



## Disaster risk reduction in times of COVID-19: What have we learned?

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DISASTER HAS NO BOUNDARIES AND IT AFFECTS EVERYONE. Most affected are the vulnerable and marginalized groups who are less able to cope with and recover from its impacts. Some disasters are triggered by natural hazards such as droughts, floods, and storms; however, they are not natural in their nature. That said, no disasters are natural. On the one hand, human-induced factors and developmental activities play a catalytic role in turning hazards (i.e., natural, biological, environmental and technological) into disasters. On the other, human and developmental activities that are risk-informed can help: (i) reduce existing risks and vulnerabilities of people and their livelihoods, ecosystems and economies by preventing hazards/risks from turning into disasters; and (ii) prevent the creation of new risks; thereby, contribute to build resilience and secure sustainable development gains.

More than five years ago, United Nations Member Countries adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in June 2015. The Sendai Framework renewed countries commitments to: (i) move from disaster management to disaster risk management; (ii) shift from reducing existing vulnerability to reduce existing risks and prevent the creation of new risks and (iii) introduce a more people-centered preventive approach. With its seven global targets<sup>1</sup> and four priority actions<sup>2</sup>, the Sendai Framework represents a milestone and paves the way to enhance and accelerate actions on disaster risk reduction (DRR), including through stronger sector and multi-sector involvement in resilience building. It explicitly acknowledges and requests further contributions from sectors, among others, agriculture & food security,

nutrition, health, infrastructure and education to ensure that their programmes and interventions, at national and local levels are risk-informed to build long-term resilience, for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It calls for more coherent risk-informed development policies and bolder actions to save lives, protect/restore/rebuild livelihoods and sustain ecosystems in which we depend on for our very own survival.

The Sendai Framework also places a stronger emphasis to a multi-hazard approach to disaster risk reduction. For example, in the health sector, it gives a greater attention to biological hazards such as epidemics and pandemics and transboundary threats (which includes links to animal and plant pests and diseases). In addition, it points out clearly the need for higher emphasis on slow on-set risks/silent disasters such as drought and other climate-induced hazard/phenomena, which have very high negative impacts socio-economic sectors, in particular, on agriculture and food sectors.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the solid foundation set by the Sendai Framework to include biological hazards in the national and local disaster risk reduction strategies, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) still caught us by surprise in late 2019. And the ugly truth is that the world was not prepared for this disaster – the COVID-19 pandemic. We witnessed some of the most developed countries being hit hardest by the pandemic resulting in significant loss of lives and

1 Target (a): Substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030; Target (b): Substantially reduce the number of people affected globally by 2030; Target (c): Reduce direct disaster economic loss in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030; Target (d): Substantially reduce disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services by 2030; Target (e): Substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020; Target (f): Substantially enhance international cooperation to developing countries through adequate and sustainable support to complement their national actions for implementation of the present Framework by 2030; Target (g): Substantially increase the availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning systems and disaster risk information and assessments to people by 2030.

2 Understanding disaster risk; Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience; and Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response, and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

3 FAO studies on the impact of disaster and crisis in agriculture and food security revealed that agriculture absorbed up to 23% of all total economic damage and loss in developing countries (FAO, 2018).

economic downturns. The World Bank 2020 report forecasts the deepest global recession in eight decades, since the Second World War, and predicts that the deep recessions triggered by COVID-19 are likely to have long lasting impacts for societies and economies through multiple channels, such as lower investment; the erosion of the human capital of the unemployed; and a retreat from global trade and supply linkages.

This paper aims to provide a quick zoom-in on the impact of COVID-19 on the agriculture and food systems through a disaster risk reduction lens, and offer some key lessons learned that are geared towards evidence-based and risk-informed interventions for inclusive, resilient and sustainable agriculture and food systems.

