



# Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Recovery with transformation: a mid-term overview

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## 1. Editorial



Privileged access to natural resources has allowed Latin America and the Caribbean to become a world leader in food production. This advantage, however, is not reflected in the diet of its inhabitants. While some do not even consume the minimum amount of calories to survive, a significant number of people have access mainly to ultra-processed foods that are high in salt, fat and sugar, with disastrous consequences for public health in terms of overweight and obesity.

As mentioned in other issues in this series, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the weaknesses and deficiencies of our societies. It has also shown that agriculture is an indispensable activity, producing essential goods. In that sense, the pandemic represents a huge opportunity to change, to start taking actions that will allow us to build a more modern, resilient and environmentally and people-friendly agriculture in rural areas. Nations have given this aspiration a name: rebuild and transform.

Fostering a reconstruction process that seeks to transform structures, habits and dynamics threatening the sustainability of the planet requires action to be taken as soon as possible, since the situation in which we will find ourselves in the post-pandemic world will undoubtedly be very different from the one we had by the end of 2019, posing even greater challenges than those we had at the end of last year.

Therefore, in this issue, we wanted to make a preliminary overview of the effects of this crisis on the regional agrifood system and list some initiatives and ideas on what to do to recover and transform the regional agrifood systems, with the aim of improving the social and economic conditions of the people living in the region, in complete harmony with nature.

## 2. Key messages



- The region is on a steady path to becoming the world's largest food producer. So, the agrifood sector appears to be more resilient than the other economic sectors, which have been hit hard by the pandemic.
- However, current agricultural production processes are not sustainable: they are responsible for 46 percent of greenhouse gases in the region and are critical agents in the loss of biodiversity.
- Besides, it is at least paradoxical to see that endemic food and nutrition security problems are present and that the crisis has exacerbated these.
- Immediate recovery measures should focus on protecting existing jobs, creating new ones and strengthening the social protection network, whether through direct investment or policies.
- Still, recovery can be the opportunity for transformation, that is, for making the adjustments that agrifood systems require to develop resilience to future risks.
- It is possible to enhance the resilience of agrifood systems by correcting the multiple social, economic and territorial inequalities present in the rural environment, and by establishing a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature.
- Although the objectives for immediate recovery and transformation of agrifood systems are not identical, the actions should start simultaneously so that recovery WITH transformation is indeed possible.
- The need to respond quickly to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a strong tax pressure, in a context of high public debt.
- Recovering our food systems is costly, but promoting a transformation of the sector is even more costly.
- Public funding for our agrifood systems is a scarce resource, which contradicts the importance of agrifood systems.
- It is necessary to look for new sources of financing, in addition to the traditional ones, such as: parafiscal charges, payments for environmental services (PES), tax discounts or a new Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to finance the necessary post-pandemic actions.





### 3. The importance of agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean



Agriculture and food systems are crucial to some Latin American and Caribbean economies, both in terms of GDP and employment. Many jobs are generated due to the work of small producers, as more than half of the region's food production comes from small farms. Although agriculture is very diverse across countries, there is enormous heterogeneity in terms of scale and sophistication, as well as its contribution to the national economy (Trivelli and Berdegúé, 2019).

The importance is also strategic, as the pandemic and the imminent risk of a food crisis remind us of the crucial importance of agriculture and food systems. Agriculture is an indispensable activity, producing essential goods. It is precisely in the area of food production that the region has positioned itself as one of the world's major producers.

Besides, Latin American and Caribbean countries have very abundant natural resources, which, in a way, has allowed the region to position itself as a major food producer. Hence, agriculture plays a critical role in the regional and global environmental balance since the environment in which agriculture and fishing take place is where ecosystem services are generated, benefitting the whole planet (Díaz-Bonilla and Del Campo, 2010).

