

POLICY BRIEF

Could Food Export Restrictions Worsen a Looming Food Crisis?

Jonathan Hepburn, David Laborde,
Marie Parent, and Carin Smaller

Introduction

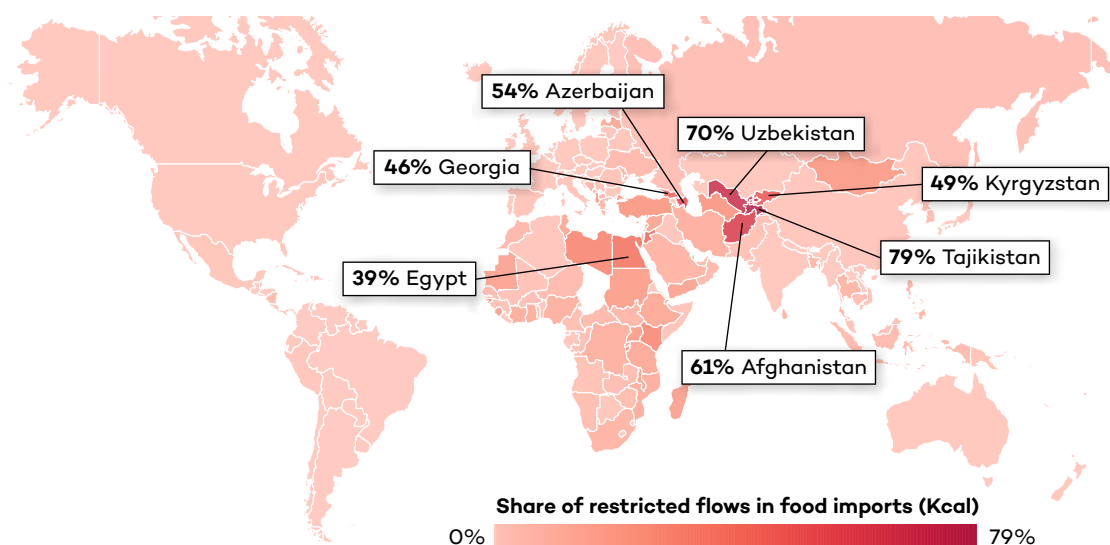
Several countries have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing restrictions on food and agricultural exports, sparking concern that access to food for consumers in low-income, food-importing countries could be harmed. This short note draws on analysis in the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI's) COVID-19 Food Trade Policy Tracker to examine how food-importing countries could be affected by recent measures to restrict exports. It looks at three types of indicators to assess how vulnerable importing countries are to the imposition of export restrictions: 1) which importing countries are affected by these measures, 2) which countries already have high levels of undernourishment, and 3) which countries are dependent on imported calories. The brief also calls on countries to refrain from banning or restricting exports of food staples because of the impact these measures can have on hunger in importing countries.

Which importing countries are affected?

Some of the poorest countries in Central Asia have been disproportionately affected by export restrictions imposed by their neighbours, including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Mongolia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have also been hit. In North Africa and the Middle East, fragile states such as Libya and Sudan have been affected, along with Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen—a country on the brink of famine. Low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been affected too, with the measures having a disproportionate impact on Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, Rwanda, and Malawi. In contrast, most countries in North and South America have been relatively unaffected. Figure 1 gives more details.

Figure 1 below shows the extent to which a given country's food imports are impacted by restrictions, as measured by the percentage of calories from products on which there is an export restriction, taking into account country of origin. For example, most of Kyrgyzstan's imported calories come in the form of wheat and wheat flour imports, which are brought into the country almost entirely from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan imposed an export ban on wheat and other products in March 2020. This impacts a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan's food imports: 50%.¹

¹ Laborde, D., Mamun, A., & Parent, M. (2020). Documentation for the COVID-19 Food Trade Policy Tracker. IFPRI.

Figure 1. Share of restriction by importer²

How food secure are the populations of different countries?

In order to understand the impact of export restrictions on food-importing countries, it is also necessary to examine the extent to which undernutrition is already prevalent among the population. According to the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, a number of countries that have been affected by export bans and restrictions also have high levels of undernourishment.³ For example, as many as 62% of people in the Central African Republic are undernourished, and, in Madagascar, Zambia and Zimbabwe, undernutrition affects over 40% of the population.⁴ Countries in South and Central America have seen steady improvements, although some, such as Haiti, still have high levels of undernutrition.

How dependent are different countries on imported calories?