## The impact of COVID-19 from agriculture and food systems lens

The impact of COVID-19 has clearly shown the systemic nature of the risk caused by a biological hazard, that is, a public health disaster which quickly turned into a socio-economic disaster. In addition, it is unfolding on top of various other shocks such as desert locust, fall armyworm (FAW), droughts, floods, storms and conflicts, that severely affect agricultural livelihoods and food systems. Together these disasters, some linked to or exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, will further worsen the exposure and vulnerabilities of people, systems and economies.

Zooming in, the pandemic is already directly affecting the agriculture and food systems through impacts on food supply and demand, and indirectly through decreases in purchasing power, the capacity to produce and distribute food, and the intensification of care tasks, all of which will have differentiated impacts and will more strongly affect the most vulnerable and food insecure populations (FAO, 2020). The effects could be even stronger in countries that are already facing exceptional emergencies with direct consequences for the agriculture and food sectors, such as the ongoing desert locust outbreak<sup>4</sup> in Eastern Africa, Western Africa the Near East and Southwest Asia. In addition, FAO's impact assessment of COVID-19 in Haiti confirmed that the main concern for smallholder farmers is drought, with COVID-19 is worsening the situation. Furthermore, as a result of COVID-19, more vulnerable groups are falling deeper into social-economic vulnerability nets such as poverty, hunger, malnutrition, gender-based violence, and displacement, among others. When jobs are lost, the

<sup>4</sup> The 2019/2020 outbreak witnessed the worst desert locust crisis in over 25 years in the Horn of Africa and the most serious in 70 years for Kenya and the situation in West Africa is very worrying.

flow of remittances is reduced, the food systems will be disrupted and eroded, which result in the increasing number of people facing acute food insecurity. It is worth repeating that even without COVID-19, it was envisaged that unless acute hunger is rapidly addressed and prevented, the world may see a further rise in chronic hunger, with long-term consequences for hundreds of millions of children and adults (FAO and WFP, 2020). Hence, we must accelerate strengthening the resilience and sustainability of agricultural and food production and distribution systems in order to prevent food emergency in all risk contexts.

## What is the extent of the food security challenge with the addition of COVID-19?

- Analysis from the [GLOBAL REPORT ON FOOD CRISES 2020](#) produced prior to the pandemic indicates an increase in the number of people experiencing acute<sup>5</sup> food insecurity in 2019 to 135 million in 55 countries. It is estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic could push an additional 71 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, leading, for the first time since 1998, to an increase in the share of the world's population living on less than USD 1.90 per day. The United Nations Secretary General has recently warned about an impending global food emergency (FSIN, 2020).
- Analysis from the [STATE OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN THE WORLD REPORT \(SOFI 2020\)](#), which is a joint collaboration of FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), confirmed that "the world is not on track to achieve zero hunger by 2030". This implies that the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs". The report revealed that pre-COVID-19 there was an increase by 60 million of the number of people in chronic<sup>6</sup> food insecurity in the last five years and if recent trends continue, the number of people affected by hunger would surpass 840 million by 2030. A preliminary assessment suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020. The nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to deteriorate further due to the

<sup>5</sup> **Acute food insecurity** is when a person's inability to consume adequate food puts their lives or livelihoods in immediate danger.

<sup>6</sup> **Chronic food insecurity** is when a person is unable to consume enough food to maintain a normal, active lifestyle over an extended period.

health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2020).

- Analysis from the [JOINT FAO-WFP REPORT ON EARLY WARNING ANALYSIS OF FOOD SECURITY HOTSPOTS 2020](#): the report indicated that the number of people with acute food insecurity in many countries will be increasing, as a result of COVID-19. Twenty-seven (27) countries<sup>7</sup>, identified by the report, are on the frontline of impending COVID-19-driven food crises, as the pandemic's knock-on effects aggravate pre-existing drivers of hunger. It is also warned that these "hotspot countries" are at high risk of – and in some cases are already seeing – significant food security deteriorations in the coming months, including rising numbers of people pushed into acute hunger (FAO and WFP, 2020).