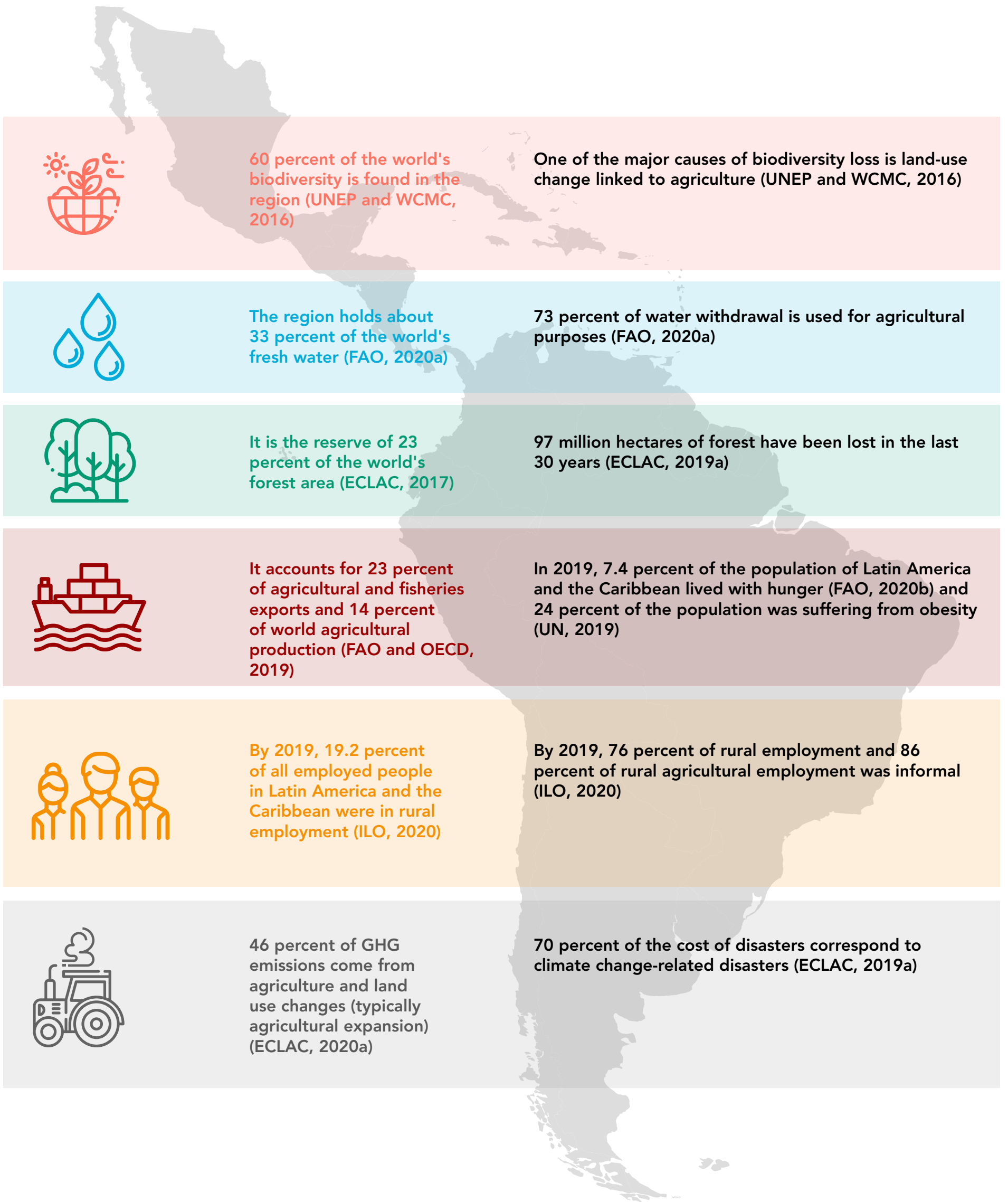
This productive capacity has meant spending more water, cutting down more trees and degrading more soil than in any other region of the world. And there is no trade-off: natural resources are being consumed at an extremely rapid rate, and their renewal does not run at the same speed.

Therefore, agrifood systems have a vital role to play in taking care of natural resources in Latin America and the Caribbean, and conserving them. This will make it possible to guarantee future production and thus meet the challenge of feeding more and more people, since the demand for food is expected to grow by 22.5 percent by 2050 (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020).





Figure 1/ Natural resources and agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean.



## 4. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and recovery with transformation



Reconstruction or recovery has often been conceptualised and designed for a country to return to the development conditions it enjoyed before a disaster or crisis. This, however, has led to the repetition of pre-existing risk situations and, therefore, the possibility of falling back into the same past emergencies or crises (UNDP, 2012). This way of analysing risks has evolved over time. Thus, a few years ago it was established that the **reconstruction phase** should be the opportunity to rebuild by creating resilience to manage or handle future risks, namely, **build back better** (UN, 2015).

As a result, more and more voices are pointing to the health, economic and social crisis caused by the **pandemic** as an **opportunity** to reflect on what kind of responses are required to emerge from a crisis of this magnitude. For this reason, it has been pointed out that in order to build back better, it is necessary to **transform the development model** of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020b; UN, 2020a).

**Transformation** refers to the adjustments that **agrifood systems** require to develop resilience to future risks (Torero, 2020a). Furthermore, it has been said since before the pandemic that food and agriculture systems require transformation – that should be aligned with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** (Trivelli and Berdegué, 2019).

After the **pandemic** became a reality in the region, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Fundación Democracia y Desarrollo (FDD) held a seminar to discuss whether investments in the COVID-19 recovery could be the necessary catalyst for a reorientation of Latin American and Caribbean economies and societies to meet the 17 **Sustainable Development Goals** (FAO and FDD, 2020). Achieving these goals depends largely on agriculture, food, and terrestrial and marine ecosystems, which offer an irreplaceable space for the development of solutions that allow to **rebuild and transform**, with public policies aimed at improving socio-economic indices, mitigating climate and environmental effects, and increasing adaptation and resilience to climate change in the region.

Perhaps it is time to address not only the direct consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also other problems besetting society, such as the **climate and environmental crisis** affecting all human activities – especially fishing and agriculture, which are highly vulnerable to climate change (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020; UN, 2020b).

This is why it has been stated that **recovery with transformation** of agrifood systems must incorporate **social, economic** and **environmental** dimensions (ECLAC, 2020a; UN, 2020a), in order to achieve the objective of moving towards more **resilient, sustainable** and **inclusive agrifood systems** (FAO, 2020a; Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020).

### 4.1. Recovery is immediate

The pandemic has deepened the economic slowdown that has been present in the region since 2014. Average GDP growth in recent years was a weak 0.4 percent. The arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 is expected to cause an impressive contraction of -7.7 percent (ECLAC, 2020b).

