

Virtual Parliamentary Dialogues: Food Security and Nutrition in the time of Covid-19

Report of the third session

Arab Countries, 1 April 2021

The Virtual Parliamentary Dialogues are aimed at supporting capacity building activities for parliamentarians as well as the political dialogue processes that are being developed in each region, focusing on initiatives able to address and mitigate the impact of Covid-19.

Moreover, the aim is to place food security, nutrition and socio-economic inclusion of family farmers, at the top of political agendas to ensure the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The events are organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), with the collaboration of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), as a follow-up to the commitments of the first Global Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition held in Madrid in 2018.¹

The third event of the series of Virtual Parliamentary Dialogues, took place on Thursday, 1 April 2021, in partnership with the Association of Senates, Shoora and Equivalent Councils of Africa and the Arab World (ASSECCA). The concept note and the agenda are available on the website.²

¹ For further information, please visit: <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/global-parliamentary-summit/es/>

² For further information, please visit: <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/virtual-parliamentary-dialogues/dialogues-calendar/arabic-countries/es/>

Session Summary

First Session – Opening

Family farmers' transformative potential to achieve SDGs

Ms. Marcela Villarreal, Director of the Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division at FAO, highlighted the importance of parliamentarians' role in the implementation of the UN Decade for Family Farming (UNDF), which serves as a framework for developing policies and investments in family farming (FF), relevant to achieve the 2030 Agenda.³

In the Near East and North Africa, 70% of the population lives in rural areas, of which 34% is engaged in agriculture and produces 60% of food. Within the framework of the Decade, 7 national plans have been approved worldwide, while 8 are at an advanced stage and 35 are mobilizing actors to enhance their elaboration.

In the region, FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have facilitated the elaboration of a regional plan, whose axes are: sustainable and innovative practices; decent rural employment opportunities and complementary social protection mechanisms; capacity of rural organizations and institutions to improve access to rural services and markets.

A cooperation model based on the exchange of experiences and good practices

Ms. María Molina Alvarez de Toledo, Head of AECID's Department of Cooperation with the Arab World and Asia, pointed out that the Maghreb and the Middle East are a priority for Spain, whose commitment focuses on SDG 16.

The fight against hunger and the defense of the Right to Adequate Food (RtAF) through the legislative branch are a hallmark of the Spanish Cooperation; it was initiated with the Hunger-Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative and specifically, with the Parliamentary Front Against Hunger (PFH).

³ For further information, please visit: <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/home/es/>

One of the milestones achieved was the celebration of the Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition. The PFHs have inspired the creation of parliamentary alliances in Spain and in other parts of the world. In addition, they are considered an excellent model of "*two-way cooperation*", from which we could learn from each other by encouraging the exchange of experiences and good practices of the different regions.

Measures in the light of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition, the Rome Declaration and the Food Systems Summit

The **Hon. Dr. Jihad Al-Fathel**, Member of the Shura Council of the Kingdom of Bahrain and Vice President of the Parliamentary Network for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa and the Arab World, stressed that the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) and the Rome Declaration are an opportunity to improve food systems. She called for considering the following measures: drafting laws on Food Security and Nutrition (FNS); securing food reserves; creating an Arab center for food security with financial support; engaging youth in agriculture; preparing emergency budgets able to contain economic and social incentives in the face of the crisis; and strengthening multilateral cooperation and the role of the UN, for instance, as a result of the Food Systems Summit, the Year of Food Security could be declared.

Second Session - Technical Overview: Food Security and Nutrition and the Role of Parliamentarians in Developing an Enabling Policy Environment in the time of Covid-19

Economic and social challenges compounded by the pandemic

Dr. Mohamed Abdel Monem, Senior Advisor and Executive Director at FAO's Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa, pointed out that the region was already facing serious challenges even before the pandemic: the highest population growth rate in the world; youth unemployment at 30%; heavy migration due to conflict; desertification

and degradation of agricultural land, as well as a 66% of reduction in water resources; rising temperatures and sea levels due to the climate change; and dependence on commodity imports.

As a consequence of the pandemic, the functioning of some food supply chains has deteriorated and trade has declined. As a result, the right to food of the most vulnerable has been seriously affected.

In the context of FF, FAO's work is based on three pillars: harnessing digital technology, especially in family protection programmes; empowering people in rural areas focusing on youth and women; and improving agricultural production through innovation.

Parliamentarians can approve pro-poor budgets and raise public awareness of the impact of hunger, among others. Their role can be strengthened with the support of scientists and academia, and by improving the capacities of national and regional statistical institutions.

