

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

Pandemic and food security: A view from the Global South

JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic



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“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.”

—Antonio Gramsci

Like many modern-day viral epidemics (e.g., MERS, SARS), SARS-CoV-2 emerged from the folds of the food system. The dominant narrative puts its earliest appearance in the wet market of the Chinese city of Wuhan, where wild animals are also traded. However, there are indications that SARS-CoV-2, which is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, may have developed in intensive livestock farming systems, possibly pig farming (GRAIN, 2020).

Not only did the virus originate from the food system, but it also penetrated it and exposed its systemic weaknesses. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are now threatening the food security of billions of people. Indeed, after initial reassurances that COVID-19 posed no concerns to global food security, as the world’s silos were well stocked (Vos, Martin, & Laborde, 2020), the tone has now changed radically. We are now being warned that global hunger could double due to food supply disruptions caused by the pandemic, especially in poor nations and Africa (De Sousa, 2020).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Twitter account @foodpandemic, which I co-manage with Nour El Houda Amhez and Abed Al Kareem Yehya, has been tracking the impact of the pandemic on food security. While our focus is mostly on the Middle East (as the largest food importers in the world, and home to the largest number of refugees and internally displaced people on the planet) and on East Africa (where food insecurity is chronic), we also cover other countries of the South.

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Tracking the pandemic's pressures on the food system allows us to identify the different stresses on food security systematically. These are presented below according to four dimensions of food security as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (2003)¹: availability, access, utilization, and stability. The pandemic has negatively affected each of these dimensions in the following ways:

A. Availability

- The global food supply chains are currently subjected to disturbances of varying severity. Freight by land and air routes has been seriously disrupted.
- A number of food-producing countries have imposed trade restrictions on major commodities, especially wheat (Kazakhstan, Russia, and Romania) and rice (Thailand, Cambodia, and India). The soymeal supply chain has also been disrupted due to Argentinian food workers' exposure to COVID-19. However, current commodity reserves still exceed regular demand, due to above-average yields in the past season.
- All countries, but especially large food importers, are scrambling to build up their food reserves and have created increased pressure on global markets.
- These developments have resulted in increases in wheat and rice prices due to a combination of demand, hoarding, and trade restrictions. Rice prices have reached a record height compared to prices in the last decade.
- Transport restrictions affecting agricultural inputs, especially seeds and agrochemicals, may delay planting for the next season.
- Harvest of the current season and planting for the new season are endangered due to limitations on the movement of migrant farmworkers.

B. Access

- At national levels, the lockdown has elicited a panic buying spree by customers, temporarily emptying supermarket shelves and increasing wastage due to unconsumed fresh food.
- Concurrently, the inability of farmers to sell food that was produced for the hotel/restaurant/catering (HORECA) sector has led to wastage and produce dumping.
- Limitation on migrant workers' movement is creating a loss of employment and income and has repercussions for increasing poverty rates in their countries of origin.
- Exposure of food workers, who are often forced to operate with minimum protection and without the ability to observe social distancing rules, is an additional stress to their health and food security.
- Lockdowns and movement control are restricting the physical ability of people to access food and is creating food deserts in areas where transport is essential for the acquisition of food.
- Reduced wages and loss of income affecting the most vulnerable are driving an increased number of people into poverty. The poorest are already experiencing reduced economic access to food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.
- There is a global price increase in the food basket of 20% to 50%, caused by disruptions, temporary shortages, hoarding, and profiteering along the retail value chain.
- Civil society initiatives such as food banks are lending support to state food assistance programs. Some countries are providing financial support to the poorest segment of the population.

¹ "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2003, para. 22).

C. Utilization

- Adaptation mechanisms adopted by citizens include shifts in diets to more shelf-stable and prepackaged food as **fresh fruits and vegetables become less available**
- The triple burden (obesity, malnutrition, and undernutrition) is likely to increase due to the combination of limited access, poor dietary choices, and locked-in dietary habits compounded by less exercise.

D. Stability

- In countries in the Middle East and East Africa, such as Yemen and Somalia, the combination of conflict, siege, and locust invasion is further destabilizing food security.
- Countries that rely on oil for the largest part of their export earnings may experience difficulties due to record low oil prices. This will affect countries with limited hard currency reserves such as Nigeria, Algeria, Iran, and Venezuela.

These pressures on food security caused by the pandemic do not affect all countries or all citizens equally. We know now that Black Americans in the U.S. are dying in disproportionately higher numbers from COVID-19, and that this is related to the quality of health services in specific cities and to economic inequalities (Evelyn, 2020). We also know that in Spain the rates of infection by COVID-19 are up to seven times higher in working-class neighborhoods than in upmarket areas around Barcelona (Burgin & Jones, 2020). As early as March 9, when the U.S. was still weighing its options for how to address the pandemic, Sandro Galea, writing in the *Scientific American* blog, anticipated that the poor and the marginalized in the U.S. would be the hardest hit by COVID-19 (Galea, 2020). The geographic and class distribution of COVID-19 infections in the U.S. and Spain show this prediction to be true at the national level. It will, in all probability, hold internationally: poor countries and countries with economic, social, and political instability are likely to be hit harder.

