners; and eco-labeling and certification of sustainably produced products. Moreover, taking a “One Health” approach—a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach to ensure human health, animal health, and environmental health—is critical in managing the risk of zoonotic diseases.

## Resources

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Jessica is a Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of Global Food Policy and Ethics at the Johns Hopkins University. In 2021, she published her first book, “Can Fixing Dinner Fix the Planet?” and co-wrote “Global Food Systems, Diets, and Nutrition: Linking Science, Economics, and Policy.” She holds a PhD in Nutrition from the University of Arizona and completed a Stephen I. Morse Postdoctoral Fellowship in Immunology in the Department of Molecular Medicine at Columbia University.



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Alexandra's dissertation focuses on how the nutrition transition is associated with changes in the food environment and dietary intake in rural Bangladesh. She is a member of the Food Systems Dashboard team. She has a bachelor's degree in Human Biology, Health and Society from Cornell University and a master's degree in Epidemiology from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

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