Third Session - Roundtable: Which topics and measures are being discussed and planned in your parliaments to address and/or recover from the impacts of Covid-19 on Food Security and Nutrition?

Agriculture can be seriously damaged if an extension of restrictions will occur

The **Hon. Dr. Basheer Alhowsh**, Member of the High Council of State of Libya, rapporteur for Arab countries in the Parliamentary Network for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa and the Arab World, stressed that the economic consequences could be particularly severe in the developing countries if the confinement will be extended, in this context, the access to vaccines is a key factor in preventing major impacts on the economy and food security.

Among the suggested measures, the creation and/or strengthening of food reserves to ensure availability and access to basic commodities was highlighted. He also pointed out the importance of multilateral cooperation and strengthening confidence in international organizations.

Libya has formed a crisis committee, a Commission of Doctors and a High Council, to deal with the pandemic.

Following the establishment of the new National Unity Government and the end of war periods, parliament began to meet and is expected to legislate on the crisis soon.

Executive control, land productivity, new technologies, training and deforestation

The **Hon. Abdulwasei Yusuf Ali**, Secretary General of ASSECAA Ethiopia, announced the following recommendations: insist on governments to adopt medium and long-term measures, improve arable land in the short term, promote irrigation and new technologies, provide training for farmers, implement programmes to combat deforestation and establish annual budgets to ensure FNS.

An international responsibility, inter-regional exchanges and stockpile of commodities

The **Hon. Mohammad Altayeb**, Deputy Secretary General of ASSECAA Yemen, called for coordination among parliamentarians at the regional level. Legislative measures should aim at strengthening investment in agriculture, especially in FF; addressing the lack of resources in the future; improving inter-regional exchanges and governance; having plans and projects to cope with potential crises; having commodities stockpiles; prioritizing the most vulnerable and, providing food aid to the most needy countries.

Legislating to improve farmers' livelihoods and incomes

The **Hon. Qarneek Haj Abul-Qader**, Member of the Algerian Council of the Nation, pointed out that among the challenges in the region since before the pandemic are terrorism and organized crime.

Algeria has launched an economic and social recovery plan based on a diversified economy and less dependence on hydrocarbons. Recovery from Covid-19 requires diversifying agriculture, combating

desertification, curbing uncontrolled urbanization of fertile land, harnessing natural resources through smart and environmentally friendly practices, promoting renewable energies to ensure self-sufficiency avoiding rural exodus, and strengthening social protection.

School feeding programmes, cross-sectorial cooperation and collaboration with researchers, key elements in LAC

Ms. Gloria Canclini, Technical Advisor to the PFH-Uruguay and Member of the Right to Food Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean (ODA-LAC), shared the PFH-LAC's experience.

School feeding programmes, the adoption of a cross-sectoral approach between the different sectors of government and the productive sectors, as well as the alliance with scientists and academia, have been key elements for the progress of FSN in the region.

Third Session – Plenary Discussion: What role can Parliaments and Parliamentarians play in addressing and mitigating the impacts of Covid-19 on Food Security, both in the containment and recovery phases?

Use of constitutional instruments and budgets

According to the **Hon. Dr. Jihad Al-Fathel**, the role of parliamentarians lies in the use of constitutional instruments, also in the oversight of the executive branch and the allocation of adequate budgets for FNS. Thus, Bahrain called for a concrete commitment to allocate funds to finance food reserves in the 2021-2022 budget.

FAO support, vaccine and water distribution

According to the **Hon. Qarneek Haj Abul-Qader**, the intervention of international organizations is needed to speak up for a fair distribution of vaccines in the poorest countries, to allocate land for the production of strategic products and to reinforce the self-sufficiency of the rural population. They should also preserve water resources and carry out studies to rationalize the use of aquifers, with the help of the FAO.

The moderator of the session, **Mr. Ayman Omer**, Senior Field Programme Officer of the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa, reiterated FAO's commitment to continue providing technical assistance to countries. Water scarcity is a priority issue for the Regional Office.

Closure

The **Hon. Dr. Jihad Al-Fathel** called for the proposals put forward during the dialogue to be turned into tangible results and to be widely disseminated for the benefit of all.

She also encouraged parliamentarians to support the work of FAO.

Finally, **Ms. Marcela Villarreal** pointed out that these dialogues highlight the peculiarities of each region, such as water scarcity, which is a challenge that particularly concerns Arab countries.

These events are an excellent example of inter-regional cooperation. The proposals expressed during this dialogue will be shared with other regions, with the aim of building the knowledge needed to achieve a world without hunger.

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