

# Challenges for a coherent approach to food system resilience within the EU

Commentary No. 2 of the [MigResHub](#) at the Migration Policy Centre, RSCAS, European University Institute

The Covid-19 crisis has prompted fears about the reliability of food supply during crises. The EU has traditionally considered “food system resilience” as a priority of high public interest. This has, over time, led to complex interventions in policy areas like agriculture, trade and investment, with different definitions and resilience objectives. Poor coordination across these policy areas may result in counterproductive impacts on resilience.

## Food system resilience: dynamic development of concepts

Food systems are complex networks of private and public actors, institutions and activities that involve production, processing, distribution, preparation, and consumption. Almost all countries perceive a secure food supply as a major political objective. Therefore, the relevant definitions, precise objectives, and monitoring and evaluation tools have become increasingly sophisticated (Harris and Spiegel 2019).

The first World Food Summit in 1974 based its definition on the “availability“ of food in a national economy. “Availability” comprises domestic production, imports and food aid, in contrast to self-sufficiency. This first pillar of food security was later supplemented by a second pillar of “access” to affordable food, determined by income and food prices. The third, more systemic pillar “utility“ considers cross-sectoral factors like access to water and energy. The fourth pillar “stability“ adds a temporal dimension.

Such more dynamic approach emerge from development policy and humanitarian assistance (Harris and Spiegel 2019, p. 8-10). The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates humanitarian aid

organisations, provides a base model with different phases in any type of crises. Applying this to food systems entails prevention measures like information and alert systems to avoid food insecurity as well as compensating measures like relief funds or insurance used after the crisis (Rudloff, Engel, Oberländer 2015).

## EU policies on food system resilience: The risk of conflicting concepts and measures

The EU addresses food system resilience through policy areas that have different understandings of resilience and critical infrastructures (CIs) (table 1). The latter are explicitly defined only by crisis management policy as vital not only for the economy but the society in general. These differences may lead to conflicts and counterproductive results for resilience.

(1) *Cross policy-risks* arise if food is defined as “critical“ by one policy but not others, or by Member States but not the EU. Measures used by one policy may be undermined by neglect of other policies. The food sector is considered as CI only at national level. (2) *Cross-sectoral risks* arise if interlinkages between infrastructures are ignored, e.g. food is defined as critical but water for agricultural production is not. The policy area of ‘crisis management’ addresses cross-sectoral effects to avoid „cascade effects“ across infrastructures. (3) *Cross-national risks* arise if the spatial dimension of vulnerability is overlooked. In crisis management at EU level, defining EU-wide critical infrastructures considers side-effects of damage to one Member State’s CIs on other Member States.

Additional conflicts can arise from variations in competencies across policy areas. For example, while trade policy is predominantly EU competence, crisis management is predominantly a national policy.

**Table 1: Food resilience concepts and measures in selected EU policy areas**

EU policy area	Concept of resilience & critical infrastructure	Dimension of systemic approach	Explicit food focus	Specific protection measures for food
Crisis management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „All hazard“-approach (manmade, natural)</li> <li>• Critical infrastructure defined as vital for the functioning of a society</li> </ul>	Cross-sectoral Cross-national (EU-wide)	Member States : yes EU: no	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food stock piles</li> <li>• Guaranteed delivery by private actors</li> </ul>
Agricultural Policy	Resilience by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of supplies</li> <li>• Access through reasonable consumer prices</li> </ul>	Cross-national (trade effects)	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subsidies to production</li> <li>• Support for school meals</li> <li>• Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)</li> </ul>
Trade and Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General objectives of national security and public moral</li> <li>• Special structures for essential or sensitive goods</li> </ul>	Cross-national (trade effects)	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rule ex- and imports to react on shortages or to stimulate domestic production</li> <li>• Subsidies without trade effects</li> <li>• Stockpiles without trade effects</li> </ul>

Source: Author's compilation.

How food cross-policy and cross-country conflicts can develop is exemplified by the interaction of agriculture and trade policy:

The *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)* was initiated in the 1960s to support the EU's security of food supply. Production-supporting subsidies and high tariffs protected European producers against foreign competitors. This resulted in production surpluses, which were stored, destroyed, or sold at subsidized prices on the world market, thereby driving non-EU producers out of the market. While achieving the first pillar of food security within the EU, this policy can durably weaken other countries' food security. In the EU, the large CAP expenditures reduced resources for other infrastructures and had negative side-effects on ecosystems and water quality (Rudloff, Weingarten 2019). In the meanwhile several CAP reforms have been initiated, above all due to WTO trade rules.