## Lessons learned from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has more than ever shown the changing risk environment, as well as the systemic and overlaying nature of risks that affect and threaten all sectors. Hence, it has reinforced the call for multi-sectoral, multi-hazard and preventive and anticipatory approaches that consistently integrate disaster, climate and crisis risk management for strengthening the resilience of people, their agricultural livelihoods and the ecosystems they depend on in a sustainable manner.

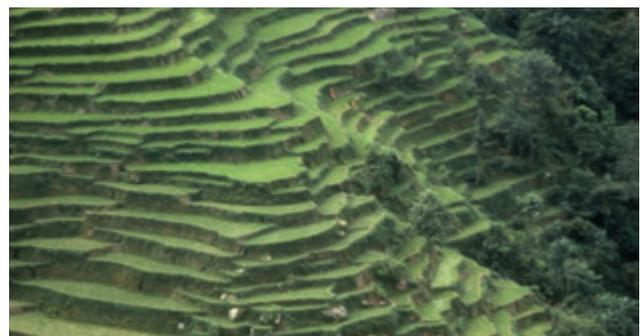
Moving forward, we must continue to ensure that our response and recovery for COVID-19 related works also contribute to reduce other potentially overlaying risks affecting and threatening the agriculture and food systems and further promote concerted recovery efforts that are geared towards enabling countries and communities to recover and become more resilient. As part of a long-term response to the pandemic and preparedness for future risks and crises, there is a need to move towards supporting more inclusive, green and resilient recovery approaches and ensure that dedicated resources for epidemics/pandemics, disaster and climate risk management are used in a "build to transform" manner and are evidence-based, within and across sectors, including in the agriculture and food sectors.

COVID-19 has proved that weak governance is one of the biggest risk-drivers, therefore, we must continue our effort to support countries to ensure that good governance for risk-informed development is in place.

<sup>7</sup> **Latin America and the Caribbean:** Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Venezuela; **East Africa:** Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia; **West Africa:** Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger; **Southern Africa:** Mozambique and Zimbabwe; **Central Africa:** Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo; **Near East and North Africa:** Yemen, Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon, the Sudan, Iraq; **Asia and the Pacific:** Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

We need to continue to strengthen countries' capacities in integrating disaster and climate risk considerations into governance and policy actions, including through supporting countries in the development/update of their multi-sectoral national/local DRR strategies that are well aligned to national climate change and biodiversity strategies and plans. Emphasis must be placed to ensure that countries are well-capacitated and equipped to develop and implement risk-informed programming for resilience building and ensure that financing for DRR actions is mobilized to deliver actual resilience building interventions on the ground. Furthermore, we must continue to invest in data/information and robust analysis, including on multiple hazard risk monitoring and early warning systems and early warning early actions for the agriculture and food systems. These well-established DRR measures are more important than ever, for reducing the risk of overlaying hazards and cascading impacts, and therefore, saving lives and livelihoods as well as reducing the costs of disaster losses including in livelihoods restoration/ recovery/rebuilding efforts.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has re-emphasized that nothing could and should be done without partnerships, through effective collaboration for coherent and convergent actions and with continued sharing and learning, within and across sectors. Only effective partnerships and coordination can support countries to successfully implement multi-sectoral, multi-hazard, multi-stakeholder and preventive and anticipatory approaches at all levels to ensure that no one is left behind. Post COVID-19 recovery and future resilience building efforts will require close partnerships, including at the local level, with a wide range of actors and stakeholders – public, private and community/local actors/stakeholders including smallholders, food producer organizations and agricultural small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) – to design and implement joined-up resilience programmes, tailored to supporting specific national development priorities and boosting local agricultural livelihoods and food systems.



**Trisuli area, NEPAL**  
Terracing in Trisuli area.  
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Njemena, CHAD

Vendors selling vegetables at the central market.  
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