Cecile Fruman, the World Bank’s director for regional integration and engagement in South Asia, began the Nov. 23, 2020 online conversation saying that the COVID-19 crisis threatens to erase socio-economic gains of recent years. An estimated 150 million people worldwide will fall below the poverty line of $1.90 per day because of the pandemic, she said. One-third of them live in South Asia.

Shrinking household income typically means families eat less meat, fish, dairy products, and other nutritious foods. “We know that women and children are particularly vulnerable in a region that already accounts for about 40 percent of the world’s stunted children and some of the world’s highest rates of anemia in women,” Fruman said.

With intraregional trade amounting to about 13% of South Asia’s total farm trade in 2019, trade restrictions and disruptions can affect food value chains. Trade in food products is critical for landlocked and smaller economies. For example, almost 17% of Bhutan’s imports are food and farm products, mostly from India. Afghanistan imported just over half its cereal shipments from Pakistan.

Context: COVID-19 disruptions increased food prices by 10% this year in South Asia, the highest rate of food inflation in all global regions. The effects of the pandemic will push an estimated 57 million South Asians into poverty. Among the hardest hit are women and children who are already vulnerable to high rates of anemia and stunted growth, respectively. Regional cooperation is needed to ensure stable food supplies in times of crisis, by keeping trade flowing and managing climate change impacts on crops and supply chains.
Panelist Will Martin, a senior research fellow with the International Food Policy Research Institute, said liberalized and transparent national trade policies are essential for food supplies to respond to demand. “I would encourage policymakers to take another look at the WTO,” he said. “Those objectives can be satisfied better with a more liberal policy regime.” Martin praised India’s recent pandemic reforms to make it easier for farm goods to move between states. In September, India’s Parliament passed bills on intrastate and interstate trade in farm products and commodities. The changes allow farmers to sell produce directly to institutional buyers instead of going through the public procurement system.

Martin emphasized the importance of social safety nets, saying COVID-19 has shaken all four components of food security. For food to be secure, it must be available in sufficient amounts, economically accessible, nutritious, and stable over time. “It’s not so much about food availability,” he said. “It’s really about whether the poor and vulnerable have access.”

Nazneen Ahmed, a senior research fellow with the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said governments in the region offered various types of financial assistance and subsidized food for the poor. Governments also took action to keep agricultural supply chains open. Bangladesh, for example,

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COVID-19 will push millions of South Asians below the poverty line of $1.90/day

( IFPRI estimates, in millions)
supported farmers with low-cost loans, kept its border with India open for shipments, and temporarily relaxed paperwork requirements so imports could clear customs faster. “We need to enhance more trade among our (South Asian) countries,” Ahmed said. An effective way to support intraregional trade is by eliminating tariffs and para-tariffs, she said. Para-tariffs are border fees, taxes, or other charges levied only on imports.

National and regional policies are best when they are gender inclusive and consider the special challenges and circumstances of poor women, she added.

Another panelist, Abid Qaiyum Suleri, executive director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Pakistan, said wheat, flour, tomatoes, onions, and chili peppers were among the foods with higher prices in Pakistan. While prices of some perishable vegetables reflected tighter supplies, there were more complex reasons for higher wheat prices, including news reports that some wheat was smuggled out of the country to other markets. Suleri quoted Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India’s independence movement, who famously said: “The world has enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.”

Audience comments posted before and during the live conversation showed support for countries to work together on climate change adaptations. Warming temperatures, climate shocks and rising sea levels threaten farming practices and other livelihoods throughout the region. The panelists agreed. “Climate change is a common menace,” Suleri said. “Developing drought-resistant crop varieties is an area for cooperation and collaboration.” The hotter, drier conditions expected in much of South Asia indicate it is time to abandon water-intensive crops and adopt new varieties suited to the changing climate.

Data sharing is another area for collaboration to respond to climate change. “It’s very important that we share real-time data on water,” Ahmed said, noting Bangladesh grows a large amount of rice that requires substantial water. “Water is going to be a big issue for agriculture.”

Pakistan is planning to set up food security dashboards with data on each district’s surplus, shortage, or near-shortage of food staples. A similar region-wide tool, Suleri said, would add valuable transparency to markets.

The pandemic has created opportunities for South Asian nations to rethink policies and share findings about social protection programs that work well, Fruman said. Women are getting a seat at the table in discussions about research, policy, and programs to ensure gender-specific challenges are addressed. Similarly, policymakers are paying more attention to the voices and concerns of youth.

“One of the silver linings for the region of this pandemic is that there is a real focus on social security and social protection again,” Suleri said.