



CONTRIBUTION TO THE CFS HIGH-LEVEL SPECIAL EVENT ON STRENGTHENING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION – 14 OCTOBER 2020

Plenary 2 - COVID-19 and its Impacts on Global Food Security and Nutrition

Part 3 - Panel Discussion: Coping strategies, lessons learned and building resilience to prevent future pandemics

Introduction

Social-distancing and lockdown measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 have significantly reduced people's incomes and global food demand. Between January and May 2020, food prices have declined steadily, affecting the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers worldwide.ⁱ Starting from June 2020, this trend shifted: prolonged closures of restaurants and schools, logistical disruptions, and shortages of migrant labor to harvest crops have resulted in unprecedented amounts of wasted agricultural output, which has reduced supply and led to increased food prices for consumers. Up to 38.2 million people could fall victim to hunger as a result of the economic crisis generated by COVID-19.ⁱⁱ

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the extreme fragility of our current food system. On the consumption side, unhealthy diets have emerged as one of the most important risk variables impacting COVID-19 mortality. The virus is disproportionately affecting individuals struggling with obesity, overweight, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. On the production side, the pandemic has highlighted that over reliance on long and consolidated supply chains reduces the resilience of food systems to sudden shocks. Short supply chains are also suffering due to the closing of informal and open-air markets, where most people in low and middle income countries still obtain their food from.

The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted our interconnectedness with nature. In particular, it has overturned our anthropocentric view of humanity, which is only afforded the status of a guest on this planet. Many studies have highlighted that the virus originated in animals and crossed to humans as a result of reducing the natural barriers between ourselves and host animals. The continuous conversion of natural habitats into cropland may have reduced the buffer space between the human and animal world, contributing to the spread of the disease.

Efforts to curtail the pandemic have sent shockwaves across the globe, with many countries activating social protection mechanisms to provide financial support to individuals and firms affected by the crisis. While the immediate measures to preserve life and control the health crisis have been wholly necessary, food systems disruptions have become more acute due to movement restrictions, which will remain for months to come. Trade stall, food price volatility and border closures mean that people will likely suffer from food shortages and lack of access to nutritious food – especially in countries already affected by climate change, land degradation, migration, and poverty. The number of hungry people, already at 800 million, could double due to the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ

What can we do?

To recover from the economic and food crises generated by COVID-19 and build more resilient food systems that can stand sudden shocks, countries will have to adopt a two pronged approach that combines short-term mitigation measures to address immediate food needs, and longer-term interventions, to transform the way we produce and



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consume food. As immediate relief actions, policymakers should facilitate trade and improve coordination and information exchange between food producers and buyers, especially at the local level. The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT is helping countries to meet short-term food security requirements by providing real-time information on COVID-19-driven shifts in food consumer behavior and safeguarding global collections of seeds and germplasm, to ensure that suitable and improved materials are ready for deployment to farmers' fields worldwide.

Longer-term measures must include promoting healthy diets. In the last 60 years, diets worldwide have become more homogeneous and increasingly dominated by staple foods,^{iv} high in energy and low in micronutrients. Three crops only – rice, maize, and wheat – provide more than 50% of the calories that humans gain from plants.^v Everywhere in the world, people are not consuming enough nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, nuts and seeds, vegetables and whole grains,^{vi} causing micronutrient deficiencies, especially among the poorest. Today, about 11 million premature deaths per year are related to unhealthy diets.^{vii}

A shift in behavior toward increased domestic food production and consumption is needed to build a more sustainable and resilient food system that ensures adequate access to nutritious food for all. The pandemic is calling us to shift to a new food system paradigm that supports regional self-sufficiency and domestic agricultural production, and sees community gardens and farmers' markets as essential services. Efforts should be directed at diversifying supply, moving away from staple production, empowering local market actors, and reducing the distance between consumers and producers and the overreliance on globalized value chains.

Identifying varieties of nutritious crops that can be reintroduced into diets is a top priority to fight food insecurity and malnutrition and build resilient food systems. For example, quinoa and fonio have a higher protein content than most major cereals and can grow in harsh environments. Further research could result in higher yields and lower prices, enabling such products to become more widely available. Governments and funder can help by allocating more financial resources for local producers of these and many other orphan crops.^{viii}

In addition to identifying locally adapted and nutritious crops that can be reintroduced in diets to address malnutrition, the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT is also working with countries to strengthen the nutritional content of those crops that dominate current diets, particularly those of the poorest populations, by crossbreeding high-nutrient varieties with high-yielding ones. This involves tapping the genetic traits of thousands of crop varieties preserved in gene banks or available in their places of origin.

Beyond improving nutrition, interventions should also aim at making agriculture more sustainable. Agriculture uses large amounts of freshwater^{ix}, accounts for 30% of global greenhouse-gas emissions^x, and is responsible for conversion of natural habitats into cropland, which in turns erodes biodiversity. For a long time, agricultural research has focused on increasing productivity, without regard to the environment. The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT is helping countries to shift towards regenerative production systems that promote biodiversity and improve soil and water quality, contributing to climate-change adaptation. This is done including by mainstreaming agrobiodiversity into agricultural, environmental and health policies and strategies as well as in dietary guidelines.



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