

Recommendations within the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic for an Agriculture-Food System that is Self-Sufficient and Resilient to Crises

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the situation we are going through constitute an unprecedented moment of crisis. It does not seem possible yet to reach a clear verdict on the gravity, magnitude, spread and duration of the contagion. However, the pandemic and the crisis dynamics triggered by it have started to show their effect in every field of social life, beginning with public health. One of the most basic necessities of human life, food, is among the fields affected foremost by the shockwave caused by the pandemic. People concerned about food safety in their homes embarking upon a search for dietary recommendations, sections of society who will fall into food insecurity if they end up unemployed because they don't leave their homes, and finally those who produce the food for all of us; those who have to go to their fields and take care of their animals to not go hungry... Empty store shelves, food deliveries by couriers and cargo workers, products left on the fields because they cannot be marketed... All and more are the consequences of the pandemic in the field of food and agriculture. It can be foreseen that the shocks triggered by the pandemic will cause a multifaceted food crisis in terms of the agriculture-food system by which the production, procurement and consumption processes of food are organized. Food crises and spreading hunger, make up the common stage of the dystopian scenarios that have multiplied and diversified within the social mood created by the pandemic.

During the last half century when the concept of development became the agenda of the United Nations, the priority of all periodically updated development goals has been guaranteeing a universal order where "no child would go to bed hungry". This is expressed in the current *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* as the target of Zero Hunger; "nobody must be left behind". The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calls on states, warning them that millions may about to be "left behind" soon by the potential food crisis the pandemic might cause, starting with peoples in countries with insecure conditions in terms of food self-sufficiency that are currently receiving food aids. (FAO, 2020a)

FAO expresses that the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken to fight it will create both supply and demand side shocks in the short term in agricultural production, in food manufacturing, in the supply chain and in access to food, and that these shocks may cause a food crisis in the long term. (FAO, 2020b) The global food supply has presently shrunk. There are various causes for this shrinkage: Production limitations tied to labor supply due to measures and mobility restrictions, efficiency losses due to difficulties in accessing agricultural inputs, interruptions in food production, congestions in the supply chain and shutdown of channels by which consumers access food.¹ Furthermore, it is expected that the shrinkage in food supply will deepen as the pandemic fails to be brought under control and continues to spread. (WFP, 2020) The demand side shocks are also multi-dimensional; global demand surged momentarily in the first phase of the crisis due to panic buying for the purpose of stockpiling. In other words, foreseeing the applications of quarantine and social isolation, many people pulled their future spending on food into the present within the limits of their incomes. On the other hand, the shutdown of businesses providing food services became an important factor that reduced food demand in the short term. Under the ongoing process, it is predicted that unemployment, growing due to an economic shrinkage of unforeseeable and global proportions, will lead to a further fall in food demand in the form of a negative multiplier effect as income is lost and purchasing power drops.

These are common predictions of the dominant actors of the global agriculture and food systems, but their concerns differ. FAO interprets this outlook as an increased risk of hunger and as a food crisis that is different than prior ones. (FAO, 2020b) Grassroots organizations and social movements of small-scale producers and workers in the agriculture and food sector especially, have exposed the role of transnational corporations, international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and their lobbying organizations in making hunger permanent, deepening existing historical and global inequalities and rendering the global agriculture and food system vulnerable in the face of crises. To contrast, they hold that small-scale food producers and agroecology are the solution to the problems being faced and present their examples, recommendations and demands. (IPC, 2020; IUF, 2020; Nyéléni ECA, 2020) Agriculture and food companies and their lobbying organizations however, while pointing to the risk of hunger in their statements, see the situation as a disruption in the global food trade and a risk of market volume shrinkage, and mobilize their political influence over international institutions and states towards promoting measures that will ease global trade. (Food and Land Use Coalition, 2020)

When the pandemic's ongoing impact on agricultural production and access to food and its medium-long term consequences which I discussed above in their general outlines are evaluated in combination with Turkey's structural and conjunctural problems in the field of agriculture and food, the food crisis which Turkey may face in the near future and the accompanying shortage and hunger scenarios should be seen not only as doomsaying but as a cautionary warning. Other than fruits and vegetables, in many agricultural products, Turkey as of recent years is not self-sufficient.

