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Food Security during times of crisis: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Collin Zhuawu*

1. Introduction*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted countries to introduce measures to contain the spread of the virus, some of which disrupted agriculture and food production and caused trade-related distortions to the sector, threatening the food security of many developing countries. In addition, some measures – such as lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing – affected jobs as some workplaces closed, contributing to the risk of food insecurity,[1] particularly for low-income households and those working in the informal sector. Further, most developing countries, especially small states, least developed countries (LDCs) and sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, already struggled to meet their food security requirements due to various other factors such as inadequate productive capacity, huge food import bills and reliance on international markets.

To date, the world is still off track in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target 2.1 on ensuring access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all and target 2.2 on ending all forms of malnutrition. Insufficient progress in these areas jeopardises commitments made in 2015 to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition and ensure food security by 2030 (FAO et al., 2020). For most developing countries, including Commonwealth countries, progress towards achieving these SDGs was significantly impacted by the pandemic, which has exacerbated the challenges they already faced in attempting to end hunger and ensure food security amid threats such as conflicts, humanitarian crises, natural disasters and climate change. Many Commonwealth countries, especially LDCs, are also net-food importing developing countries (NFIDC).[2] As reported by the World Bank (2020a), the pandemic caused a global recession that, among other things, increased the number of people at risk of food insecurity.

The COVID-19-induced threat to food security came just over a decade after the world experienced another crisis-induced food threat in

* Collin Zhuawu is Economic Adviser: Multilateral Trade in the International Trade Policy Section, Commonwealth Secretariat, London. Any views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

1 According to the FAO (2003 p. 29), food insecurity occurs when 'people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to food'.

2 The WTO list of NFIDC comprises LDCs, as recognised by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and developing country members that requested to be listed. It includes 14 Commonwealth member countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Botswana, Dominica, Eswatini, Maldives, Mauritius, Namibia, Pakistan, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Sri Lanka and Trinidad and Tobago (WTO, 2012).

2008–2009. Meanwhile, World Trade Organization (WTO) members have continued to grapple (since 2013) to find a permanent solution to allow countries, especially developing countries, to stockpile food for security reasons.

This issue of ***Trade Hot Topics*** examines the broader threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the food security of developing countries, including most Commonwealth small states, LDCs and SSA countries. It argues that the pandemic provides strong evidence in support of finding a permanent solution at the WTO to public stockholding (PSH) for food security[3] to provide assurance on enough food supplies in future crises.

2. How COVID-19 has impacted food security

The outbreak and spread of the coronavirus caught many countries and their agriculture and food-producing sectors by surprise, prompting urgent policy responses and other measures[4] to contain its spread, save lives and ensure domestic food security. Some of the adopted containment policies and measures negatively impacted agricultural production and restricted trade[5] in agriculture and food products, threatening the availability and supply of adequate food to many people, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged communities.

As COVID-19 continued to spread globally, particularly in developing countries, concerns emerged about the risk of the pandemic exerting pressure on global food security,[6] especially considering that it had already resulted in the deepest recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s (OECD et al., 2020). Furthermore, some countries' prospects for food security were worsened by other simultaneous events, such as locust invasions, cyclones and various humanitarian crises (Zhuawu et al., 2020).

2.1 Disruption to agriculture and food production

Various COVID-19 containment measures adopted by governments, such as lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing, affected agriculture and food production, including in Commonwealth countries **(Box 1),** worsening the risk of food insecurity, particularly for low-income households and those working in the informal sector.

The COVID-19 crisis led to various challenges in importing and distributing agricultural inputs such as chemicals, seeds and fertilizers due to disruptions to global distribution systems such as shipping and ports, which affected vital supply chains. Restrictions were introduced on vehicles and crews in many key global ports, leading to a decline of about 20 per cent in ships sailing to destinations that had crew-change restrictions[7] compared to a drop of 6 per cent to ports that imposed milder restrictions (Heiland and Ulliveit-Moe, 2020). As discussed below, some countries experienced revenue losses due to export adjustments that affected their commodity exports, impacting the importation of agriculture inputs, and affecting agriculture and food production – contributing to significant shifts in production and output.