*Trade policies* per se have cross-country effects. WTO rules acknowledge several reasons to intervene in trade flows, often applicable explicitly to food. Supply shortages of food (and undefined "other essential goods")

allow for limits of exports and imports and even bans. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly 300 trade interventions mainly on medical products have been imposed (WTO 2020). Around 5 percent of these measures concerned food, primarily export bans. These can raise world market prices and reduce food system resilience especially in poor food-importing countries.

#### **Policy responses to COVID-19 in EU Member States with impact on labour force**

One way COVID-19 impacts the European food system is by workers becoming sick. There are also indirect effects via border closures, which limited the mobility of seasonal workers. The consequences tended to be limited to selected products in countries with a high dependence on foreign farm workers (Wieck et al., forthcoming).

Food and agricultural workers have been politically recognized as essential during the pandemic (Martin 2020). After initial limitations of labour mobility, several Member States switched to intensified recruitment efforts. Their success has thus far not been comprehensively evaluated (Wieck et al., forthcoming).

## Policy recommendations for a more coherent approach to food resilience

The key question is whether food supply should be ensured by domestic production or through an international (or European) division of labour (including work force), or by a combination. This is reflected by the new aim of an “open strategic autonomy“ in the proposed new EU trade strategy (European Commission 2020). The lesson from the CAP warns against turning away from the international division of labour. Beyond this, some improvement is possible to the three risks outlined above:

*Establish cross-crisis and cross-country-governance for systemic resilience.* Inter-institutional approaches might better coordinate currently diverging concepts (table 1). For instance, a joint task force could include actors from policies relevant to EU/national food system resilience. An extension of regulatory impact assessments (RIAs) to include cross- policy and international impacts could be undertaken: for instance the impacts of the CAP and trade policy (and their interplay) on food systems resilience can thereby be identified. Similarly, the “Sustainable Impact Assessments” carried out for EU trade agreements could evaluate food security and resilience.

*Address critical value chains instead of infrastructure.* Not only has critical infrastructure been overlooked in discussions about migrant workers (Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs, 2020), but human capital, including migrant workers, has also been largely overlooked in discussions about critical infrastructure. However, policy reactions – e.g. creating green lanes for seasonal workers - demonstrated that these workers are important for resilient infrastructures. This must be considered in related policy areas and resilience definitions (table 1). Specifically for food resilience, also inputs like seeds, feedingstuffs and fertilisers should be considered in the whole value chain.

*Dr. Bettina Rudloff is a Senior Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.*

*The Migrants and Systemic Resilience Hub ([MigResHub](#)) facilitates research and debates on how migrant workers affect the resilience of essential services during the Covid-19 pandemic and similar shocks in the future. MigResHub is a joint initiative of the EUI's Migration*

*Policy Centre (MPC) and Migration Mobilities Bristol (MMB) at the University of Bristol.*

*Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.*

## References

Anderson, B., Poeschel, F., Ruhs, M. (2020): COVID-19 and systemic resilience: rethinking the impacts of migrant workers and labour migration policies, RSCAS Working Paper 2020/57, EUI. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/68235>

Engel, A., Oberländer, L., Rudloff, B. (2012): Contingency planning for food crises. A puzzle of existing approaches, Working Paper FG 2, 2012/No. 3, Nov. 2012, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/contingency-planning-for-food-crisis/>

European Commission (2020): A renewed trade policy for a stronger Europe Consultation Note, 16 June 2020. [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/june/tradoc\\_158779.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/june/tradoc_158779.pdf)

Harris, J. and Spiegel, E. (2019): Food Systems Resilience: Concepts & Policy Approaches. Center for Agriculture and Food Systems. [https://www.nal.usda.gov/sites/www.nal.usda.gov/files/food\\_systems\\_resilience\\_concepts\\_policy\\_approaches\\_final.pdf](https://www.nal.usda.gov/sites/www.nal.usda.gov/files/food_systems_resilience_concepts_policy_approaches_final.pdf)

Martin, P. (2020): Food Supply Resilience and Migrant Workers. MigResHub Think piece No. 3 <https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migreshub/MigResHub-think-piece-No3.pdf>

Weingarten, P. and Rudloff, B. (2020). Die Gemeinsame Agrarpolitik: Entwicklungsstand und Reformbedarf. In: P. Becker, B. Lippert (eds.): Handbuch Europäische Union. Springer, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1. Edition 2020, XIII, p. 843-868.

Wieck, C. et al. (forthcoming): European policy responses and economic impacts on agri-food markets due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Study for IATRC.

WTO (2020), WTO members' notifications on COVID-19, [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/covid19\\_e/notifications\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/notifications_e.htm)