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Despite long term productivity increases, domestic production of various grains, pulses and oilseeds do not fulfill the total demand of consumers and exporters. This is rendering the agriculture and food system vulnerable to crises. Input prices are rising faster than product prices for agricultural producers in recent years and food inflation is surpassing the increase in the real incomes of the majority of social segments. These are the consequences of the same structural issues. Falling incomes in agricultural production, increasing financialization and insufficient public institutional and economic support had already increased rural poverty. Under these conditions, agricultural producers are either forced to

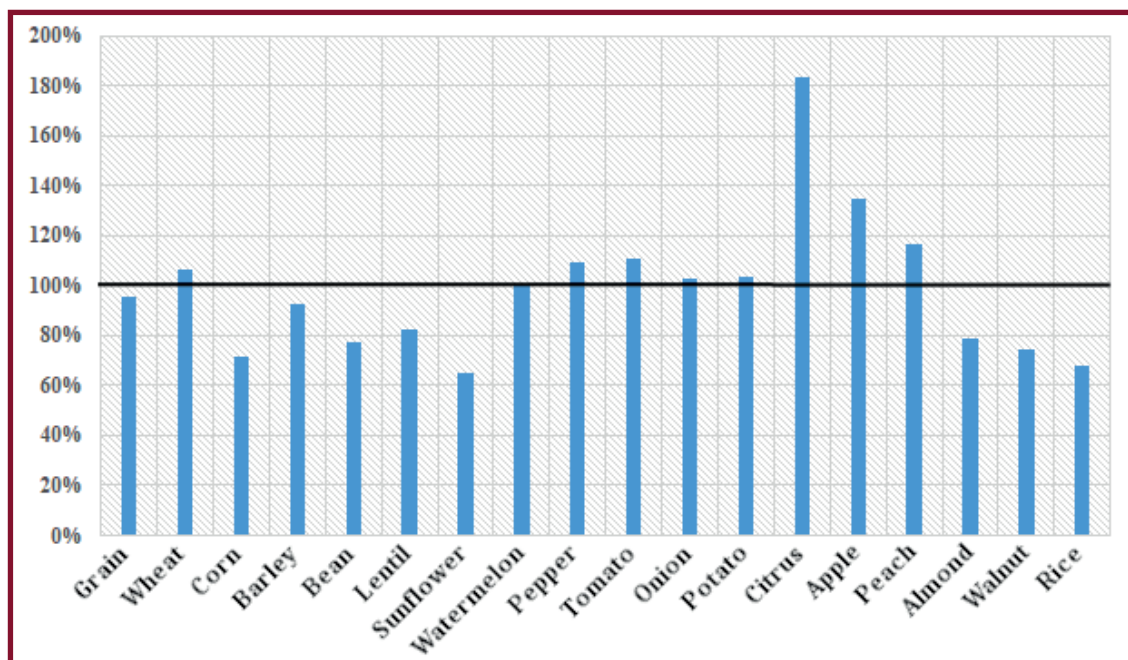


Chart 1. Turkey's degree of self-sufficiency in major agricultural products

Source: TURKSTAT 2020, Crop Balance Tables

abandon production or can only maintain production by taking on debt. Increased indebtedness in agriculture is another structural issue that renders the system even more vulnerable. Despite varying according to the product being produced, the scale of production and the specific production basin, the concrete contemporary consequences of all of these structural problems (and the forms they are experienced in) feed a feeling of insecurity, vulnerability to crisis and futurelessness shared by all agricultural producers regardless of scale and geography.

Turkey is entering a period of global economic recession that will be deepened by the pandemic, with a vulnerable economic structure. Meanwhile a food crisis of unknown duration and consequences will compound structural problems in agricultural production and food security risks. The measures taken by the central government to fight the contagion since the day the pandemic was declared and the fiscal policies it implemented to ameliorate its economic effects contain partial measures concerning the field of agriculture and food. However, the isolation and quarantine applications implemented in order to control the contagion ignore the concrete conditions of rural life and agricultural production. Some of the measures announced in order to incentivize agricultural production were proposed prior to the pandemic and their conditions of implementation have not been clarified yet. Meanwhile, on the issue of rendering access to food easier, it can be said that central government is not involved in a coordinated, collaborative effort with local administrations. There is a need, to the contrary, for

concrete steps that will remove the uncertainty that producers face under the conditions we are in and reduce concerns of the public regarding food security and safety.

