

Food for thought: the future of food security in the UAE

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What is food security?

Food security has been defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (the 'FOA') as "all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life". In July 2017, the UAE Government agreed to build on its support to the FAO Sub-regional Office for the Gulf Cooperation Council (the 'GCC') States. The renewed FAO-UAE partnership aims to:

- improve the sustainability of agriculture and fisheries production in the UAE and the sub-region, thereby improving nutrition, food safety and food security;
- contribute to eradicating hunger and poverty in developing countries by improving agriculture and fisheries-based livelihoods; and
- motivate innovation, technology-sharing and development in the food and agriculture sectors.

In 2017, for the first time the UAE Government established a State Ministry for Food Security, which became FAO's line Ministry by June 2019. The new Minister has led the new UAE National Food Security Strategy 2051, which was approved in November 2018. It is most notable that the new strategy aspires to make the UAE top of the Global Food Security Index by 2051 and among the top 10 countries by 2021, and focuses on facilitating the global food trade, diversifying food import sources and identifying alternative supply schemes.

In 2018, the UAE Government announced that the UAE stood at 31st place on the Global Food Security Index. In December 2019 the index showed that the UAE had risen 10 places to 21st position, with the National Food Security Strategy 2051 proving its influence throughout the year. This is an impressive achievement by the UAE and is a clear indication that the UAE is benefiting from the strategy which aims for its population to have access to safe, nutritious and affordable food for a healthy life at even during states of emergencies.

Due to the UAE's climate, water and land resources, it can only provide a small fraction of its overall food requirements. The UAE Government strives to develop its food producing sectors with key focus on the aquaculture sector, to facilitate its goal of achieving the UAE Vision 2021 and the UAE Centennial 2071 Plan. The UAE Government issued Aquaculture Pulse 2020 report which aims for the aquaculture sector to enhance marine resources, maintain their sustainability and guarantee food security for future generations. The report analyses consumption in the local and international markets, taking into account the product quality and size. This strategic report aims to attract investors and ensure the success for aquaculture projects in the UAE, highlighting the advantages of the local produce in terms of quality and cost.

Further, on 28 June 2020, the UAE Cabinet approved the national system for sustainable agriculture to improve self-sufficiency in food, enhance farms and create opportunities to ensure that the agriculture sector is always ranked high in the UAE. The national system for sustainable agriculture seeks to:

- improve self-sufficiency from the targeted agricultural crops to five per cent annually;

- increase the average farm income to 10 per cent annually;
- increase the workforce in the sector by five per cent annually; and
- achieve a 15 per cent annual reduction in water used for irrigation of a production unit.

In addition, the UAE Government has also:

- established the Food Security Dashboard of Dubai which is capable of using artificial intelligence to analyse indicators of food security e.g. stock availability, production and consumption; levels;
- launched the UAE Food Bank in 2017, which is a charitable organisation. It distributes food to those in need by collaborating with local authorities. It is the first food bank in the United Arab Emirates;
- established the Food Security Research Platform. This an online portal that allows specialists to share its latest findings and publications across different research themes. It aims to serve the needs of a wide range of stakeholders in terms of data, information and knowledge on research and development in sustainable food systems across the food value chain; and
- established Abu Dhabi Farmers' Services Centre responsible for agriculture, food safety and food security affairs in Abu Dhabi.

Federal Law Number 3 of 2020 ('Strategic Food Security Law')

The UAE recently introduced the Strategic Food Security Law which was approved with the aim of enhancing food supplies in the event of emergencies, and thereby achieving food sustainability. The provisions of the law apply to the Ministry of Economy ('**MOE**'), producer or importer and the registered vendors with a view to ensuring adequate food supplies across the UAE at all times, including in the event of a disaster.

The Strategic Food Security Law provides that the MOE shall prepare statistics, reports and databases in relation to the production and provision of food, propose policies relevant to food commodities, estimate the volume of food consumption and availability of produce in the UAE and the originating.

In relation to providers and the registered vendors, the new law imposes several obligations which they must abide by and they are as follows:

1. maintenance of the safe stock subject to the provisions of this Law;
2. supply the strategic stock of food commodities upon request;
3. electronic connection with the competent entity and the authority to ensure the continuous follow up of quantities, kinds and condition of the strategic stock of food commodities;
4. execution of resolutions issued by the competent entity;
5. distribution of commodities in case of emergencies according to the distribution plans prepared by the authority in co-ordination with the competent entity; and
6. maintenance of an appropriate warehouse for storage of the commodities in the UAE.

The Strategic Food Security Law also provides that incentives and facilities will be introduced for the provider and registered vendor through a Cabinet Resolution which is yet to be published.

Non-compliance with the Strategic Food Security Law imposes significant monetary penalties including a fine of no less than AED 500,000 (US\$136,000) and not more than AED 2 million (US\$5.5 million) which can be imposed on producers, importers and registered vendors who are found to be in violation.

It is clear that securing sustainable sources of food is a matter of national security. The initiatives introduced by the UAE Government and the new Strategic Security Law will further enable the UAE to achieve its vision of becoming a leader in food security by 2051.

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