The COVID-19 crisis also brought about widespread disruptions in labour supply, causing a decrease in the availability of labour for agriculture and food production activities as workers adhered to lockdowns and social distancing measures in many countries. The impact was expected to be significant in small states, LDCs and SSA countries where agriculture and food production are labour intensive and mostly undertaken by smallholder farmers (Espitia et al. 2020). In addition, most of these countries have limited capacity to create safeguards for workers by monitoring the contact between employees in the agriculture and food production sector or informing the sector of the impact of supply chains on inputs to seek alternatives.

For most small states, LDCs and SSA countries, the future looks uncertain as they will find it challenging to resume full production after the pandemic and will face delays in reaching their optimal food production levels.

2.2 Trade distortion

World trade in agriculture has been more resilient than other sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic

3 The concept of PSH programmes for food security involves governments purchasing crops and food products from local farmers and selling them (in some cases at subsidised prices) or distributing them for free of charge to the poorest and most disadvantaged and food-insecure households (Galtier, 2017).
4 These policies include lockdown measures (business closures, social distancing, movement restrictions, travel bans and border closures), trade restrictions and exports bans, and food stockpiling.
5 Trade restricting measures included new sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and export restrictions.
6 According to the FAO (2003, pp. 28-29), food security is realised when 'all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.
7 Because of restrictions, ships became quarantine vessels as they were refused entry to ports until after the country's quarantine period was met and the crew declared virus-free.

Box 1: Examples of the impact of COVID -19 on agriculture and food production in Commonwealth small states, LDCs and SSA countries

Bangladesh

Various measures, such as restrictions on movement, social distancing and the closure of restaurants and hotels, contributed to lessening agriculture and food production activities. The shortages of workers also contributed to production and supply challenges. The pandemic affected the harvesting of staple crops such as boro rice, potatoes, onion and maize, mainly due to there being fewer labourers to help during the harvest. Mymensingh city experienced a sharp decline in fruit supply, notably lemons, which could not be transported from the south of the country. Bangladeshi dairy farmers found it challenging to sell their milk. The decline in the consumption of eggs and chicken affected the poultry sector.

Agricultural inputs such as insecticides, seed and fertilizers as well as farming services were not readily available, except from a few providers who remained open, until the Government decided to allow all agricultural input shops to stay open at specific times to support farmers.

Sources: Al Zabir et al., 2020; Rosen, 2020; and Heifer International, 2020.

Nigerian and Ugandan Seed Sectors

In Nigeria and Uganda, social distancing and mobility restrictions brought challenges to the countries' seed sectors, hampering the evaluation and release of new seed varieties, disrupting the production and quality of seed, hindering access to agro-inputs to produce quality seed and retarding the promotion of seed varieties and the distribution of seed for sale.

In addition, the impact on the seed sector risked setting off a chain reaction that could lead to seed becoming scarce in the future, affecting agriculture and food production and contributing to a food crisis. Well-functioning seed sectors in both Nigeria and Uganda are essential to secure future crop harvests and food production.

Sources: Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation et al., 2020a and 2020b.

Belize

The Caribbean COVID-19 Food Security and Livelihoods Impact Survey, launched by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and prepared by the World Food Programme (WFP), shows that people who engaged in informal daily and casual labour expected their livelihoods to be severely impacted. About 80 per cent of respondents indicated that their ability to carry out livelihood activities was affected by the pandemic. The survey also showed that about 27 per cent of informal/casual workers were concerned about leaving their houses due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This contributed to the disruption of agriculture and food production activities. For example, some fishermen could not fish because of restrictions on movement. Even those who did fish could not find a market because of a fall in demand due to people losing their jobs and income and the closure of restaurants, hotels and other eating outlets.

Sources: Fair Trade, 2020; and WFP, 2020a.

Vanuatu

Strict measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as travel restrictions, social distancing and limited public transport, combined with low demand for domestic agriculture due to people's reduced income and weak demand from the tourist industry, impacted agriculture and food production activities. For example, it became difficult to replace crews and carry out vessel maintenance operations, and vessels were placed in quarantine before going into ports.

Disruptions to agriculture and food production activities were exacerbated by Cyclone Harold, which caused significant damage to croplands and smashed fishing boats.

Sources: FAO, 2020; and Sherzad, 2020.

