



gFSC Technical Working Group on Advocacy for COVID-19

Safeguarding food security and nutrition during and after COVID-19

Without an immediate and sustained response, the unprecedented health and economic crisis posed by COVID-19 could deteriorate into a global food security emergency. As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has urged: *“We must **rapidly mobilize now** to save lives and livelihoods, focusing attention where the risk is most acute. But we must **also invest in the future**, by addressing the shortcomings in our food systems that the pandemic has rendered so starkly obvious.”*

The gFSC recalls the dangerous policies that contributed to the 2007-2008 food price crisis; there is a growing fear that history may repeat itself if measures are not taken now to safeguard food security during and post-COVID-19 lockdowns. The gFSC therefore calls for **urgent action to avert multiple, overlapping food crises, by protecting and safeguarding food supply chains from production through consumption**, especially for the millions of people already experiencing acute hunger, those in vulnerable situations, fragile contexts, protracted crises, the displaced and those in need of humanitarian assistance.

Overview

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created a global crisis, with hundreds of thousands losing their lives, loved ones and means of survival. Yet COVID-19 is not only a health crisis, it is also a poverty, food and hunger crisis. Almost everyone is feeling the impact: the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that lockdown measures could throw 400 million workers into unemployment worldwide, with the poorest and most fragile nations likely to be the hardest hit. **Those who are reliant on remittances, informal and cross-border trade to meet their basic needs could see their income sources disappear entirely.**

Repercussions for food security

The impacts of COVID-19 risk reversing decades of progress in the fight against hunger and malnutrition (SDG2) if food supply chains and food systems continue to experience disruptions and lockdown measures continue to prevent people accessing food and markets. Moreover, as of mid-2019, some 79 million people were displaced globally by conflict, devastating climate shocks and economic volatility. Most of these people live in settlements, camps/camp-like settings and urban slums in developing countries, so they are not only at risk of contracting the virus from the close proximity of their living arrangements, they are also in highly unstable economic situations and often reliant on food assistance to survive.

The pandemic is throwing into stark relief the **extreme vulnerability of millions of people and how interlinked the world's food systems are**. It is further exposing those who are one paycheck, one skipped market day, or one missed planting season away from crisis. It is exacerbating the existential threat posed by climate change and weather extremes, forcing more and more people into the humanitarian caseload and accelerating the erosion of agriculture-based livelihoods and food systems strained to their limits. This is further undermining food access and availability among the world's most vulnerable people. Unless urgent action is taken to address food security as part of the COVID-19 response, it could spark a global food crisis worse than witnessed in 2007-2008. To avoid this, social protection measures must accompany lockdown restrictions to help meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable groups and safeguard their means of survival.

The gFSC calls for immediate collective and strategic action by national governments, partners and donors to rapidly and effectively coordinate response efforts, at global and national levels, to:



Ensure access to food

Stabilize access to food by supporting household production and purchasing power through in-kind distributions and cash/voucher transfers, helping the most vulnerable families to meet critical needs without resorting to selling off livelihood assets. Where available, work with governments to scale up social protection systems, especially in hard-to-reach rural areas and for the most marginalized sectors of society.

Access is ensured when all households have enough resources to obtain food in sufficient quantity, quality and diversity for a nutritious diet. This depends mainly on the amount of household resources and on prices. Drastic changes in these dimensions could seriously disrupt production strategies and threaten the food access of affected households.



Improve food use and utilization

Establish and maintain healthy and hygienic food production and consumption habits during and after the pandemic. While no foods or supplements can prevent COVID-19 infection, a nutritious diet rich in whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and animal products is key for supporting a strong immune system.

Given the delivery of CVA to support the most vulnerable groups and meet their basic needs, it is important to accompany deliveries with nutrition and hygiene education to help families decide what food to purchase and how to prepare it, as well as how to consume and allocate it within the household.



Support food availability

To maintain and enhance food availability for the most vulnerable populations, support local markets, safeguard agricultural and livestock production and ensure continuous inputs are provided. This will help to maintain food supply chains between rural, peri-urban, and urban areas and within and between countries.

