Impacts of Crisis on Food Security in Lebanon:
Presentation to the Food Security and Agriculture Sector Regional Working Group for Beirut-Mount Lebanon and South

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Issues to Cover

• Impacts of economic crisis and COVID-19 on food security in Lebanon

• *Online Seminar Series: The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Food Security* hosted by FSP
Impacts of economic crisis and COVID-19 crisis on food security
A challenging foundation for food security: MENA

- Progress across MENA region towards food and nutrition security had been limited in recent years, across various indicators for SDG2 - undernourishment, stunting, overweight and obesity.

- Food and nutrition security across MENA had worsened in 2019 due to multiple factors - conflict/insecurity, extreme weather, economic shocks (oil, remittances, currency depreciation, economic contraction). These factors also limited government ability to respond to challenge.

- COVID-19 has further exacerbated the challenge for MENA countries. WFP predicts 130 million additional individuals into acute hunger by end-2020 due to COVID-19, worst effects felt in Africa and MENA.
A challenging foundation for food security: Lebanon

- The **agriculture orientation index** of the Lebanese government expenditure was 0.17 in 2016, indicating that agriculture is a very low priority for the state.
- High levels of **food import dependency**, low levels of food self-sufficiency: 65-80% of food basket is imported.
- The **average dietary energy supply adequacy (ADESA) decreased** from 128% to 114% between 2010 and 2016, indicating lower food availability – which is correlated with higher prevalence of undernourishment.
- **Poverty** is most prevalent in the rural areas of Akkar and the Bek’aa. These are also the main areas where refugees have established themselves (ESCWA, 2016).
A challenging foundation for agriculture: Lebanon

• Lack of data and data sharing on agriculture production and food stock which keeps citizens hesitant around food shortages.

• Additional social and environmental challenges:
  - Water crisis and pollution
  - Climate change
  - Poor infrastructure and services in rural areas
Impacts of the economic crisis

• Macroeconomic:
  • Declining export revenues and incoming remittances creates greater challenges for food-importing countries like Lebanon, which will find it difficult to foot their import bills, risking significant currency devaluation and inflation.

• Microeconomic:
  • Minimum wage = $450 only months ago and now = $160
  • Rapid price inflation has impacted households’ ability to access food
  • Low/no access to finance
Impacts of COVID-19 crisis

• **COVID-19-induced trade restrictions exacerbated economic and financial crisis in Lebanon by further raising prices of imported food.**
  - Prices of commodities and foodstuffs increased at least by 58% since October 2019 (revolution).

• **COVID-19 exacerbated financial stratification that already existed between rich and poor.**
  - Example: Exacerbated poor living conditions of daily earners like taxi drivers and street vendors who could not afford to stay at home.
Impacts on agriculture

• Disrupted access to imported inputs
• Disrupted access to investment/working capital
• Disrupted/reduced access to export markets

• Mixed impacts on effective local demand due to reduced purchasing power, reorientation of demand from imports to domestic products
Impacts on food availability

• Lockdown/quarantine conditions imposed on farm workers prevent them from picking seasonal agricultural products (e.g., potato farmers).

• COVID-induced trade restrictions, together with the liquidity crisis, are negatively affecting the availability of products in the import-dependent Lebanese market.

• Panic buying caused shortages of commodities from the market.
Impacts on food security and nutrition outcomes

• Rising rates of poverty will reduce food accessibility.

• Anticipated shifts in household consumption are expected but not yet documented: coping through reduced or lower quality food consumption.

• Combined effects of high reliance on food imports, soaring food prices, loss of livelihoods could yield levels of hunger not seen since the early 1900s.
Gendered impacts

- Lebanon’s context makes women’s lives more precarious. New data from WFP look at impacts of COVID-19 on women:
  - Women’s employment reduced more than men’s.
  - Women are disproportionately adopting additional care roles.
  - A large proportion of refugees are women and children, who are more likely to lose work due to COVID-19.
  - Domestic workers - vulnerable already - face reduced ability to send remittances and most earnings due to economic shocks.
  - Reductions in food intakes, reductions in spending on medical care point to longer term adverse impacts like nutrition, health outcomes.
What strategic responses are needed?

- Strategic government responses in MENA must address longer-term underlying challenges as well as additional stress imposed by COVID-19.

- Strategic government responses in MENA must consider food and nutrition security broadly, beyond sole focus on agricultural production. Nutritional concerns and utilization must not be overlooked - as they too often are in food security approaches in MENA.

