UN POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES
SUMMARY NOTE

Introduction

The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in China is organising a series of Policy Dialogues under the United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 launched at the end of April 2020. The aim of the Dialogues is to share the Chinese experience with the impacts of the pandemic and recovery, as well as to inform the policy debate and explore how to "build back better" by leaving no one behind, establishing better conditions for ending poverty, protecting our planet and accelerating the SDGs.

In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, "the pandemic has highlighted the fragility of our food systems." Small farmers, fishers, pastoralists and rural workers are among the populations most at risk of socio-economic marginalization. Ensuring the continued or improved functioning of small producers, informal workers, along with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across sectors is vital to ensuring production of, and access to, food and other essential goods and services.

The pandemic is generating severe socio-economic impacts for those working in food production and supply chains (migrant agricultural workers, plantation workers, food vendors, subsistence farmers, etc.) and those working for transport and delivery of goods. Their precarious conditions in turn affect the food systems, which need to be restored more robust and resilient to safeguard food value chains, prevent future breakdowns and ensure food security.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization (ESCAP-CSAM), with the support of nine other UN agencies, organised the Policy Dialogue titled China's experience in strengthening food systems amid the response to COVID-19 on 11 December 2020. Together with partners from China's central and local government, academia, the private sector and think tanks, this Dialogue explored ways to address the fragility of food systems that has been highlighted by the pandemic.

The Dialogue kicked off with the opening remarks of H.E. Mr. Li Jinxiang, State Chief Veterinary Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA). Mr Li pointed out that China coordinated the prevention and control of the pandemic, while making efforts to ensure the stable

production and supply of grain and agricultural products. He also reiterated China's willingness to work with other countries to promote agricultural cooperation, especially South-South cooperation, to a wider range and deeper level under the framework of the United Nations.

From the point of view of building back better, Ms. Amakobe Sande, interim UN Resident Coordinator in China, noted that "the whole agricultural value chain – from production to processing and retail – must be put back on a sustainable track and rejuvenated." She stressed that essential food and nutrition services must be maintained. For no one to be left behind, it is key to ensure that vulnerable segments of the agricultural workforce, elderly workers and women farmers, have the capacities and access to solutions such as agricultural machinery and ICT-enabled distribution platforms.

The dialogue was then divided into three sessions summarised in this note. The common starting point was that COVID-19 threatens the food security and nutrition of millions of people, many of whom were already suffering. As for many of the development challenges we are facing today, concerted action is needed to avoid some of the worst impacts of this crisis – and future ones – as well as to support the transition to more sustainable food systems that are in better balance with nature and enable healthy diets for all.

1. Restoring robust and resilient food systems

1.1 Building resilience of food systems, from the South-South cooperation perspectives

South-South cooperation has proven to be key in strengthening the resilience of food systems globally. Both Dr. Qu Sixi, Country Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) and Mr. Xie Jianmin, Counsel (Director General Level) of the Department of International Cooperation (MARA) emphasized that South-South cooperation was an effective way to share China's experience on agricultural development, while supporting more developing countries in improving food systems and achieving the SDGs.

China has gained rich experience in agriculture and food system development, including agriculture development strategy and policy formulation, farmland construction, measures and policies to support farmers, agriculture industry chain improvement, etc. Its food system has demonstrated strong resilience, especially amid COVID-19. Engaging via South-South Cooperation, China has positively contributed to partner countries' agricultural development through:

- Providing the largest amount of funding for agriculture compared to other global providers for South-South cooperation: USD 80 million to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), USD 10 million to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and USD 6 million to WFP;

- Deploying the largest number of agricultural experts (about 1,100 persons in 29 countries and regions, or 60% of all experts deployed by FAO); and

- Applying a wide range of agricultural technologies and techniques.

Furthermore, in 2020, 13 webinars by the WFP's Centre of Excellence in China were successfully organized, reaching a broad coverage of around 1,700 participants from more than 40 developing countries. These virtual discussions covered a wide range of topics (rural e-commerce development, post-harvest management and food systems, along with disaster risk reduction and climate change resilience), exploring how to maintain a strong and resilient food system against crises and challenges.

Mr. Xie Jianmin noted that China will continue to engage in South-South Cooperation with inclusiveness and innovation, supporting global food security by: strengthening cooperation with more countries and organizations, upgrading approaches and methods, as well as exploring the potential of technology to provide systemic and digital solutions for developing countries, to improve the resilience of food systems.