However, the agrifood sector seems to be behaving differently from the other economic sectors. Before the crisis, Latin America and the Caribbean was expected to become the main food producing region in the world, contributing more than a quarter of the world's agricultural and fishery products (OECD and FAO, 2019); and after almost a year of crisis, it seems that the projection has not changed much. Moreover, exports of agricultural and fishery products produced in the region have increased by 6 percent during the first half of 2020 (FAO and ECLAC, 2020).

Given the amount of food produced in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is at least paradoxical to see that endemic food and nutrition security problems are present and that the crisis has exacerbated these. This can be explained by the serious impact on poverty and employment levels that the pandemic has had, and by the high price of healthy diets in the region.

Figure 2/ Poverty, extreme poverty, unemployment and hunger observed and projected in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019 and 2020



Source: FAO, based on ECLAC (2020c).

Thus, immediate recovery measures should focus on protecting existing jobs, creating new jobs and strengthening the social protection network, whether through direct investment or policies. However, if the resilience of agrifood systems is to be enhanced, the recovery should incorporate transformational aspects, which will be addressed in the next section.

In the immediate recovery process, it is considered necessary to explore mechanisms to provide all poor people with basic emergency income. This may include the possibility of providing the equivalent of the national poverty line. To address food insecurity and malnutrition, these measures could be complemented, where necessary, by anti-hunger vouchers for people living in extreme poverty (UN, 2020a).

Also, health and social protection measures should be targeted at workers in the informal sector, which is mainly composed of women, youth, indigenous peoples and migrants (UN, 2020a). It is also essential to maintain feeding programmes for children, the elderly and other vulnerable people, giving priority to the public purchase of healthy and perishable food from small-scale agricultural producers and artisanal fishers in the region (FAO, 2020b).

Finally, it is important to implement actions aimed at preserving productive and management skills and capacities, so that production can respond when demand recovers, such as emergency grants for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), especially to cover labour costs. Policies and investments should facilitate equal access to information and communication technologies, tools and platforms (ICTs). For larger enterprises, financial support could be provided with conditionalities, such as protecting jobs, investing in research and development (R&D), making green investments and refraining from distributing dividends to shareholders (UN, 2020a).

## 4.2. Transformation is a long-term work

### 4.2.1. Inclusiveness, diversification and equality of rural territories

Although transformation is a long-term process, it must start alongside the immediate recovery process, focusing on the economic, social and environmental aspects that need to be corrected in the long term.

Since before the pandemic, rural population faced significant lags and gaps in development indicators. In 2017, one out of two rural inhabitants in the region faced monetary poverty and one in five faced extreme poverty (ECLAC, 2019b). These rates double and triple, respectively, the incidence of the same indicators in the urban environment.

These social differences are not static, but tend to be reproduced and passed on from one generation to another, as a result of the interaction of the multiple social, economic and territorial inequalities present in the rural environment. This is the manifestation of the territorial traps of poverty, inequality and low social mobility (Bebbington *et al.*, 2016). Hence, ending poverty is not on the horizon for a large part of the rural population (Trivelli and Berdegúe, 2020), and achieving it by 2030 will be difficult for most countries in the region.

Therefore, poverty in rural areas is not only based on lower levels of economic growth, but also on the prevalence of high levels of multidimensional inequality. In other words, poverty must be analysed together with other dimensions, such as nutrition.

The prevalence of undernutrition has increased in the region over the past five years, probably because of stagnant economic growth. In 2019, undernutrition levels reached 6.7 percent in Latin America and 16.6 percent in the Caribbean, when the global average was 8.9 percent. Besides, it should be recalled that poor nutrition is associated with obesity and overweight – diseases that affect almost half of the regional population (FAO *et al.*, 2020).

Economic conditions, structural imbalances (income, assets and resources) and the lack of social protection policies are the main causes of hunger and malnutrition in the region, added to disasters and crises that make it more difficult to escape this vicious circle (FAO *et al.*, 2020). This situation can be illustrated by the clear territorial inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean. While child overweight in highly underdeveloped territories is 13.1 percent, it is 6.6 percent in those with no underdevelopment (FAO *et al.*, 2020).

In short, today more than half of the regional population is suffering from hunger or malnutrition, and the pandemic has only made the numbers worse. To achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda, the efforts made so far will have to be redoubled.

# FAO proposal

## Transforming food systems: healthy diets for all

This proposal comprises two main focus, which require renewed public institutions based on science and technology, integrating all actors, including consumers and the private sector. Therefore, dialogue and collaboration with the business sector will be a priority for FAO.

Also, reliable information and policy monitoring are required to reduce rates of hunger, overweight and obesity. Achieving this requires effective governance that balances the interests of all actors in the food system, with a greater role for the public sector.

### Focus 1. Ensure greater supply and physical access to diversified and nutritious diets for all people

- Increase the production of healthy and nutritious food by providing assets, financing and training to small and medium agricultural producers and artisanal fishers.
- Boost the circular economy and reduce food loss and waste.
- Improve food distribution systems (including distribution systems and supermarkets, which must have a greater food supply), promoting short marketing circuits and local supply premises.
- Establish trade policies that promote greater food security.
- Improve food safety and quality, a cornerstone of marketing.

### Focus 2. Facilitate economic access to food and improve information and consumption patterns to promote healthy diets

- Promote fiscal and social policies that facilitate access to healthy food.
- Regulate food advertising and labelling to empower the population.
- Promote food education and school feeding.