- So far, MENA government policy responses are focusing less on utilization issues, a reflection of longer-term policy orientation.
Policy response in Lebanon

• Lebanese government has acknowledged risks to food security due to crisis + COVID-19. First step but not enough to tackle effects:
  • Lower agricultural production
  • Lower access to finance in agriculture sector
  • Spiraling food price inflation
  • Lost wages/jobs
  • Rising poverty
  • Lost savings
  • Reduced resilience
Lebanese government response: food availability

• Minister of Agriculture authorized the import of 10,000 tons of potatoes from Egypt for industrial use.

• Ministry of Agriculture established an emergency plan aimed at ensuring food security for a year through:
  • Sustaining and increasing cultivated areas, productivity, quality, quantity of produce
  • Marketing products and protecting consumers
  • Supporting livestock breeders in Lebanon (small- and medium-scale)
Lebanese government response: food access

• Ministry of Social Affairs allocated $12m to provide food and medicine for 100,000 vulnerable families.
  • Lebanese Army distributed aid packages in various locations.
  • Due to limited resources, these packages only reached a quarter of the vulnerable families.

• Cabinet agreed to provide LL 400,000 as financial assistance to those who lost jobs and are in need.
Policy response in Lebanon: gaps

• Strategic thinking still needed to respond to changes in food systems post-COVID - to guide reinvestment in agricultural sectors, respond to shifting trade patterns/shortened supply chains, and tackle widening gaps in food and nutrition security.
Policy responses: needs

• Lebanese government responses should thoughtfully reinvest in agriculture for the long-term:
  • Prioritize currency for imported inputs that aren’t locally available, for critical food products.
  • Reconsider subsidies to support food and nutrition security of consumers and producers - enough for tobacco?
  • Promote local, plant-based proteins to make high quality protein available and affordable.

• Government must preserve, expand social safety net vs. rising poverty.
  • Build on existing mechanisms established via humanitarian work?

• Government must do the boring but essential work of collecting key data for evidence-based policy and program monitoring.
  • 2020 agricultural census + updates next year?
  • Undernourishment, malnutrition, FIES
Online Seminar Series: The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Food Security
International guest speakers from five continents

Brazil, Cyprus, Egypt, Germany, India, Lebanon, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Somalia, Thailand, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, and Zambia
Food Security Program Online Seminar Series: 
*Impact of COVID-19 on Global Food Security*

Seven sessions are uploaded on YouTube and watched by +2000 viewers.

Sessions are the following –

1) Food Trade
2) Food in the Global South
3) Water and Climate
4) Nutrition Security
5) Sustainable Food Systems
6) Food Security Strategies in the Middle East after COVID-19
7) Gender and Food
• Early impacts of COVID-19 on food security via availability dimension.
• Disruption of COVID-19 greater for labor-intensive, fresh, perishable foods: FFV, dairy
• Trade is critical for food systems and food security, especially during crisis. Keeping trade open takes cooperation, transparent market data.
• COVID-19 is an opportunity to challenge orthodoxies in food system(s).
• Ongoing debate: Will COVID-19 ultimately be pro-globalization or anti-globalization?
  • Diversification of suppliers
  • Shortening of supply chains
• Impacts in Global South disproportionately affect the poor, vulnerable:
  • Small farmers lost markets (e.g., Brazil)
  • Migrant workers stopped from working
  • Larger retailers gained over small, traditional
  • Households with insufficient housing, less access to water & sanitation, poorer nutritional health are also more susceptible to disrupted employment, education, & disease

• COVID amplified existing FNS challenges
• COVID + other crises: natural, economic
• Governments in Global South lack tools to respond: price controls, social safety nets.
• Rising calls for local, circular economies rooted in agroecology post-COVID and changes in rural-urban structures.
• COVID-19 adds to existing challenges to agriculture and food security: sustainability, climate change (co-disasters)

• Complex crises may challenge top-down systems where operation, innovation are locally controlled (like agricultural water use).

• Attention is needed to understand, address impacts on most marginalized, vulnerable.

• Resilience co-benefits: Efforts to improve water resilience help communities weather COVID

• Big shifts are possible, but only happen when “no other choice” is possible.