1.2 The role of sustainable agricultural mechanization in enhancing productivity and preventing zoonotic diseases

Dr. Li Yutong, Head of ESCAP-CSAM, highlighted the role that sustainable agricultural mechanization can play in restoring healthy food systems, to enable the farming community's recovery and build long-term resilience. In fact, mechanization is effective in various aspects of food systems, as it can improve agricultural input efficiency, productivity and incomes, benefiting both food and nutrition security, while empowering farmers to better cope with future shocks. This should happen while ensuring that the most vulnerable segments of the agricultural workforce – e.g., elderly workers and female farmers – have the capacities and access to these solutions for an inclusive, sustainable recovery.

Mechanized interventions have many applications. For example, COVID-19 has drawn attention to the threat of zoonotic diseases, i.e., diseases that jump from animals to humans. Recent ESCAP-CSAM research,[1] in collaboration with MARA, contributes towards identifying solutions to mitigate the threat of zoonotic diseases through mechanized interventions. It examines the prevention and control of zoonotic diseases from through appropriate automation design, health safety and mechanised disinfection of farms. Mr. Jin Hongwei, an expert on mechanization solutions for livestock from the China Agricultural Machinery Testing Centre/China Agricultural Machinery Technological Extension Centre of MARA who contributed to the ESCAP-CSAM's research, noted that the automatization of feed and water distribution, as well as filtration and ventilation systems, can strengthen prevention and control. Based on lessons learned from COVID-19, he also provided the following recommendations for applying agricultural mechanization to mitigate future threats:

1. Strengthen research and development for technological innovation and policy development; as well as accelerate the application of new technologies such as automation, informatization and smart equipment.

2. Encourage appropriate-scale livestock farming and standardized construction of livestock farms, while strengthening technical guidance efforts on integrated large and small-scale farming facili-ties along with equipment, to avoid risks.

3. Prioritise scientific prevention and control, along with mechanization, including guidelines on technical specifications for mechanized disinfection in livestock farms. Large-scale farms (zones) as well as small-scale farms should be equipped with facilities to use livestock and poultry manure resources, as well as safely treat dead livestock and poultry.

4. Since mechanization alone cannot eliminate all risks, it must also be combined with drugs control.

1. Available in English from http://www.un-csam.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/ENG.pdf and in Chinese from http://www.un-csam.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/CHN.pdf

5. Implement training and education programmes for practitioners to engage in extensive interna-tional exchanges and cooperation; increase training opportunities for farm employees and im-prove the competency of practitioners in the livestock farming industry. This can be achieved by organizing upstream and downstream capacity-building to ensure mechanized solutions are used correctly along the whole value chain.

6. Strengthen cooperation with relevant sectors and departments, such as in animal health, epidem-ic control, public health and environmental protection; as well as strengthen experience sharing and knowledge exchanges via close cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO), World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), FAO and other international organizations.

1.3 Enhancing resilience of food value chains

Ms. Han Yan, Officer in Charge, Assistant Representative for FAO China, presented the FAO's comprehensive and holistic COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. This includes seven priority areas to assist the most vulnerable and strengthen the post COVID-19 resilience. Of these key areas, two are relevant to this policy dialogue: preventing the next zoonotic pandemic and food systems transformation. She added that COVID-19 brought attention to the relationship between risks in these sectors and thus the need for a more sustainable, robust food system to face future crises.

It was also noted that digital innovation played a significant role in combating COVID-19 and reducing food loss and waste. An example was provided by Mr. Zheng Wei, Vice President of Alibaba Local Services. Alibaba Local Services, with its extensive network and millions of diversified users, facilitated enhanced big data analysis and utilization. This, coupled with extensive digitalisation, enabled it to strengthen the agricultural supply chain both online and offline, enhancing its efficiency while generating higher revenues for wholesalers and smallholder farmers, along with lower costs for customers, particularly the most vulnerable. In addition, Alibaba Local Services is actively promoting reducing food loss and waste, in line not only with the FAO's initiative, but also China's national campaign of saving food. Overall, Alibaba Local Services' flexibility and quick response to the pandemic and market demand contributed significantly to the post-COVID-19 recovery of resilient food systems.