Availability refers to the physical existence of food. It is a combination of domestic food production, commercial import and export, food assistance and domestic food stocks, either from own production or bought from local markets.



Promote food stability

There is no choice between mitigating the health impact of COVID-19 and preventing economic collapse: agricultural recovery strategies must be implemented to ensure the stability of food supply chains and keep households and small businesses afloat. Particular attention should be paid to those working in the informal sector, those living in developing rural and densely-populated urban areas, and to implementing gender-sensitive and climate-smart initiatives.

Food stability is achieved when the supply at household level remains constant during the year and in the long term. This includes food itself (particularly cereals, pulses, fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, milk, fish and related products), as well as income and economic resources.

If we don't act now: Potential impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition

The consequences of interrupted food supply chains and a lack of food and nutrition during the immediate phase will ripple for years, not months, and we must start planning ahead for the likely increased numbers of people in need.



Disruption of food systems could cause turmoil for smallholder farmers

Up to 80 percent of households in food crisis contexts rely on some form of agricultural production for their livelihoods. Women comprise on average 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, and account for an estimated two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock-keepers. Disruptions to agricultural production due to COVID-19 are hampering food access and availability. Closure of markets and difficulties accessing transport are already contributing to increased food waste and sharp declines in incomes for the most vulnerable, which is further undermining their ability to purchase inputs for continued food production, and thus ultimately reducing food availability in local markets. Governments must declare agricultural inputs and production as essential during lockdowns, particularly as it remains uncertain whether countries will experience waves of restrictions and easing of containment measures during different seasons as the pandemic evolves.



Trade restrictions on staple foods could drive up prices and increase hunger, particularly for net food-importing countries

Addressing the COVID-19 crisis through trade restrictions causes more problems than it solves. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) predicts that an additional 18 million people around the world (not including countries implementing trade bans) could face chronic hunger in 2020. While countries implementing export bans may effectively avoid increases in hunger among their own populations, the resulting surges elsewhere more than outweigh these effects. An approach that comprehensively considers the multi-dimensional nature of food systems—from the bowl of rice porridge for breakfast to the need for international movement of resources and products to get them where they are required—is of utmost importance to get through this crisis as best we can. As governments respond to COVID-19, it is important to conduct market analyses and assessments to provide timely responses.



Risk of high levels of malnutrition and food insecurity from the fallout of the economic, health and food security crises

Food prices strongly influence the dietary choices of farmers, traders, processors, and consumers. Border closures will lead to increased reliance on staple foods and restrict access to diverse and nutritious diets. When markets are tight, prices are sensitive to shocks such as a bad harvest or supply disruptions caused by COVID-19. High prices puts families at risk, as they will not be able to afford nutritious food from the market. As school feeding programmes close due to lockdown measures, this puts a strain on the meagre income of parents and caregivers to meet the nutritional needs of their children, let alone their own.

As the pandemic deepens across the world, health systems may no longer be able to meet the growing demand for treatment or prevention of malnutrition or other diseases or services, posing an additional threat to the nutritional status in particular of children and pregnant and lactating women. The supply chain could also be disrupted, meaning production of life-saving nutritional food could be hampered along with delivery to health facilities. This complex situation could perpetuate a vicious circle between increased disease burden and widespread food insecurity, leading to higher malnutrition and death rates.



Initial concentration of COVID-19 tends to be in densely populated areas, with those living in urban slums some of the most exposed and hardest hit from income loss.

The proportion of the global population living in urban areas is projected to rise to 70% by 2050 (UN-Habitat 2008). As more countries adopt lockdown policies to contain the COVID-19 crisis, poor families can no longer afford to put enough food on the table, especially in urban slums and camps or camp-like settings, where the majority of residents work in the informal economy and rely on daily wages. Urban households are highly dependent on markets for income opportunities and essential food and non-food items, while markets often depend on regional and international trade for their produce – all of which COVID-19 mitigation measures would render impossible. Global food security and poverty eradication actors, host governments and the international community as a whole should prioritize the creation of an urban-focused food security task force to consolidate monitoring and response capacities for mitigating economic impacts in densely populated areas of developing countries.