• Water must be added to the global climate change agenda.
• Projected impacts of COVID:
  • Poverty rising
  • Acute hunger rising, to double by end-2020
  • Wasting in children up 20% (5-10 million)
• Impacts worst in areas already hard-hit, among the most vulnerable
• Malnourishment increases vulnerability to disease. Healthy diets can support prevention & treatment of disease.
• Interventions: protections for food system workers, maintain market access (safely), income support, social protections, nutrition-specific interventions
• Real-time data collection & program monitoring are essential to guide, adjust interventions in short- & long-term.
  • Lebanon: Existing program for refugee & host community support via food retail system allows for quick study of price changes, changes in purchasing habits.
• COVID is an opportunity for radical new thinking around food systems – but little evidence so far.

• Sustainability concerns/lessons emerging:
  • Production, sale of animal protein
  • Increasing food waste (short term?)
  • Insufficient agri water productivity, pricing

• To change unsustainable aspects of food systems, we need political will, goodwill, coordination, and internalization of environmental/health externalities.
• MENA progress toward FNS:
  • Already limited in recent years
  • Slowed in 2019 due to conflict, weather, econ
  • COVID worsened, will raise acute hunger

• Strategic responses must:
  • Address long-term challenges + COVID impacts
  • Emphasize local, shorter supply chains when possible
  • Address needs of small farmers (education, technology)
  • Address FNS beyond agriculture alone!
  • Political will and support
Even before COVID, unhealthy diets were a leading cause of disease and mortality.

Vulnerable communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID due to underlying power, resource imbalances.

- Illness
- Burden of care (children, elders)
- Dietary impacts
- Economic disruption, employment loss
- Inter-generational cycles of poverty

Equality vs. equity

- Issues of inequality (inequity) stretch through entire food chain, beyond the farm

Political will is needed for serious change in response to combined crises, as in Lebanon: “Something has to give for things to change.”

Amid economic crisis + COVID-19, must learn from the humanitarian crisis and advances in social safety nets in particular.
Where to Watch

• YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0M2VQvKNHObMHRnLCKj8g

• FSP Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/pg/aub.fafs.fsp/posts/
International Commentary

The impact of COVID-19 on water and food systems: flattening the much bigger curve ahead

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Background: COVID-19 and water security: a similar curve

The year 2020 will go down in history as a year of major change. For the first time in almost 75 years, all peoples across the world have been affected by major disruptions on a global scale. The cause was invisible, but deadly. The world is changing by a virus. At first, governments reacted with low concern. COVID-19 was regarded as a problem for China. When Iran became infected, COVID-19 was still not taken seriously. If governments around the world had taken earlier steps to contain and mitigate the impact of the infection, many people’s lives and livelihoods might have been spared. Management of the coronavirus pandemic around the world provides examples of effective and also of flawed policy responses to a crisis.

In the world of water science and policy, this narrative is very familiar. Although few realize it, the ongoing water crisis, serious policy steps to mitigate the crisis are still largely absent. Water scarcity is mostly perceived as an issue for countries in the Global South. The Global North has only felt the first impacts of the crisis in the form of longer droughts in England, France, California or Germany. Yet, this is a misconception similar to initial responses to the coronavirus. The actual destructive force of the water crisis is still not felt because the water ecosystems, especially the groundwater systems, are still able to take the strain, and where that is not possible huge technological investments are being made to provide alternative sources of water.

When in March 2020 COVID-19 began to take more seriously, ‘flattening the curve’ became the new mantra of decision makers across Europe. The now famous Imperial College model by Professor Neil Ferguson predicted millions of deaths around the world in case of inaction. Fortunately, these predictions have not been realized to date. Still, more than 400,000 people have died worldwide, with no immediate end to the pandemic in sight. Beyond COVID-19, much greater environmental challenges that also endanger health and well-being are being built up for decades. This situation also requires urgent attention of decision makers.

There will probably be a vaccine for COVID. There is no vaccine for sustainability solving climate change and protecting water resources will require sustained effort for as long as human beings dominate the Earth. Any period in which our attention is diverted from that will see a ‘second wave’ in climate, environment and water risk that may exacerbate the current challenges even further.
Invitation to Participate in Research Study

• Study exploring impacts of crisis (especially COVID-19) on food shopping behaviors and attitudes in Lebanon

• Eligibility: Adults 18+ living in Lebanon who play some role in food shopping for self/household

• Participation via phone/WebEx/Zoom interview

• Join: FSP Facebook, FSP Twitter account, or email rb89@aub.edu.lb
For More Information

Website: [www.aub.edu.lb/fafs/foodsecurity/](http://www.aub.edu.lb/fafs/foodsecurity/)

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