Inequalities in the rural environment are reflected not only in malnutrition, but also in other dimensions, such as access to basic services and infrastructure, which remains limited for rural population – the gap compared to the urban environment is very high (Fort, 2019). This difference appears clearly in relation to connectivity and accessibility (roads, telecommunications, internet) and basic services (Fort, 2019; Saravia-Matus and Aguirre, 2019). Failure to ensure a minimum supply of these requirements will limit social and economic development in rural areas.

Because of the pandemic, these inequalities could increase among the countries of the region. The hardest hit countries will be those dependent on tourism and service activities and highly dependent on food imports, such as the Caribbean small island developing states. The increase in external public debt in these countries will put investment in services and infrastructure at risk for the next few years (UN, 2020a).

This is why it is not only necessary to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas, but also the inequality between countries. Differentiated public policies are required to support the development of all territories.



# FAO proposal

## Hand-in-hand: towards prosperous and inclusive rural societies

The objective is to generate public policies, tailored to the countries and territories, that provide integral solutions to rural territory. With the support of the digital and technological revolution, the aim is to reorder public, private and academic work.

The focus should be on small-scale fishing and family farming, which make up 80 percent of the productive units in rural areas. The work is divided into five main focus.

### Focus 1. Support increased investment in public and private goods

- Strengthen property rights to land.
- Extend the coverage and quality of rural services.
- Provide better information to the agricultural sector.

### Focus 2. Extend social protection in rural areas

- Link them to productive policies with inclusion programmes.

### Focus 3. Promote sustainable management of natural resources

- Especially those managed by the most vulnerable rural population, indigenous peoples, afro-descendants and women.
- Promote new ventures associated with natural and cultural heritage, such as: use of non-timber forest products, certificates of origin, and rural tourism.

### Focus 4. Boost non-agricultural rural employment

- Improve links between urban and rural centres.
- Improve the connection between the agricultural sector and the markets for goods and services.

### Focus 5. Expand rural infrastructure with investment packages

- Carry out public and private investment packages.
- Improve access to the internet, information and telecommunications.



#### 4.2.2. Sustainability and resilience

Before the pandemic, the region's development model already faced serious structural limitations, which were manifested in low growth levels, increasing indicators of poverty and food insecurity, loss of biodiversity and greater vulnerability to disasters associated with climate change. These constant and frequent shocks led countries to over-indebtedness, as occurred with the Caribbean small island developing States, which are among the most indebted economies in the world (UN, 2020a).

In this sense, agriculture and fisheries are particularly vulnerable to disasters associated with climate change, as they are activities that depend on environmental conditions (IPCC, 2014). Agriculture in the region is also particularly sensitive to climate change. In addition to temperature increase, change in rainfall distribution and rising sea levels, it is expected that by the middle of the 21st century the availability of surface and groundwater will be reduced in most subtropical regions (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020).

On the other hand, despite the fact that Latin America and the Caribbean is a biodiverse area – eight of the world's seventeen mega-diverse countries – and has unique and irreplaceable ecosystems, the region has suffered, from 1970 to date, an 89 percent decline in wildlife populations, the largest documented loss in the world (WWF, 2020). The causes would be deforestation, for forestry and agricultural production, and unsustainable fishing (UN, 2020a).

Therefore, attention to the pandemic should not lead to environmental neglect. On the contrary, recovery should be a unique opportunity to embark on a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature. All the more so as global demand for food is expected to increase in the coming decades. The challenge lies in producing more food with less: less pollution, less greenhouse gas emissions, less land use change, less water, less overfishing.





# FAO proposal

## Sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture

This objective is composed of two main focus that require greater investment, a great leap in innovation and technology and a profound institutional change that involves new governance, more sectors of society, and stimulates cooperation between countries.

Agriculture must move towards a development model that not only exploits natural resources, but also enhances and values them.

Focus 1. Produce more sustainably, reduce the environmental footprint, and integrate ecosystems and biodiversity

- Reduce the environmental footprint, improving soil health and moving towards efficient water use.
- Integrate biodiversity conservation into production policies will protect the basis of agriculture and regional food security.
- Sustainable management of forests, promoting the fight against illegal logging, co-management of forests, community forestry and forest concessions.
- Safeguard fisheries and aquaculture by combating illegal fishing and ensuring sustainable growth of the sector.
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by preventing deforestation, promoting low emission livestock farming, recarbonising soils and reducing food loss and waste.

Focus 2. Farmers, rural communities and ecosystems more resilient to climate change

- Invest in disaster risk reduction: improve risk-related information systems.
- Incorporate climate-resilient production practices that are adopted on a large scale.

Other measures cannot be overlooked, such as those recommended by the United Nations Environment Programme (UN, 2020b), which proposes to incorporate **nature-based solutions** (NBS). NBS are extremely cost-effective in helping ecosystems to produce services that enable the economic development of local populations, as well as adapting to the effects of climate change. Healthy ecosystems can save USD 125 billion annually related to climate threats in the region. These healthy systems can be generated, for example, through the protection of wetlands, reforestation with native species, or maintenance of ecological river flows.