2. Ensuring food security and nutrition services for the most vulnerable

Mr. Matteo Marchisio, Country Director and IFAD Representative for China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Republic Of Korea (ROK) and Head of East Asia Regional Hub, stressed that future food systems must place resilience and inclusion as a top priority. From the perspective of IFAD, smallholder farmers – as key beneficiaries – must be included in the debate. This is important for two reasons. First, a sustainable food system must provide decent livelihoods for those working in it. Smallholder farmers make up a substantial part of global food production, producing more than half the world's calories. At the same time, they are the poorest and most prone to malnutrition, as they do not receive a decent income through the food systems. Secondly, small-scale farming systems are often more sustainable. Smallholder farmers are closely attached to their land; they know their landscape, their ecosystem and the biodiversity. This knowledge is key to achieving sustainability. Systems built around smallholder farming are also socially sustainable, as smallholder farmers provide food to their local community, thereby benefiting society.

Mr. Fan Shenggeng, Chair Professor at China Agricultural University and former Director General of International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) also presented on the need for inclusive and resilient food systems. He described the three groups of people who are particularly vulnerable to certain shocks, such as the current pandemic: smallholders, rural migrants and SMEs. He noted that food systems must produce a sufficient amount of healthy and nutritious food, as well as be environmentally sustainable – particularly in terms of water usage – and benefit vulnerable groups. He observed that COVID-19 is an opportunity to build our future food system's resilience, through empowering smallholders by improving their access to financial services, as well as technology to increase their profitability). He added that the pandemic is also a chance to increase nutrition, as well as establish and expand the social protection of vulnerable rural groups. Well-designed policies, technologies and institutions are key to eliminating hunger and malnutrition.

The discussion moved to explore experiences and policy options for two specific vulnerable groups: children and women.

Children. Ms. Anuradha Narayan, Chief of Health, Nutrition as well as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) China Office, along with President Yang Yuexin from the China Nutrition Society, presented on childhood nutrition conditions and challenges. In particular, how China's rapid economic development, diets, dietary behaviours and food environments are changing dramatically, contributing to more children being overweight or obese. UNICEF has conducted an analysis[2] of Euromonitor International marketing reports to assess the trends in sales of highly processed food and drinks in China. The report found that "diets dominated by highly processed products are driving the rise in overweight and obese children". UNICEF observed that governance in addressing childhood obesity is a challenge, as cooperation across sectors is required to implement the relevant policy. Based on China's National Action Plan for Child Overweight and Obesity Prevention (2020-2030) and other related policies,

2. https://www.unicef.cn/en/reports/market-highly-processed-food-and-drink-driving-childrens-diets-briefing

UNICEF will work with the National Health Commission (NHC) and other line-ministries to implement comprehensive steps that create a healthy food environment for children. It will also work to build stronger national programmes that can prevent childhood obesity in China, with a focus on four areas:

1. Advocating for new legislation and regulation on the marketing of unhealthy foods;
2. Empowering children and young people to demand healthy and sustainable foods;
3. Building public awareness through social behaviour change communication (SBCC); and
4. Promoting optimal Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) through health system and workplaces.

It was also noted that a wider and stronger set of actors - including the private sector - is needed to help form and implement policies that create a healthier food environment for children.

Women. Ms. Smriti Aryal, Head of Office of UN Women in China, highlighted that women comprise 70% of China's agricultural workforce and play a critical role in supporting household and community food security. Their participation and leadership have led to significant increases in income and empowerment for themselves and their families. China is a success story in this, garnering worldwide attention. However, challenges remain as women often lack equal access to and control over resources, including a seat at the table in decision-making related to food systems. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and inequities. Emerging evidence suggests the current crisis is regressing gender equality and women's empowerment globally.

Applying a gender lens to food system policy measures can aid in designing a more appropriate and effective response, while avoiding unintentional harm or aggravating gender inequalities. In China, UN Women has partnered with the Qinghai local government, along with the United Nations Environment Programme - International Ecosystem Management Partnership (UNEP-IEMP) and IFAD to implement a programme aimed at empowering women from rural communities by developing their capacities. This involves training them in new methods of agricultural innovation, access to markets via technology, along with promoting leadership in poverty alleviation and climate-smart agricultural solutions. To date, the project has directly reached over 55,000 rural women, with clear gains in their incomes and leadership, as well as personal and community benefits.