(WTO 2020a).[8] Nevertheless, this overall picture of resilience conceals the impact on certain types of food, especially high-value perishable food products transported by air, which were hit hard by the sudden decrease in air transport. It also conceals the impact on food security in individual countries and regions. Some countries and regions that are massive food importers and rely on international

8 Agricultural and food trade in the first quarter of 2020 increased by 2.5 per cent compared to the same period in 2019 (WTO, 2020a).

markets for ensuring food security found it challenging to import specific food products as their primary sources of these imports introduced trade restriction measures (Zhuawu et al., 2020). Assessing the possible effects of COVID-19 on African economies, Gondwe (2020) shows that those that are net food importers were among the most affected. This demonstrated the negative effect of heavy reliance on the international market for food security.

Despite global food supplies remaining stable and adequate, several countries adopted various policy measures to limit the impact of COVID-19 on access to and availability of food (Table 1). As of 19 March 2021, 46 trade-restrictive measures and 24 trade liberalising measures had been introduced and 21 trade-restricting measures with no specified end date were still in place, raising concerns about their compatibility with WTO rules.[9]

The introduction of trade restrictions on agriculture and food products by some countries, especially major producers, raised concerns about global food security if such restrictions became widespread (World Bank, 2020b; WTO, 2020a). A prolonged or protracted pandemic raises the prospect of escalating export restrictions on food, causing a decline in export supplies and a rise in world prices (Espitia et al. 2020). Escalating export restrictions could generate a vicious cycle as high prices could prompt a series of measures to restrict exports of food in food-exporting countries and panic buying in food-importing countries (Giordani et al., 2016). Such developments would expose most small states, LDCs and SSA countries – which heavily rely on food imports – to the risk of significant food supply disruption, because export bans and other export restrictions have the potential to hurt the food security of importing countries (World

Table 1. Trade-related measures adopted on food products during the COVID-19 pandemic

Measure type	Number of measures	Number of measures with unspecified end date	Effects on Trade
Additional import duties	2	1	Restrictive
Export prohibition	21	7	Restrictive
Import prohibition	3	3	Restrictive
Licensing and permissions to export	2	1	Restrictive
Quarantine requirements	3	3	Restrictive
Export quotas	4	0	Restrictive
Prohibitions/restrictions of imports for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) reasons	9	5	Restrictive
Requirement to pass through specific port of customs, transport restrictions	1	1	Restrictive
Certification requirements	1	1	Restrictive
Total	**46**	**21**	
Tariff reduction	15	5	Liberalising
Tariff elimination	2	2	Liberalising
Increasing the import quota	4	3	Liberalising
Certification requirements	1	1	Liberalising
Exceptional measures to facilitate imports	1	1	Liberalising
Suspension of certification requirements	1	0	Liberalising
Total	**24**	**12**	

Source: Calculations based on ITC, 2021.

9 Article XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1994 generally prohibits export bans and restrictions but also provides a broad range of carve-outs, which allow members to impose such bans and restrictions temporarily (2a, b and c). Article XI (2a), for example, allows members to impose export restrictions to prevent or relieve critical shortages temporarily. Article XX also allows countries to impose export restrictions under certain conditions that must be met. Such measures should also not constitute a means of imposing arbitrary or unjustified discrimination between countries or disguised restrictions on international trade. If members impose restrictions on foodstuff temporarily, article 12 of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture requires them to give due consideration to the food security of others.

Bank, 2020b). In addition, the pandemic caught most countries unaware, making it difficult for governments to identify alternative sources of food supply; where new suppliers were identified, it meant challenges such as a change in costs, lead times and risks regarding delivery in full and on time.

Some countries also adopted import-restrictive SPS measures, mainly on animal imports and transit from affected areas, with the primary objective of preventing the virus's entry and spread in their territories (WTO, 2020a) (Table 1).[10] As a result, some of their trading partners, especially agriculture commodity exporters, were at risk of food insecurity due to limited foreign exchange earnings. For some countries, their own import restrictions prevented them from importing essential food supplies. For example, Sri Lanka's introduction of import restrictions on some essential food items such as rice, grains and bakery products affected the supply of these products from abroad. The country also imposed a special commodity levy on imported fruit and edible nuts, which affected imports of oranges, grapes, pears, apples, cherries, plums, lemons, peaches, grapefruit and some dried fruits.[11]

The fall in commodity prices due to COVID-19 created an additional shock to countries that rely on commodity exports for foreign exchange earnings. As a result, some developing countries faced economic contraction that negatively impacted governments' capacity to extend critical public services to respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis.[12] For example, cotton exports declined significantly after the outbreak of COVID-19 due to falling global consumption, affecting several cotton exporting countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, where revenue from cotton accounts for between 8 per cent and 12 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP), and about 40 per cent of their export earnings (WTO, 2020a). Elsewhere, revenue losses could reach 5.8 per cent in Burundi, 7.6 per cent in Comoros, 10 per cent in The Gambia, 10.2 per cent in Malawi and 7 per cent in Sierra Leone (Akiwumi, 2020). The low revenue constrained the resources that these countries needed – for importing medical supplies and food, for example – to tackle the pandemic.

