

POST COVID-19 CONFINEMENT: ENHANCING FOOD SECURITY PREPAREDNESS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

The Mauritius Academy of Science and Technology (MAST), launched in 2007, consists of a group of Mauritian scientists and technologists who reflect on burning issues of national and global importance and offer independent opinion on them. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Academy strongly feels that coordinated national initiatives are warranted to address our food requirements in the coming weeks and months. Systematic and sustained actions are needed for sustainable food and nutrition security at national level in the short and long terms. Food security encompasses many sectors of agriculture and beyond. This position paper focuses on food crops security, of relevance to alleviate the immediate situation and for future action.

Introduction

The agricultural sector in Mauritius has experienced a number of constraints over the past years whereby it has not been able to significantly increase its domestic food production. It still imports up to 75% of its net food requirements, including essential food commodities such as rice, wheat flour, pulses, onion and garlic. However, agriculture is considered by Government as an important sector and support measures are dispensed because of its contribution to rural employment, food security and imports reduction. Almost 100% of the requirement of the country in fresh vegetables, 80% in potato and about 40% in onion production have been achieved. Nevertheless, Mauritius remains vulnerable to food shortages and rising global food prices.

Current and expected impact of the pandemic on food security

The current pandemic of COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate our food security challenges. Closed borders, national lockdowns, and the reduction in air and sea traffic have significant adverse effects and would have major impact on supply chains and logistics in the months ahead. International trade disruptions may trigger food price panics and difficulties in obtaining imported foodstuffs.

Imported agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, crop protection products, equipment and ensuring seed availability from different parts of the world (e.g. Asia and Europe) may be disrupted or become restricted for trade by the producing countries. The market and trade disruptions could drive prices of essential agricultural inputs and raw materials higher, impacting on cost of production on the one hand, and/or cause decline in crop yields on the other hand, due to limited supply of those inputs.

Movement restrictions at national level are causing labour unavailability. Growers could experience their crop production capacity fall due to labour shortages and restrictions in the regrouping of workers because of infection risks. Sickneses could affect the ability to effectively manage fields.

Increased food losses due to the lack of logistics and market disruptions are already a reality, especially for the more perishable products.

Currently, fresh vegetables are in short supply because of access to markets and prices are spiralling. After the end of confinement, we can expect a long lag phase before production attains the normal output.

The resultant of all these challenges are higher food prices associated with lower purchasing power (people being out of work) for households in the months ahead. The weakening of the Mauritian rupee with respect to the US dollar and Euro is already tangible and is a foretaste of the tough economic situation ahead.

A food security crisis could be triggered.

Proposed response for the post-confinement period

Food security is fragile under normal circumstances and must not be ignored in the wake of the unprecedented crisis caused by COVID-19. An urgent, coordinated and integrated national response is needed to protect the population, especially the most vulnerable, and get growers back into production. Actions proposed to address food security are:

1. A national awareness in promoting and planning the cultivation of fruits and vegetables is essential to supply the local market and to also aim at import substitution. The setting-up of a National Task Force on food production is of relevance for the implementation of strategic measures to attain food security.
2. A stimulus package is warranted to stabilize the agricultural sector with initiatives such as seed availability, fertilizer allocation programmes and subsidies for agricultural machinery.
3. An assessment of uncultivated land in various parts of the island should be carried out and growers encouraged to cultivate the plots to step up production. Better usage of the productive land for food production should be the foremost priority. Incentives are necessary for youngsters to embark in agri-business and to feel that in so doing, they are connecting with nature. Back-yard and roof gardens offer the potential for improving household food security by direct access to diverse vegetables, allowing savings on food expenses. Seed distribution should be used as an incentive to trigger interest in cultivation.
4. Enabling policies and market access are to be provided for entities that have the capacity to rapidly go into large-scale production. Potato and other tuber crops, as well as maize, are the crops of choice that are adapted to the climate of Mauritius as primary and substitution food products. Rice production, the main staple food, needs to be re-envisaged on suitable land.

5. Regular policing and surveillance of cultivated areas is necessary to discourage theft. Food prices should be monitored and market supervision strengthened for fair access and protection of consumers.
6. Guidelines are to be issued for the various contexts of the agricultural sector and for consumers to ensure safety and public acceptance - plant, harvest, transport, and sell food without endangering health and safety.
7. Government is to use its diplomatic channels with friendly countries to ensure the smooth flow of trade, and secure inputs to production and food supply sources. It is appropriate to constitute in advance for the months ahead, the necessary stock of our staple foodstuff to ensure that there is no rupture and measures are taken against illegal stockpiling and profiteering.

Lesson learnt

A lesson learnt is that Mauritius is vulnerable to such pandemics. It should be less dependent on food import and increase its level of food- self-sufficiency. It is an opportunity to give agriculture a boost by encouraging innovative research and modernizing production tools with enhanced agro-processing capacity in our food security strategy for resilience. Social and infrastructural measures are required to make it more attractive to live in rural areas where most food is produced. Sustainable food and fruit production towards self-sufficiency and import substitution is imperative in the medium and long-term. The added benefit would be a green, healthy and attractive environment. Rodrigues should also be taken on board to encourage cultivation of its traditional crops for its own food requirements and to supply a surplus to Mauritius.

Mauritius Academy of Science and Technology

24 April 2020