Best practices from Qiaotou Village in Qinghai Province was presented by Ms. Li Yulan, the First Secretary of Qiaotou Village. She stated that when COVID-19 first struck China, the cooperative worked with UN Women China to restructure how they planted their key crops - mainly sunflowers, potatoes, corn, cabbages, apples, and pears - so that they could be sold nearby, avoiding problems related to shipping and delivery. They also began to plant a greater variety of vegetables in smaller batches and to rear pigs, sheep, and chickens. This combination of planting and breeding allowed the cooperative to set up a fully organic, zero-waste circular system: their animal waste becomes fertilizer, while unused produce becomes animal feed. Today, the cooperative is growing and the economic empowerment has improved women's status and capabilities in Qiaotou. Besides increasing incomes, the project has also raised women's gender awareness.

3. Quality food production, ecosystems protection and restoration and agrobiodiversity

3.1 The experience of UNESCO Designated Sites in balancing quality food production and ecosystems protection and restoration.

Ms. Himalchuli Gurung, Programme Specialist for Culture Sector, Officer in Charge of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Beijing Office, noted that food lies at the core of human practices, community identity and social scripts, and thus has been incorporated into a number of UNESCO's activities. Food culture is a powerful tool for intercultural dialogue and social inclusion, so preserving local food practices and traditions is important in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, reduce inequality and protect the planet.

Ms. Gurung noted how COVID-19 has greatly affected all aspects of urban life that has in many ways has come to a standstill. That said, the fundamental creativity and ability of cities to inspire social connection remains intact. Cities have been on the frontline of fighting this crisis. They have come together to nurture new ideas and projects by connecting people to culture and creativity, demonstrating their potential and versatility in enabling social transformation, economic development and technological innovation.

An example is Shunde (Guangdong Province), a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, renowned for its gastronomic inheritance and creativity in China. Ms. Li Fang, from the Tourism Department of Shunde, presented about the local government having implemented a wide package of measures capitalizing on the city's creative and cultural potential, to support China's recovery from the pandemic. For instance, the Shunde Culinary Institute has been actively involved in rural revitalization and poverty alleviation, focusing on poverty-stricken households. It closely collaborates with the private sector and civil society organisations for effective training, fostering job opportunities among the most vulnerable – a successful example of ecosystem restoration and protection benefiting vulnerable groups, to leave no one behind.

3.2 Collaboration for food security and agrobiodiversity

Mr. Tu Ruihe, Head of UNEP China Office, Director Zhang Linxiu from UNEP-International Ecosystem Management Partnership (UNEP-IEMP) and Deputy Director General Prof. Yang Yongping from the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, Chinese Academy of Sciences, discussed how protecting agrobiodiversity could support food security. The Asia-Pacific is home to more than 60% of the world's population and the biggest group of small-holding farmers. In China, about 90% of small-holding farmers cultivate 70% of the land. Great biological diversity is mainly rested in wild-life and traditional farms. Diversified small-holding farming systems have been threatened by many challenges, rendered more acute and urgent by COVID-19. Actions to enhance small-holding farming systems for agrobiodiversity and food security are threefold: i) steps taken by international

organizations, such as UNEP,[3] ii) actions taken by the Government, such as the recently great efforts to protect crop germplasm resources, and iii) the establishment of Community Seed Banks (CSBs).[4] In the past two decades, 27 CSBs have been set up in 11 provinces across the country facilitated by UNEP-IEMP and its partners. The functions and services of CSBs focus on conservation, access and utilization, sharing and networking and value-adding of agrobiodiversity, significantly enhancing the links between communities' seed systems and the national system, as well as smallholding farming systems.

Actions on enhancing smallholding farming systems proven to be effective include:

1. Improved bio-cultural and farmers' seed systems, linking to the public seed system for mutual and support;

2. Enhancing links between farmer seed systems for agroecology and circular farming, rural-urban connections and the circular economy;

3. Linking ancient native "wisdoms" with scientific knowledge, business sector partnerships, plus supportive policies for green transformation; and

4. Women's empowerment in agrobiodiversity, food production and healthy diets for better adaptation to all crises.

3. UNEP made a joint submission together with the Alliance of Biodiversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) on "Biodiversity, Nutrition and Dietary Health in the Zero Draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework"

4. UNEP-IEMP has collected stories from 14 farming communities in China basing on community responses and adaptation to the COVID-19 and climate change, to show how working with nature can help people cope better with and recover better from the crisis (detail of the stories: http://www.unep-iemp.org/newsInfo_156.html).

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