Border restrictions and national lockdowns made it difficult to move food from surplus areas to areas of deficit, amplifying the negative effects on food and nutrition security (Banga et al., 2020). In Africa, cross-border trade – which provides livelihoods for communities and cities along corridors – was disrupted, and farmers could not move their products to border markets. In East Africa, for example, disruptions to cross-border trade led to declines in food supplies in cities, resulting in price spikes that threatened the food and nutrition security of many people (ibid.). The disruption of cross-border trade also meant a loss of income for traders, most of whom are vulnerable women and smallholder farmers, exposing them to food and nutrition insecurity.

2.3 Jobs and income

COVID-19 has also adversely impacted jobs and incomes, contributing to individual and family food insecurity. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that as of 23 September 2020, about 94 per cent of workers lived in countries that had introduced measures that disrupted economic activity, resulting in some sort of closure of workplaces (ILO, 2020). These closures caused disruptions to labour markets, leading to an estimated total loss of 495 million full-time equivalent (FTE) working hours in the second quarter of 2020 and an estimated labour income loss of US$3.5 trillion in the first three quarters of the year (ibid.)

The COVID-19 impact on jobs and incomes contributed to increasing the number of people facing hunger. The World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that 270 million people could face severe food insecurity[13] by the end of 2020 in the countries where it operates owing to the pandemic (WFP, 2020b).[14] It became more difficult for poor people to access food as their incomes and purchasing

10 For example, the Russian Federation adopted import restrictive SPS measures on exotic animals and live fish; Egypt on garlic, carrots and green ginger; Kazakhstan on fruits; Jordan on animal and plant-based products; and Georgia on live animals and fish.

11 https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/latest-news/news/2020/06/02/impact-of-covid19-on-food-supply-chains-in-sri-lanka#:~:text=Increased%20levels%20of%20food%20loss,heavy%20losses%20to%20the%20farmers.

12 The World Bank reported that the pandemic affected both the supply and demand of commodities due to mitigating measures affecting economic activity and supply chains and that the prices of most commodities fell after January 2020 (World Bank, 2020c).

13 Using the economic pillar of the Proteus food security index combined with export dependency for primary commodities, the WFP (2020b), identified the following Commonwealth countries to be at risk of food insecurity: Bangladesh, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Zambia.

14 Commonwealth countries where the WFP operates include Bangladesh, Barbados, The Bahamas, Cameroon, Dominica, Eswatini, Fiji, The Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu and Zambia.

power fell. Under such circumstances, the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people tend to depend on governments to provide cheaper or free food – which can be a challenge if governments do not have food stockholding and encounter severe revenue losses.

3. Lack of capacity to ensure food security during crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the challenges brought about by uncertainty in the length of time a crisis can last, posing considerable risks to food security in both the short and long run. In addition, it has shown the vulnerability of developing countries due to the concentration of their exports and reliance on a few markets. They experienced losses in tax revenue due to export adjustments, which affected commodities exporters, reducing the capacity of governments to ensure adequate food supplies.[15] Furthermore, most of the significantly affected countries experienced declines in remittances – a critical source of foreign exchange to finance imports – as migrant workers found it difficult to work in host countries and some returned home. In some LDCs, flows of remittances dried up (WTO, 2020b). The situation in most LDCs, small states and SSA countries was worsened by their being net-food importing developing countries (NFIDC) – a situation that led them to call on WTO members to refrain from introducing export restrictions on food (WTO, 2020c).

Besides, most small states, LDCs and SSA countries have limited capacity to produce enough food to meet domestic demand and to ensure food security due to various underlying challenges, such as unsustainable agricultural practices and lack of proper inputs, the over exploitation of water supplies, exposure to natural disasters and climate change, and pollution. The COVID-19 crisis worsened their situation as they struggled to deal with market closures, blockages to transport routes and logistics services and a lack of storage facilities such as warehouses and cold storage units, resulting in heavy losses of food and a loss to producers. This will significantly impact on food security in both the short and long term. In addition, due to their lack of resources to support an economic rebound, most of these countries are likely to take long periods after the COVID-19 pandemic before their economies return to their original states, threatening to reverse hard-won development gains and exposing most of their populations to food insecurity.