On the other hand, the World Bank (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020) proposes a strong focus on **changing energy sources**, since the energy used in agriculture is both a challenge and an opportunity. The energy used for agriculture is responsible for 22 percent of total emissions from the agricultural sector (excluding emissions from food transport) (WRI, 2020). Therefore, the use of new technologies is proposed, including solar and hydro energy, to introduce new and cleaner agricultural production systems. However, agricultural activity itself can offer new energy source opportunities. Ruminant waste can generate energy. Simple technologies are enough (such as on-farm biodigesters); they have the simultaneous potential to improve manure management, reduce GHG emissions and produce energy on the farm. On the other hand, agricultural products can be produced with the express purpose of generating renewable fuels. This is the case, for example, with ethanol, which is commonly produced from corn and charcoal, a black carbon residue produced by removing water and other volatile components from animal and plant materials.

## 5. Financing



**The need to respond quickly to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a strong fiscal pressure.** Expenditures have risen while tax revenues dropped. By the middle of the year, governments had already announced fiscal efforts equal to 4.1 percent of GDP in 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries (ECLAC, 2020b); and by the end of the year, the fiscal gap had only widened. It is estimated that the region's fiscal position at the end of 2020 will be the largest deficit in the last 70 years (ECLAC, 2020b).

Public financing conditions for recovery are not easy, in a context where debt levels in Latin America and the Caribbean have only increased over the last decade. Central government gross public debt rose to 45 percent in the region by 2019 – a 30 percent increase compared to 2010 (ECLAC, 2020f). Besides, international financing conditions have not been in favour of a region that is highly dependent on natural resources, with prices that have generally fallen during the pandemic.

**Both the recovery and the transformation of our agrifood systems require a lot of investment.** In the short term, food and its production processes are an essential part of the region's economy. In the long term, food remains essential, in addition to the need for sustainable interaction with the ecosystems that make our way of life possible. **Therefore, the alternative of promoting a transformation of the sector is even more costly.**

Unfortunately, **public funding for our agrifood systems is a scarce resource.** In most countries of the region, public expenditure on agriculture is between 1 and 2 percent of total expenditure, which is less than agricultural value added as a percentage of GDP, although there are some exceptions in the Caribbean.

### 5.1. Liquidity to recover

The crisis requires a two-faced response. On the one hand, it has generated cash flow problems for a significant number of companies in the short term. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) projects that 2.7 million companies will close in the region by 2020. Of these, almost 300 000 are hotels and restaurants with strong links to primary agricultural production (ECLAC, 2020f). On the other hand, the pandemic has left millions of people without jobs and life chances. This has led to increased levels of poverty, extreme poverty and hunger. ECLAC estimates that 44 million jobs have been lost, reaching up to 13.5 percent unemployment.

Consequently, financing measures for recovery must ensure that the health crisis does not turn into a food crisis. For this to happen, a comprehensive response from the agrifood system, including consumers, is required (ECLAC and FAO, 2020):

- **For consumers,** ECLAC and FAO have proposed an **anti-hunger bonus** equivalent to 70 percent of the poverty line for areas in extreme poverty, with a cost that varies greatly from country to country, but reaches 0.52 percent of regional GDP.
- **For the region's 17 million agricultural units and two million fishers,** ECLAC and FAO have recommended an increase in soft loans to the sector of around 20 percent per year. Besides, **a one-time investment – with non-reimbursable funds – in a basic investment kit** is recommended (fertilisers, seeds and others), for this kit to be delivered to 6.8 million family farms.



## Sources of income and funding

### Traditional sources

- **Public debt:** between March and June 2020, eleven countries in the region placed sovereign bonds in international markets for a total of USD 24 812 billion, at low interest rates (ECLAC, 2020b).
- **Monetary policy:** with inflation at historically low levels in the region, there is room for expansionary conventional and non-conventional monetary policies (ECLAC, 2020b).
- **Multilateral financing:** this is an important source of income for the most vulnerable countries in the region. In El Salvador and Honduras, multilateral financing amounted to 3.7 percent of GDP until 20 May 2020, (ECLAC, 2020f). So far in 2020, 25 countries in the region have accessed emergency funds from international financial institutions, reaching USD 22 587 million (ECLAC, 2020b).
- **Reduction in tax evasion:** ECLAC estimates that in 2018, tax evasion was around USD 325 billion, equivalent to 6.1 percent of GDP (ECLAC, 2020f).

### Non-traditional sources

- **Parafiscal charges:** a law allows private entities to receive resources generated by each unit produced, exported or imported. These contributions, although imposed by the state, do not appear in the general budget, hence the term "parafiscal". This system makes it possible for a country to have its own budgetary resources to implement public-private agendas for chains, since the legislation requires all members to make a financial contribution, thus solving the classic problem of the free rider, that is, a person who receives a benefit for using a good or service, but avoids paying for it. In Colombia, parafiscal funds raised around USD 610 billion in the sector in 2019.
- **Tax discounts:** when tax exemptions are authorised for companies to promote innovation or infrastructure improvement. An interesting reference is the *Obras por Impuestos* (works for taxes) programme implemented in Peru.
- **Payment for environmental services (PES):** (monetary) incentives offered to farmers or landowners in exchange for some ecological service. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Costa Rica (1997) and Mexico (2003) are leaders, although several countries now have centralised or non-centralised PES schemes. (Moros, Matallana and Beltrán, 2020). PES are attractive because of their flexibility in implementation. However, three features are key to their success: i) spatial targeting; ii) differentiation for payments; and 3) a robust system for monitoring and sanctioning non-compliance (Moros, Matallana and Beltrán, 2020).
- **New approaches to corporate social responsibility:** going beyond philanthropy and the shared value approach, to integrate a commitment of companies to collective strategies implemented in favour of the community, and explicitly aimed at reducing systemic risks.

