

COVID-19 Learnings: Plant Science Submission to ASEAN (May 2020)

Brief Overview

While regional governments continue to largely exempt food and agriculture sectors to ensure continuity with food production, farmers are still adapting. Pre-COVID-19 issues impacting smallholders (access to labor, markets, technology and finance) have only been exacerbated by lockdowns, border closures and movement restrictions. In some instances, gaps between related national policies and on-the-ground state/provincial realities have also come to light. On the whole, this has highlighted the fragile nature of 'Food Security' in ASEAN and reinforced the critical need to better enable and empower the region's smallholder farmers.

Industry Recommendations for Food Production Resiliency

- Ensure demand from markets and supply chain reaches farmers in a timely manner
- Make permanent the exemption of agriculture as an essential service (as well as provide necessary equipment and training to secure the safety of the farming community)
- Adapt regulations and policies to deliver timely agriculture inputs (raw materials and technologies such as quality seeds and crop protection products) to farmers
- Encourage innovation/technology development and farmer access through a responsive and flexible regulatory approach
 - Leveraging 'Fast Track' registration and introduction of agricultural innovative solutions
 - Cross-border sharing of science-based, predictable regulations to promote digital agriculture applications, utility of drones, plant breeding innovations, and other technologies that can enhance regional smallholder production
 - Promoting greater use of mechanisation and technological solutions to reduce labour-intensiveness
- Ensure inter-agency coordination in developing/executing policies that support continuity of agriculture sector and food security, both at the national and local levels
- Encourage and step up inter-sectoral partnerships, including with private sector and digital solution providers, to generate new and innovative solutions to address farmers' needs
- Strengthen monitoring across the food/agriculture value chain to identify gaps and respond in a timely manner
- Develop and/or amend regulations to address illegal, spurious seed markets in ensuring farmer access to quality seeds
- Explore options to better facilitate and safeguard cross-border movement of agricultural products, such as the implementation of e-Phyto certification
- Ensure safe working environments for farmers by providing them with access to basic PPE, sanitation and disinfection products; and staggering work times to maintain social distancing