Today, as the virus rages through rich countries, devastating families, destroying economies, and immobilizing hundreds of millions at their homes, we in the Global South are bracing ourselves for the shock. We now know that COVID-19 is not the great equalizer. We know that the poor, the marginalized countries, and disenfranchised households will suffer disproportionately. And we understand that when the storm is over, there will not be trillions of dollars in stimulus packages to restart our economies, most of which are already in tatters. We worry that even if and when a vaccine is found, there may not be enough for our countries, and that certain scientists who are working on developing vaccines think of us as guinea pigs and not as patients or people (Rosman, 2020). But most of all, we are now concerned with putting food on the table in the midst of the lockdowns and the economic crash.

The extraordinary measures that are accompanying the pandemic, especially the lockdown, mean a complete loss of income for the self-employed. These represented, as of March 1, 2020, 80% of the labor force in poor countries and 76% in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2020). In Africa, where one in five people was hungry in 2019 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2019), food security—which hinges on the ability to acquire healthy and nutritious food—has never seemed so elusive. The lockdown is preventing 300 million school children from accessing the school meals on which their nutrition depends. The situation is even more distressing in East Africa, where the coronavirus is hampering efforts to fight one of the largest locust swarms in recent times (United Nations, 2020).

In the South, we too are paying the price for neoliberal economic guidance provided by large financial institutions. Export-oriented agricultural policies based on comparative advantage and the production of non-food produce were a keystone of those policies. As the European markets close their doors to flowers, thousands of women who work in the flower production industry in Ethiopia and Kenya

have lost their jobs and can no longer put food on the table (Bhalla & Wuilbercq, 2020). In Nigeria, where local rice production is sufficient to feed the entire population, local rice farmers have been under pressure from the rice trade and smuggling. International trade restrictions have created a situation where Nigerian rice producers and millers can provide the quantities that are needed (Economic Confidential, 2020). Whether the local rice will be affordable to all will be a question the central government needs to resolve.

The lockdowns may be the only way to halt the spread of the virus, but where social protection is lacking they may have disastrous economic, social, and nutritional consequences. Voices of the poor from Zimbabwe and the Philippines, and the Rohingya refugees in India, are clear: “We risk dying from hunger before we die from COVID-19.” Poor diets are an aggravating factor for the impact of COVID-19. Where malnutrition is endemic, such as households that cannot afford fresh fruits and vegetables, we can also expect an increase in the number of casualties. Action has to be taken immediately, but as the entire planet finds itself in the throes of the disease, there are very few places one can turn to.

In regions of conflict and crisis, such as the Middle East and East Africa, the COVID-19 threat is compounded by sieges and embargos and obstacles to food access created by political and military pressures. Millions of Syrian refugees today live in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, where they rely on food aid and are unable to practice social distancing. Their situation has been described as “a disaster in the making” (The Economist, 2020). Their fate is similar to the 70 million refugees worldwide for whom the pandemic is an additional distress they need to contend with.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not cause all of these issues, but it has exploited the weaknesses of a system that we have accepted for too long, and which was starting to crack. The current food system, based on overconsumption and overproduction, is one of the main problems in the Global South and the world, but it is not the only one. The food system is a symptom of the economic and political choices that are made for us, often by regimes that have little legitimacy. Just before the pandemic, people in countries such as Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon were witnessing massive protests and were challenging the ruling class, demanding a redrafting of the social contract between the state and the citizen. The lockdown forced them into a massive self-imposed, self-funded house arrest, which is increasing their precariousness and making them reliant on charity for survival. It has also shown that central authority can enforce its will by invoking force majeure without having to offer any alternatives or addressing any of the popular demands for redistributive justice and an end to flagrant inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified food security issues that have been endemic in the vast majority of the countries of the South in modern times. These issues are associated with the globalized food system that controls what, when, and how people eat through its domination of the value chains. This is exacerbating obesity and undernutrition and associated noncommunicable diseases that aggravate the impact of the disease.

As we look beyond the pandemic, we must act immediately to reshuffle the food system, which is implicated in the origin, spread, and lethality of COVID-19. However, this cannot be achieved without a global movement of solidarity between all the people on the planet and the drafting of a new social pact without borders. Many among us are just starting to understand the importance of migrant workers—the invisible martyrs of the food system—in providing us with fresh fruits and vegetables, which are essential to health and nutrition. This is also the moment when people realize the importance of local food systems and of supporting small farmers and agriculture near the city.

The world that will be built after the COVID-19 “monster” cannot resemble the Old World. We cannot go back to “normal,” because “normal” is what is killing us. It is up to us all, in the North and in the South, to make the New World a better one. Transforming the food system is a good place to start.



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