4. Food security and WTO discussions on public stockholding

The argument that openness to trade contributes to food security has come into question. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that changes in trade policy influence both global and domestic food availability.[16] As discussed above, many people in Commonwealth countries have experienced food insecurity as they have not had adequate physical, social or economic access to food. This has put in doubt assurances on adequate global food supplies and suggestions that there is diminishing risk of natural disasters, economic shocks or humanitarian crises causing food shortages (FAO, 2003).

While countries can consider exploiting digital technologies to enhance agriculture and boost yields and improve long-term sustainable agriculture production to help prevent food insecurity, finding a permanent solution on public stockholding (PSH) for food security can also help countries mitigate food insecurity during a crisis.

4.1 WTO PSH discussions

Discussions on PSH at the WTO are of great interest to most developing countries and particularly to some small states, LDCs and SSA countries as they demand policy space to avert food insecurity. At the Bali Ministerial Conference held in 2013, ministers decided on an interim mechanism on PSH for food security until a permanent solution to the issue could be found. This set out conditions under which a member could stockpile food for security reasons – conditions that, if met, required that other WTO members refrain from challenging the support provided by a developing member for traditional staple food crops meant for PSH programmes for food security purposes if there was an inconsistency under article 6.3 and 7.2(b) of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) (WTO 2013). Members also agreed to a Work Programme to find a permanent solution not later than the 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11). At the 10th WTO

15 Some countries, especially most small states, that rely on tourism for revenue experienced revenue losses due to the collapse in demand for tourist-related services. Countries that also rely on import duty for revenue experienced some losses because of the slowdown in trade.

16 One of the commonly used food security strategies involves a set of policies where the sources of food are determined by international trade patterns (FAO, 2003).

Ministerial Conference held in Nairobi in 2015, ministers decided that discussions on PSH were to continue until a permanent solution was found (WTO, 2015). At MC11, ministers still could not reach an agreement on PSH but committed to continuing to move forward with the negotiations.

While there is consensus that developing countries and LDCs should enjoy special and differential treatment when maintaining PSH, there are some remaining areas of contention. First, WTO members continue to differ on whether the scope of the Bali Decision can be expanded to include new programmes on PSH that countries may have put in place since 2013 or to include new crops. While the Bali Decision only included existing programmes involving traditional staple food crops, some countries did not have PSH programmes at the time and would like a permanent solution that covers existing and future PSH programmes (WTO, 2019). At the same time, the general understanding of food and nutritional security worldwide has evolved to include a wider range of crops (Global Nutrition Report, 2017).[17] Second, some countries hold the position that progress on PSH would only be possible if corresponding progress is made in other negotiating areas such as domestic support; others call for a standalone outcome,[18] arguing that such a link is against the existing mandate to find a permanent PSH solution. Third, some members are demanding that PSH programmes should not distort trade or adversely affect other members' food security (WTO, 2019). The fear is that some stocks procured for PSH might end up on international markets.

4.2 A permanent solution to PSH as a food insecurity mitigation tool

Amid the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture and food production and trade, concerns about risks associated with food security increased, especially as all countries tried to ensure adequate domestic food supplies. The pandemic showed the potential for the crisis to change the worldwide demand and supply of commodities from producer to the consumer (World Bank, 2020b). It also demonstrated the vulnerability of countries that rely on food imports for food security, providing evidence that highly centralized global food supply chains that operate on a just-in-time supply basis are prone to falter due to crisis shocks, exposing millions of people to food insecurity (Batini et al., 2020).

The global food supply system has also demonstrated global markets' vulnerability and their proneness to fail to feed the world, especially the most vulnerable in developing countries. Because most of these countries are net-food importing countries, their food security is threatened, especially when export restrictions are imposed on food by major suppliers. Such restrictions create a shortage on the global market, causing a spike in price, especially because international markets for agricultural goods are often shallow and concentrated and tend to react faster to supply shortages (WTO, 2020b).