All these mechanisms should be accompanied by an active policy to identify low-cost solutions, where territories and local communities enhance their own resources – which must be combined with advanced technology (digitalisation, for example) to achieve the desired impact.

## 5.2. Financing to transform

In the post-pandemic stage, the central challenges for public spending are the construction of social welfare states, the strengthening of productive development and the implementation of policies to promote environmental sustainability (ECLAC, 2020b).

Current incentives in the financial sector do not adequately incorporate the externalities present in the agricultural production process, and the investment and financing levels in the agrifood system are not sufficient to achieve the SDGs (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020).

The financial system is de facto a mirror of society's priorities and preferences; it reflects and expresses the rules of the game. Historically, the relevance of the agricultural sector and the food system in the global financial market has been minimal, and the sustainability of the system even less so.

However, in the world of finance, an emerging trend is changing the tone. In January 2020, BlackRock announced a USD 500 million target for climate change-related infrastructure. In October of the same year, JPMorgan Chase & Co. announced its alignment with the Paris Agreement targets and a strategy to help its clients transition "to a low carbon world".

Recovery from the pandemic is a key moment to change the productive trajectory of the region's food system. A change in financing incentives that takes into account the various costs of actions to make our agrifood system more sustainable can open up new opportunities in the sector.

The gaps in access to finance (between rural and urban areas, between primary agriculture and agro-industry, between large and small enterprises) are significant. Today, financial inclusion for the rural population is extremely low in the region. Less than 10 percent of producers report a loan to a financial institution (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020).

Financial inclusion of the region's rural populations that have been left behind may increase, as a secondary result of subsidy policies or financial support, since in order to access some public goods, financial infrastructure (bank accounts, etc.) must exist (Morris, Sebastian and Perego, 2020). If these gaps in access to finance can be closed, other gaps (in productivity, access to technology, etc.) can also be closed.





## 6. Rebuild and transform: some concrete initiatives in the region



Some concrete ideas developed for a recovery with transformation of agrifood systems are presented below (FAO and FDD, 2020). The challenge was to come up with concrete, replicable ideas that met two conditions:

- i. Have the potential to drive economic and social recovery from the effects of the pandemic, with results in no more than two years.
- ii. Enable a large-scale climate and environmental transformation to be implemented in the region.

After a selection process, the projects chosen were (FAO, 2020c):

### Climate-smart livestock farming



**Objective:** strategies that increase livestock productivity and producer income, while reducing land degradation, increasing the capacity to adapt to climate change and reducing GHG emissions. This would be achieved by strengthening coordination and institutional capacity to incorporate a climate-smart approach; implementing cross-sectoral policies, technologies and techniques for sustainable livestock production; monitoring GHG emissions and adaptive capacity in the livestock sector; and, managing and evaluating knowledge on climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies.

**Effects on transformation:** reduction of the carbon footprint and deforestation of livestock activity; cost reduction, and improvements in efficiency in the use of critical inputs for livestock, decommodification of production, and access to niche markets.

**Effects on recovery:** there is a potential access of beneficiaries to financial mechanisms (credits) as a complementary element to the implementation of good practices. However, there is no evidence of a short-term recovery effect.

**Potential scope:** livestock farmers in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru; people of various ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, and women.

### Restoring the balance between agriculture and biodiversity: the socio-economic benefits of restoration actions



**Objective:** carry out ecosystem restoration actions through the provision of ecosystem services, and planting and restoration tasks. This can be achieved by identifying priority areas and good practices; restoring degraded ecosystems affected by fires; generating buffer and protected areas; promoting forest management focused on public and private lands. Some ecosystem services could recover within five to ten years. Carbon sequestration, however, is immediate.

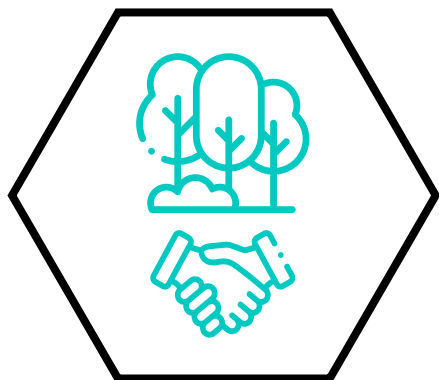
**Effects on transformation:** benefits associated with ecosystem restoration: increased provision of ecosystem services, water, pollination, etc.

**Effects on recovery:** employment generation at local level in the short term, and generation of additional business opportunities (for instance, tourism).

**Potential scope:** populations living in areas to be restored in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, participating in the Bonn Barometer. It could expand to Chile and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

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**Post-pandemic economic recovery based on the agro-forestry activities of indigenous peoples and afro-descendants and the synergies with social protection and climate action**



**Objective:** improve the quality of life and the condition of the forests in the collective territories of indigenous peoples and afro-descendants together with the reactivation of the forest and agro-forestry economic activities of the local economies. By mobilising international and national resources to implement forest governance strategies and creating synergies between social protection, economic inclusion and forest governance projects.