Foremost among the factors that will provide an environment of trust that will remove uncertainties faced by producers who are about to start the planting and sowing season, and that will prevent people from storming the markets and bakeries as a curfew is declared, is a democratic and transparent agriculture and food policy. The way to address the issues that the Covid-19 pandemic will create in the field of food and agriculture is coming up with an immediate action plan that will sustain production in the short term, resolve the problems in the supply chain from the field to the table and provide everyone with access to healthy, nutritious and sufficient food. To this end, it is essential that public policy changes are urgently resorted to on local, national and global scales that will produce results in the short, medium and long term. The following must therefore take place, without delay:

- An **Agriculture and Food Council**, furnished with necessary mandates and of a democratic structure, must be established. An **immediate action plan** for agriculture, food and nutrition must be prepared within this framework. The committee must include representatives of relevant ministries, representatives of local administrations, participants from organizations representing all actors in the food supply chain, representatives of chambers in the fields of healthcare, agriculture and food, and also representatives of consumer organizations.
- Central government must urgently announce a **package of measures for the agricultural sector** heeding the opinions and recommendations of the Agriculture and Food Council.
- Political qualms must be set aside to ensure **coordination and cooperation** between all relevant actors. Local committees with necessary powers of implementation and of a democratic character, must be formed to work simultaneously and in coordination with the central Agriculture and Food Council towards identifying and solving local issues.
- **Full disclosure to the public, transparency and effective supervision** must be central to the preparation and application processes of the policies to be implemented.

The immediate action plan which needs to be implemented with the formation of Agriculture and Food Councils at the central and local levels must intervene in two fundamental areas in the short run; ensuring access of the people to fresh, healthy, nutritious and affordably priced food, and supporting agricultural production.²

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Recommendations concerning access to food

- Problems concerning access to food must be intervened in by prioritizing bringing the contagion under control and by considering public health risks.

A procedure for communication and coordination must be implemented that can compile at the local level the problems that emerge in all processes of the food supply chain –from production to consumption– due to the pandemic, as well as problems resulting from the measures taken, and transmit them to the central council. Such a procedure can ensure that the flaws in the food supply chain can be quickly remedied.

The Agriculture and Food Council should create a healthy and balanced nutrition program, identify the points individuals must be careful about regarding food security due to the pandemic and share these widely with the public. It must form a program that renders the basic products on these lists accessible, apply price controls on these products, ensure coordination with all actors in the supply chain and perform inspections to make sure these products are priced appropriately and are accessible to all sections of society.

- Food provision to vulnerable segments of society that are having difficulty accessing food due to physical and economic reasons must be urgently ensured.

Channels for accessing food must be created for social segments that are experiencing physical or economic difficulty accessing nutritious, sufficient and healthy food due to measures taken within the scope of dealing with the pandemic, due to restrictions on mobility or due to lack of economic means. Action must be taken in coordination with neighborhood administrators, municipalities and civil society working in the field for identifying families and individuals in need and delivering food to them. The aim must be, through a common plan, to extend and direct various local and civil initiatives working to ease access to food such as food banks, food tents, food packages and milk delivery programs, towards where needs are concentrated.

It is essential to organise the operation necessary for the small scale farmers who produce in the periphery or the surrounding of cities to bring and sell fresh fruits and vegetables at peasant markets or food sale points. These are to be established at locations easily accessible to citizens in the citycenters with appropriate conditions, free of risk of contagion. This must take place under the supervision and control of local administrations, especially in regions and localities with dense urban populations. Products that fail to sell in markets should be purchased by municipalities and delivered to consumers in need within the scope of food distribution programs.

Recommendations for strengthening agricultural production

Within a perspective that prioritizes self-sufficiency and access of citizens to fresh, healthy and sufficient food, the Agriculture and Food Council must consult scientific experts and local councils to engage in analyses and planning according to the following scenarios:

- The current condition of agricultural production and the effects of the pandemic on agricultural production and food supply
- Probable effects of dynamics linked to the pandemic on agriculture and food product markets in global agriculture and food trade

A production plan must be created, by relying on these analyses and fact finding reports to be prepared by local committees, that takes into consideration the structural issues of agricultural production and problems caused by the pandemic and related restrictions. Different scenarios must be contemplated, short, medium and long term strategies must be prepared and shared with the public.

Urgent production plans must be made for products with self-sufficiency risks, at agricultural basin scale, in accordance with product reports. Temporary restrictions should be placed on exporting these products. For export-oriented products that do not carry self-sufficiency risks, arrangements must be made in the fields of customs and logistics to make exporting easier and new export supports appropriate to the new situation must be implemented.

Land suitable for agriculture that is currently not used for agricultural purposes, and land suitable to agricultural production that belongs to the central government's Treasury Ministry must be identified and opened to production on the basis of social need, supporting small -scale producers and principles of sustainable and ecological agriculture.