In response to COVID-19, some countries pursued stockholding programmes to make food available to the poor and most vulnerable and, in the process, helped agricultural producers by purchasing their unsold products. In this regard, some WTO members such as India, Egypt, Morocco, the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia revived or expanded their public stockholding programmes (WTO, 2020a). Elsewhere, countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Fiji and Namibia introduced support measures, including agriculture input support, cash transfers, loan guarantees and interest subsidies, to ensure continued agricultural production (ibid.)

Thus, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that in times of crisis, countries adopt measures that relate to the very contentious issues that are preventing WTO members from agreeing on a permanent solution, including, for instance:

a. some countries resorting to stockholding programmes to ensure sufficient domestic supplies and food security;

b. countries providing domestic support to ensure the continued production of food; and

c. countries introducing trade policy measures that restrict trade and distort markets, affecting the food security of other members.

17 Generally, food is provided by three major cereals - maize, wheat and rice – but as countries face different forms of food insecurity and nutrition needs, there are many other minor crops such as teff, amaranth, pigeon pea, millet and winged bean that are highly nutritious and can contribute to food and nutritional security.

18 Most developing countries implement price support measures to safeguard the interests of farmers and the poor. Under the provision of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, the expenditure on stockholding and distribution can be classified under Green Box support, which is regarded as minimal trade-distorting support, but the procurement of food under administered price is classified as Amber Box support, which is trade-distorting.

Therefore, it is critical to also discuss PSH in relation to these distortions that take place during a crisis. In other words, small states, LDCs and SSA countries must have the flexibility to stockpile for a crisis-induced threat to food security just as countries, with the capacity to do so, can adopt stockholding, domestic support and trade restriction measures during a crisis for reasons of food security.

5. Conclusion and way forward

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the threat posed by a global crisis to agriculture, food production and trade and the associated risk of food insecurity for all countries, especially small states, LDCs and SSA, which have low production capacity and rely on imports for food security. The pandemic thus far has demonstrated the challenges that poor countries face in providing adequate food for their people and highlighted the need for them to stockpile food, mostly because of the uncertainty regarding when the next crisis might occur. It has also demonstrated the greater relevance of public stockholding for food security purposes and the need to come up with a permanent solution to PSH, as decided at the Bali Ministerial Meeting.

A permanent solution to PSH will help governments ensure food availability, especially to the poor and the most vulnerable and particularly during a crisis. It will also help empower them to transform their rural food production and supply systems to build resilient domestic food supply chains to ensure food security for everyone. In addition, it will help improve access to good nutrition and ensure nutrition security. Moreover, a permanent solution will help avert the risks of food insecurity, including starvation, because of the lack of access to and availability of food and the likelihood of violent conflict in affected communities and countries.

Therefore, it is essential for WTO discussions on a permanent solution to PSH to critically consider issues relating to the obligation of states to ensure access to and availability of enough food for their populations, especially in the context of feeble global food supply chains and the ever-present threat of crisis-induced food insecurity. In this regard, the experiences of the COVID-19 crisis offer a unique opportunity to build consensus on a permanent solution to PSH and provide small states, LDCs and SSA countries with policy space that lowers the risk of food insecurity, especially during a crisis. It will also provide a safeguard for food import dependent countries when markets are distorted. Failure to decide on a permanent solution on PSH would continue to expose these countries to the threat of food insecurity, especially during a global crisis that impacts both global food supply chains and food production.

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International Trade Policy Section at the Commonwealth Secretariat

This Trade Hot Topic is brought out by the International Trade Policy (ITP) Section of the Trade Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which is the main intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth – an association of 54 independent countries, comprising large and small, developed and developing, landlocked and island economies – facilitating consultation and co-operation among member governments and countries in the common interest of their peoples and in the promotion of international consensus-building.

ITP is entrusted with the responsibilities of undertaking policy-oriented research and advocacy on trade and development issues and providing informed inputs into the related discourses involving Commonwealth members. The ITP approach is to scan the trade and development landscape for areas where orthodox approaches are ineffective or where there are public policy failures or gaps, and to seek heterodox approaches to address those. Its work plan is flexible to enable quick response to emerging issues in the international trading environment that impact particularly on highly vulnerable Commonwealth constituencies – least developed countries (LDCs), small states and sub-Saharan Africa.