**Effects on transformation:** improving the quality of life and reducing the social and cultural vulnerability of indigenous peoples and afro-descendants through economic recovery, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, governance of their territories, synergies between formal and informal social protection systems.

**Effects on recovery:** potential reactivation of economic activities and the capacity of territorial and forest governance of indigenous and afro-descendant regions to generate a dynamic of sustainable local development, among other multiple social and environmental benefits.

**Potential scope:** forested areas where low-income indigenous and Afro-descendant people have communal land rights. The programme will be implemented in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and Peru.

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**Provision of public goods and infrastructure in lagging territories for post-pandemic recovery**



**Objective:** develop integrated public goods infrastructure programmes for a post-pandemic recovery with transformation of 31 lagging territories, through the identification of needs and conditions for skilled and unskilled employment; development and management of these jobs; development of capacities and skills; improvement of infrastructure in access to water, digital connectivity, grain storage systems, drying plants, among others.

**Effects on transformation:** economic and productive inclusion of lagging territories in food systems and production chains of non-agricultural goods and services (ecosystems, community tourism, etc.) through access to public goods and quality infrastructure.

**Effects on recovery:** Rapid reactivation once the COVID-19 pandemic has been overcome through the generation of employment and the revitalisation of territorial economies due to an increase in local consumption. Then, generation of employment and dynamisation of local economies; strengthening the capacity of local governments and community/social organisations in resource management.

**Potential scope:** the candidate countries are Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic, and 31 territories identified in the framework of the 100 Territories free from Hunger and Poverty strategy and FAO's Hand-in-Hand initiative.



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## Wholesale and supply markets: modernisation, digitalisation and transparency



**Objective:** modernise markets and supply centres, promoting inclusive marketing technologies, innovation and adaptation of processes to implement digital business strategies. Application of circular economy criteria; intelligent management of water, energy, transport and solid waste; improvement of loss and waste management, market intelligence and logistics; and use of information systems to articulate supply and demand of food, electronic commerce, among others.

**Effects on transformation:** concrete improvements in supply markets to ensure food supply, inclusive marketing processes involving family farming and multi-sectoral economic development strategies in food supply.

**Effects on recovery:** strengthened supply centres that generate jobs and boost the local economy, improving their management through technological innovation, digitalisation and the generation of efficient food marketing processes, with price information management.

**Potential scope:** wholesale and central supply markets with national, provincial/state influence in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

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## Development of digital marketing capabilities for associative and cooperative agrifood companies



**Objective:** develop and install logistic, administrative, financial and technological capacity in countries of the region to migrate public-private associative entities and cooperatives to digital systems, through the increase of marketing capacities; development of new businesses and surveys of potential e-commerce markets; systematisation of product offers; articulation of buyers; promotion of associativism, among others.

**Effects on transformation:** enabling farmers to access online markets (e-commerce) which were previously inaccessible, with subsequent economic benefits.

**Effects on recovery:** employment generation (increasing number of farmers who are members of cooperatives), increase in sectoral/regional GDP, increase in income, strengthening of agrifood product marketing chains, increase in the productive capacity of producer associations and cooperatives.

**Potential scope:** it is projected to benefit a total of 5 754 people distributed in 58 cooperatives, that is, 5 percent of cooperative members in four countries (Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic).

## 7. Interviews



### **Jorge Bedoya**

President of the Colombian Farmers' Society (SAC, by its acronym in Spanish)



#### **What benefits and impacts have the parafiscal entities had in Colombia?**

There is no doubt that parafiscal operations is one of the best public policy tools available to the Colombian countryside. Taxes paid by producers, aimed at benefiting their entire sector, administered by the organisation that represents them, and monitored by the entities that control public resources, have become a recipe for success over the years.

There are many advantages to this mechanism. Firstly, these resources are paid as a tax by the producers and the total fund for a specific year depends on the behaviour of the sector itself, so they do not depend on the annual payments of the government budget and neither do they depend on approvals by the Congress of the Republic. Second, the cost for the producer is well reduced in his scale of production costs, and much more if the benefit to the whole sector is taken into account. Third, their investment is for the sector as a whole and investment decisions are made with the participation of democratically elected producers – also with the help of the Ministry of Agriculture, where the voice of the producers predominates. Fourth, each fund is different in the orientation of its resources, since it responds to the needs and priorities of the sector, in such a way as to configure public goods, accelerators of better sectoral performance, contribution to the well-being of producers, their education and training, among others.

In terms of impact, each sector has many indicators of success. But, in general, I would mention the increase in the consumption of products such as chicken, eggs and pork, which have experienced sustained growth as a result of consumption promotion campaigns carried out with resources from their respective funds. Likewise, in terms of animal and plant health and research, it is satisfactory to see the progress made by sectors such as pig, palm and coffee in their regionally deployed campaigns, and also in the strengthening of research centres to generate disease-resistant varieties, development and innovation in good agricultural practices, among others. And of course, technical assistance and knowledge transfer to producers, where, for example, the cases of rice and fruit are models to follow, as well as steps to consolidate export possibilities.

#### **Are these parafiscal entities independent of the political cycle and how do they relate to governments?**

It is important to bear in mind that parafiscal funds are accounts managed by the sectoral organisations, depending on the sector concerned. And these organisations are private entities that do not respond to political cycles. However, the Ministry of Agriculture and, depending on the case, other public entities are part of the fund's boards, but most of the board members are producers who respond to the interests of the private sector. This minimises the risk of political cycles and politicking. And at least in the general experience we have had in Colombia, there has been a harmonious relationship with the government – except in a specific sector a few years ago – and a search for joint work to benefit the sector.