All subsidy payments among the agricultural support payments of the 2019 production season agreed upon in the budget talks that as of yet have not been paid, should be paid. All subsidies planned for the year of 2020 should be paid in advance.³

Loans, taxes, insurance (SGK, BAĞKUR, TARSİM) and similar payments of farmers owed to the Ziraat Bank, Agriculture Credit Cooperatives or private banks must be deferred by at least one year after the pandemic, without interest.⁴

Public subsidies and the necessary organization required by farmers to acquire inputs such as seedlings, seeds, pesticides and fertilizers for the sowing season must be urgently implemented and various taxes levied on these inputs must be temporarily set to zero.

The fall in global oil prices must be reflected onto pump prices. To this end, the VAT and Special Consumption Tax on diesel fuel must be set to zero for agricultural use cases. Electric bill debts incurred for agricultural irrigation must be cancelled by being brought under the scope of electricity subsidies.

A "Keep Up the Production" Fund must be created from the central budget for the agricultural sector. This fund must be directed to relevant public bodies to be used in areas such as direct input procurement and distribution, direct product purchases, price controls, favorable credit provision and loss compensation.⁵ The allocation of the budget fund to these areas must be made by considering existing inequalities between agricultural enterprises and regions, in a balanced way that will reduce inequalities, prioritizing products that are at the forefront of healthy diet recommendations yet ranking low in self-sufficiency.

Resources from the fund must be allocated and/or interest-free loans must be provided under favorable conditions to agricultural organizations so that agricultural cooperatives with deteriorated cash flow due to market disruptions can make their payments.

Minimum work standards must be set for day wage earning workers and seasonal agricultural workers by taking into consideration travel, shelter and food needs, workers' health and safety and measures against contagion. An application and supervision system must be formed with public and civil society partnership in order to implement these conditions in production centers.

In lieu of a conclusion

Uncertainties caused by the pandemic compounding the existing problems related to agricultural production might lead to productivity losses, marketing issues and price movements unfavorable to producers, accelerating the process of exodus from production that has already been ongoing for a long time. These proposed measures, geared towards motivating producers to keep up production, should not simply be thought of as measures to save the day; they should be interpreted as vital policies for ensuring food security, creating a self-sufficient, sustainable, crisis-resilient agriculture-food system and guaranteeing a secure rural life in the long term.

The main reason why concerns about food and related demands came to the fore to such an extent with the Covid-19 pandemic is the vulnerable nature of the existing food system. It has once again become apparent that the agriculture-food system, with its structure that is dismissive of ecology, addicted to external inputs and based on long supply chains can sustain quite heavy wounds in the face of even short term shocks. A pro-public sector food policy that is open to international information sharing and cooperation, that is effective, transparent, accountable and inclusive of multiple actors, encompassing of different scales and levels, based on a way of operating which is considerate of regional and cultural differences and that is based on a participatory planning process, is vital in order not to face a scenario of ruination at every crisis. This is the only way a resilient, sustainable agricultural model and food supply chain can be built that all sections of society can equally benefit from.

I would like to thank the Yerküre Local Studies Cooperative partners who have shared their contributions and criticisms concerning the assessments hereby presented.

Notes

- 1 Findings underlined by studies that assess the social impacts of the contagion from a class perspective point at a risk to agricultural production and food supply that cannot be ignored. Like all other sections of society who do not have the option to stay at home due to the need to provide livelihoods for their families and due to the necessity of reproducing social life, agricultural producers and laborers have a higher probability of catching the disease and dying than those who are able to stay at home throughout the pandemic.
- 2 The measures listed in this section for increasing agricultural production and easing access to food have been compiled from international reports and statements of various producer and professional organizations and experts. Links to these statements have been provided in the bibliography.
- 3 Special registries must be created for producers who for various reasons are not registered to the Farmer Registration System and yet are in production, so that they can take advantage of the subsidies.
- 4 Following the pandemic emergency, efforts must be launched to create a debt jubilee program to be prepared in a participatory fashion for resolving agricultural sector debts.
- 5 Compensatory measures applied regionally during natural disasters must be implemented at the national scale. Local committees, in a damage-assessment commission capacity, must engage in product-based regional damage assessment studies. Products in harvest season that cannot be marketed due to disruptions in the supply system and the demand shock during the pandemic must be bought up, through direct procurement if possible, to be processed and presented for consumption.

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How to Cite:

Dođan, Orkun. 2020. "Recommendations within the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic for an Agriculture-Food System that is Self-Sufficient and Resilient to Crises" *TESEV Briefs* 2020/1. <https://www.tesev.org.tr/en/research/agriculture-food-system-covid-19>

This brief was translated from its Turkish [original](#) by Emrah Irzik.



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TESEV would like to thank the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) for their support for this publication.