Scope of ITP Work

ITP undertakes activities principally in three broad areas:

- It supports Commonwealth developing members in their negotiation of multilateral and regional trade agreements that promote development friendly outcomes, notably their economic growth through expanded trade.
- It conducts policy research, consultations and advocacy to increase understanding of the changing international trading environment and of policy options for successful adaptation.
- It contributes to the processes involving the multilateral and bilateral trade regimes that advance more beneficial participation of Commonwealth developing country members, particularly, small states and LDCs and sub-Saharan Africa.

ITP Recent Activities

ITP's most recent activities focus on assisting member states in their negotiations in the World Trade Organization and various regional trading arrangements, undertaking analytical research on a range of trade policy, emerging trade-related development issues, and supporting workshops/dialogues for facilitating exchange of ideas, disseminating informed inputs, and consensus-building on issues of interest to Commonwealth members.

Selected Recent Meetings/Workshops Supported by ITP

21–23 October 2020: Recovery from COVID-19 – Tackling Vulnerabilities and Leveraging Scarce Resources, organised in the framework of the LDC IV Monitor and held virtually on the road to the Fifth UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDC5) in collaboration with the OECD Development Centre, UN-OHRLLS and FERDI.

29 January 2020: Looking to LDC V: A Critical Reflection by the LDV IV Monitor (in partnership with the OECD Development Centre and the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh) held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

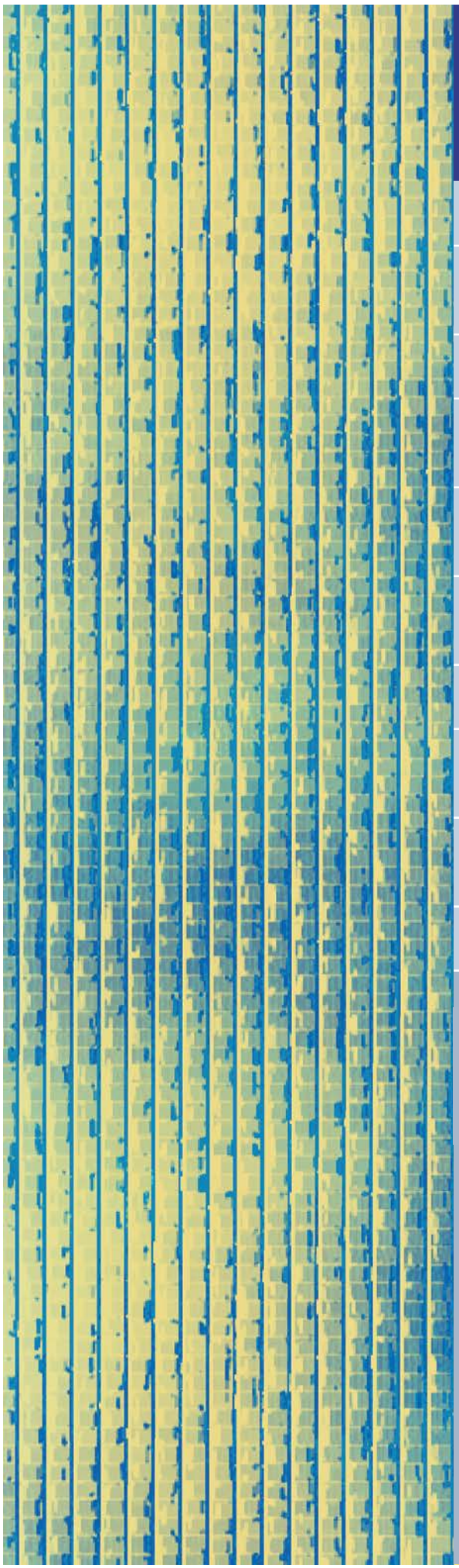
28 January 2020: Roundtable Discussion on Trade Shocks in the Commonwealth: Natural Disasters and LDC Graduation (in partnership with the Enhanced Integrated Framework) held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

11 October 2019: Tapping the Tourism Potential of Small Economies: A Transformative and InclusiveApproach (WTO Public Forum) held in Geneva, Switzerland in collaboration with the WTO and the UNWTO.

10 October 2019: Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

26–27 September 2019: 12th South Asia Economic Summit XII: Shaping South Asia's Future in the Fourth Industrial Revolution held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in collaboration with The Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka

26 June 2019: Launch of the Commonwealth Publication 'WTO Reform: Reshaping Global Trade Governance for 21st Century Challenges,' held in Geneva, Switzerland.



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