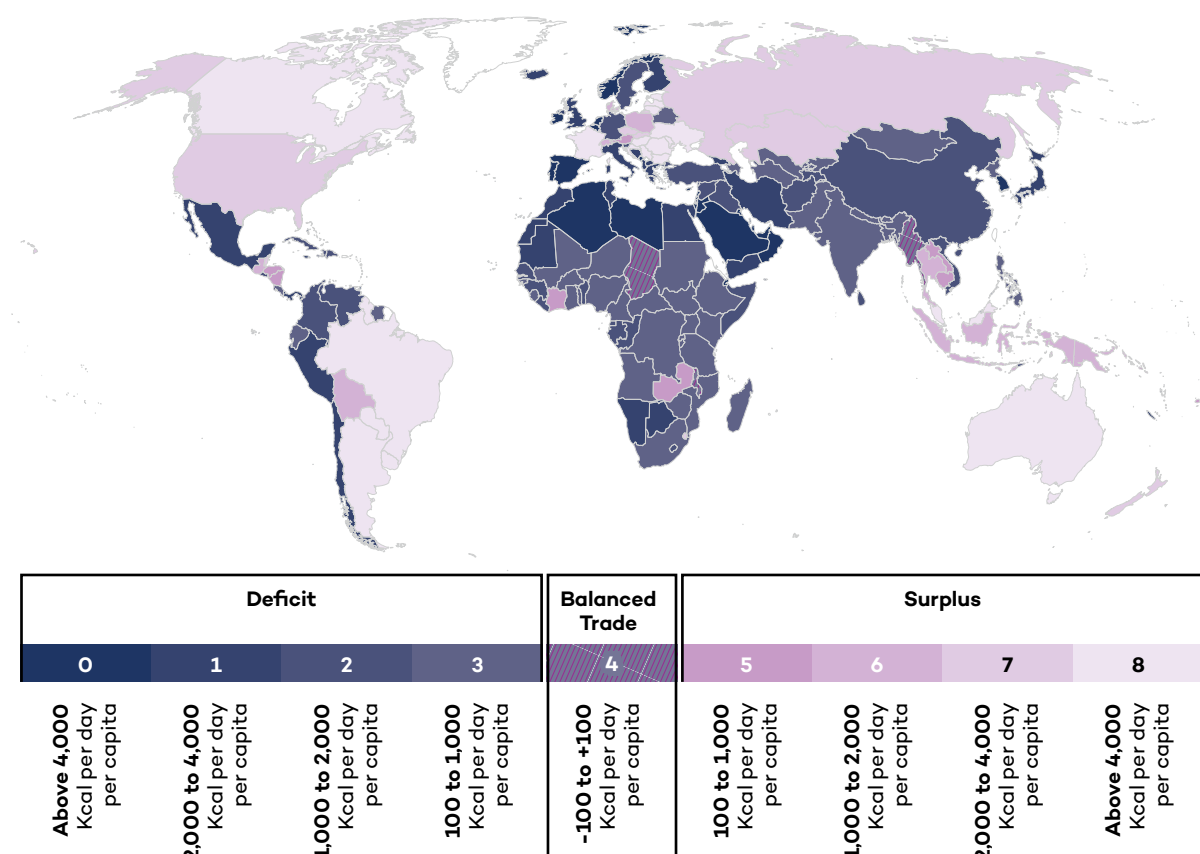
A third criterion to consider is the extent to which a given country relies on imported calories to meet domestic demand. This can be calculated by subtracting a country's level of calories consumed from the level of calories it produces domestically. Available data indicates that countries with a calorie production deficit include most countries in Africa and the Middle East; much of South and East Asia; the Caribbean; the Andean region in South America; and parts of Europe such as Scandinavia.⁵

² Find this map at IFPRI's Food Trade Policy Tracker: <https://public.tableau.com/profile/laborde6680#!/vizhome/ExportRestrictionsTracker/FoodExportRestrictionsTracker>

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2019). *The state of food security and nutrition in the world: Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns*. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf>

⁴ FAO data on "Prevalence of Undernourishment" is presented in IFPRI's online tracker *Hunger Around the World*: https://public.tableau.com/profile/laborde6680#!/vizhome/CERES2030_SDG2_1_a/HungeraroundtheWorld

⁵ Laborde, D. & Deason, L. (2015). *Trade and nutritional contents*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340914152_Trade_and_Nutritional_Contents. Laborde, D., & Goundan, A. (2020). (forthcoming). A consistent approach of trade data: The AATM database; United Nations Trade Statistics. (2017). Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding Systems (HS). <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/tradekb/Knowledgebase/50018/Harmonized-Commodity-Description-and-Coding-Systems-HS>; United Nations Trade Statistics. (n.d.). United Nations Comtrade Commodity Classifications. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/tradekb/Attachment439.aspx?AttachmentType=1>.

Figure 2. Net trade expressed in Kcal per day per capita⁶

What can be done?

The head of the World Food Programme, David Beasley, has warned of the risk of famines “of biblical proportions” if countries fail to address the food security implications of the COVID-19 outbreak.⁷ Nonetheless, the coronavirus pandemic occurs at a moment when global food stocks are plentiful, harvests are expected to be large, and oil prices are very low—meaning there is no immediate reason to fear shortages of basic food staples or to ban or restrict their export.⁸ Averting a looming hunger crisis requires exporting countries to do no harm, and that means no export bans on food staples.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United Nations. (2020). *WFP Chief warns of hunger pandemic as COVID-19 spreads*. <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council>

⁸ Murphy, S., & Smaller, C. (2020). *We can prevent a COVID-19 hunger crisis if we look back and learn*. International Institute for Sustainable Development. <https://www.iisd.org/library/hunger-crisis-covid-19>

⁹ Smaller, C., & Murphy, S. (2020). *We need a global stimulus package to prevent a COVID-19 hunger crisis*. Food Tank. <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/04/we-need-a-global-stimulus-package-to-avoid-a-covid-19-hunger-crisis/>

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IISD Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3B 0T4

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700
Website: www.iisd.org
Twitter: @IISD_news



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