The relationship responds to technical criteria, designing strategies to strengthen the productive sector, within the framework of possible actions defined by the laws that create each fund, and with proposals that come from the producers represented in their respective organisations, who are the ones who truly know the needs of each sector.

The initiatives that can be worked on are generally defined in the laws that create each of the parafiscal funds. So, they respond to the particularities of each sector and range from campaigns to promote consumption, technical assistance, marketing, economic studies, animal and plant health, food safety, among many others to, of course, issues of sustainability and improvement of living conditions of producers through sectoral strategies.

If new funds were to be created or existing ones modified, they would have to be approved by Congress, which is also synonymous with legal security.

**Lisa Moon**  
CEO of the Global FoodBanking Network



#### **Do you think that the pandemic caused a leap in the food bank requirement for 2020?**

Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented increase in demand for food assistance worldwide. During "the great lockdown", all food banks without exception reported increased demand for food assistance, as millions of people lost their income and were suddenly at risk of hunger. In addition to the expansion of social protection programmes and cash transfers, the mobilisation of food banks around the world has been crucial in preventing the public health crisis from becoming an even greater hunger crisis (Torero, 2020b).

Food banks experienced a growing demand for services concurrent with disruptions in the food supply chain, forcing all our members to find alternative food sources to meet the needs of the community. These challenges were further compounded by public health restrictions, mandatory closures and a critical loss of food and donated funds, as well as the voluntary workforce to sort and distribute essential food assistance. Today, 91 percent of the food banks served by GFN are experiencing high demand for food relief, as many people remain unemployed or underemployed.

We are present in 18 countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region: Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, through 205 food banks and four national networks.

In this region, 95 percent of the food banks show an average increase of 116 percent in the kilos distributed during the pandemic. These food banks have managed to increase the number of social organisations served, reaching with food an additional 3.4 million people.

#### **What are you doing to broaden the donor base?**

Food banks depend on support from both the public and private sectors to provide services. Throughout the world, food banks rely heavily on private sector donors for financial and in-kind support. Local and global businesses, farmers, individuals and foundations provide the funds that keep food bank infrastructure running. They also donate food and non-food items that are provided to people who need food assistance. In response to COVID-19, thousands of individuals, foundations and businesses, including companies in many industries, are providing rapid and crucial support to food banks to help them meet the emergency needs of their communities.

It is crucial that this support continues so that food banks can continue to respond to the high rates of food insecurity in their communities. GFN and our members are inviting all businesses and individuals to explore how they can contribute to the activities of their local food banks. There are ample opportunities to offer financial support, product donations, employee involvement and expertise to boost hunger relief. At GFN, we are inviting multinational agricultural and food producers, and the companies that support them, to work with us to identify opportunities to recover surplus food along their supply chain and donate it to nearby food



banks. We are also building on the experience and best practices of the private sector to support food banks in expanding access to food at the community level.

Finally, GFN is carrying out a project with the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic to identify barriers to food donation in various countries. We will not be able to achieve zero hunger, especially with the complications created by COVID-19, with policies that discourage the donation of surplus food for human consumption for hunger relief purposes. Through this project we hope to identify common-sense policy solutions that can facilitate the reduction of food loss and waste and fight hunger.

### **Keeping in mind the lessons of the pandemic, what should be the new lines of work in the future?**

Food banks are community development institutions that bring together the social protection objectives of the public sector and the efficiency of the private sector food system to reduce hunger. The COVID-19 pandemic experience demonstrates the important role of food banks in helping to better rebuild our communities, with greater resilience to future crises, leading to more equitable human development and food security.

To move forward in the food banking model in all regions, cultures and socio-economic conditions, consideration should be given to redoubling efforts, including:

- Create public-private partnerships to strengthen food banks technically and operationally, generating greater scale and capacity to prevent hunger, expand social protection and support human capital strengthening objectives.
  - Provide additional resources to food banks and social organisations as a proven mechanism for routing food to hungry populations.
  - Recognise food banks as essential components of the government response to food insecurity.
- Strengthen the capacities of food banks so that they can provide rapid responses to crises that may arise.
  - Implement food banks as distribution centres for government social assistance, particularly food assistance to children during pandemic-related school closures.
  - Create exceptions for food banks (as essential services) to emergency response measures, such as quarantines, curfews and homestay requests, to ensure that the reception and distribution of food donations continues uninterrupted.
- Build resilient local food systems to ensure supply chains keep operating in times of crisis, and guarantee access to food for vulnerable populations.
  - Develop public policies to promote the donation of surplus food, including tax incentives and liability protections for donors.
  - Strengthen food collection strategies in the agricultural sector that promote surplus disposal, including logistical support, and reward farmers for making unmarketable products available for hunger relief.
- Strengthen civil society institutions to provide safety nets at the community level for impoverished and disadvantaged populations
  - Generate greater capacity in the networks of organisations served by the food banks through which the beneficiaries are reached, through technical assistance and financial support to expand the services offered, receive and distribute sufficient volumes and high-quality nutritional food, and build local organisational resilience for the future.
  - Promote and update models of service provision to ensure that populations are not left without food aid in times of emergency.

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