



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Addressing the impacts
of COVID-19 in food crises

Humanitarian Liaison Working Group | New York | 4 May 2020



Overview

Since late 2019 early 2020, an **outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)** – an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus – has rapidly spread across the world, devastating lives and livelihoods. As of early May 2020, the full impact of the virus on food security and agricultural food systems is not yet known, nor will likely be known, for months to come as the spread of the virus continues to evolve differently by continent and by country. What is clear is that it will have, and is already having, significant negative effects on people along the food supply chain – from producers to processors, marketers, transporters and consumers.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is particularly concerned about the potential impacts of the virus and related containment efforts on food security and livelihoods in contexts of high vulnerability and where populations are already experiencing food crises.

Experience from previous crises, particularly from the Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak in West Africa in 2014, has indicated the significant impact of movement restrictions and disease containment efforts on food production and access, and the importance of maintaining and upscaling humanitarian food security interventions for the most vulnerable populations, alongside the health sector's efforts to avert disease spread.

The release of the **2020 Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC)** highlighted that around 135 million people across 55 countries were already experiencing acute food insecurity (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)/*Cadre Harmonisé* (CH) Phase 3 or above) at the end of 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak with the majority living in contexts of conflict, climate change and economic turbulence.

This marks the highest number in the four years since the first edition of the GRFC report; it clearly shows the high vulnerability of food crisis countries where the number of people in acute food insecurity could tremendously increase due to the pandemic. The report also shows that a further 183 million are in stressed conditions and could easily be pushed over the edge by one more shock. COVID-19 risks further escalating these figures, with likely huge rises in humanitarian needs and food insecurity as a consequence of both the pandemic itself and containment efforts.

Countries with existing humanitarian crises are particularly exposed to the effects of the pandemic, in terms of both direct impacts on people's health and lives where health systems are already weak and overburdened and malnutrition levels are high, and indirect effects such as disruption of livelihoods, food supply chains and access to food, basic services as well as humanitarian assistance. In food crisis contexts, needs are already extremely high and basic service delivery is poor. Movement restrictions necessary to contain the spread of the virus simultaneously threaten to disrupt the entire food supply chain – from production to processing, packaging, transporting, marketing and consumption – as well as livestock movements, which are critical for pastoralists' survival. This leaves already vulnerable populations facing a growing reality of even further constrained access to food due to shortages, high food prices and curtailed incomes. Labour shortages could further disrupt the food supply chain, while informal labourers will be hard hit by job and income losses. The lessons from the 2014 EVD outbreak in West Africa are clear: while health needs are an urgent and primary concern, we cannot neglect livelihoods and food security-related impacts or we will face deepening humanitarian crises in countries already on the brink.

Similarly, slow-downs or reductions in the delivery of humanitarian assistance could be catastrophic in these contexts. The pandemic will likely have significant repercussions on humanitarian operations, in particular on budgets, as resources may be reprogrammed to support COVID-19 efforts; on logistics, as movement restrictions will hamper both staff and delivery; and leading to rising humanitarian delivery costs (costs of food assistance may also increase in case of any increases in the cost of cereals). This would result in an increase in the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance, while posing an enormous challenge in terms of the ability of governments and organizations to address those needs.

Situation as of early May 2020

Movement restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are impacting agricultural input supply chains at critical times in the season, reducing informal labourers' access to farmlands, wages, area of land cultivated, harvesting capacity, and constraining transport of goods to processing facilities and/or markets. Immediate impacts tend to be more severe for fresh food leading to food losses, reduction of income and deterioration in nutrition, especially among the already vulnerable population. Livestock supply chains could also be hit by the pandemic, with significant implications for pastoralist households, especially in Africa's drylands. Transhumance routes are already affected by movement restrictions and border closing, limiting the access to pasture and market thus increasing inter-community tensions and dramatically impacting transhumant pastoral livelihoods. For example, in East Africa, transhumant pastoralists rely heavily on the Middle Eastern markets during Ramadan and Eid as a main source of income; movement restrictions thus threaten their entire year's income and food access.

These would translate into significant income losses and therefore also purchasing power, undermining nutrition and overall resilience in the face of the health emergency.

Already, these impacts on livelihoods and food security are manifesting in countries of particular concern. In Yemen, as of the middle of April, small and micro-enterprises have been hit by unprecedented sudden redundancies. Imposed COVID-19 curfews and reduced working hours are affecting small businesses, especially restaurants and open-air markets. Availability of perishable food commodities such as fruits, vegetables and fresh milk (critical to nutrition in a country experiencing desperately high levels of acute malnutrition) is also in short supply in many markets. A rapid assessment study highlighted negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for the agriculture sector in Cox's Bazar in several categories: harvesting may be disrupted because of a lack of seasonal labour; planting because of a lack of seed or fertilizer; transport because of reduced transport facilities; and market exchange because of lockdowns or social distancing. In the Central African Republic, the monitoring system put in place by the government and its partners reports major disruptions in the supply chain leading to shortages of certain food products in the country's markets.

It is therefore crucial to rapidly mobilize and pre-empt COVID-19 impacts on food security in food crisis countries. FAO is thus pursuing a two-pronged approach: maintaining and securing existing critical humanitarian operations; and anticipatory actions to safeguard livelihoods and protect the critical food supply chain to mitigate the secondary effects of the pandemic.

FAO's response

Within the framework of the **revised United Nations (UN) Global COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan**, FAO is revising significantly upwards its requirements, which will be confirmed and shared in the coming days, to maintain the provision of critical assistance where there are already high levels of need, while meeting new needs emerging from the effects of COVID-19. Within the Plan, FAO's efforts are focused on four main activities:

- **setting up a global data facility** – in close collaboration with key partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the global Food Security Cluster and the Global Network Against Food Crises Partnership Programme – to support analysis, and inform assessments and programming as public goods in contexts already experiencing humanitarian crises;
- **stabilizing incomes and access to food** as well as preserving ongoing livelihood and food production assistance for the most acutely food-insecure populations;
- **ensuring continuity of the critical food supply chain** for the most vulnerable populations, including between rural, peri-urban and urban areas through support to the sustained functioning of local food markets, value chains and systems, focusing on vulnerable smallholder farmers and food workers as well as areas that are critical to the food supply for vulnerable urban areas; and
- **ensuring people along the food supply chain are not at risk of COVID-19 transmission** by raising awareness about food safety and health regulations, including rights, roles and responsibilities of workers, together with national authorities and the World Health Organization (WHO).

FAO's progress to-date

FAO is establishing a data facility in close collaboration with WFP to set up a risk monitoring and analysis system to capture the current and potential impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural production, food security and livelihoods, with a focus on food crisis contexts. In 22 priority countries, FAO is setting up a remote data collection system which consists of periodic phone surveys (households, agricultural inputs vendors, food traders, key informants) in high priority areas (e.g. IPC 3 or above), and rapid or in-depth assessments. These data collection systems will also inform the forthcoming IPC analyses. In addition, FAO is planning to collect the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) indicator on a periodic basis with a national coverage. Remotely collected data will feed into a global knowledge exchange and analytical platform.

FAO has fast-tracked the procurement of agriculture and prepositioned agriculture inputs to meet planting season needs and compensate for the limited purchasing power of farmers and access further aggravated by COVID-19 lockdowns. Ongoing responses are supporting the local production of fresh foods to sustain local income and nutrition, ensuring the emergency provision of animal health services as well as fodder/feed distributions particularly to pastoralists affected by movement restrictions, and expanding 'cash plus' (cash+) and social protection programmes to take into account the additional needs of the most vulnerable rural population groups (informal workers, landless, female-headed households, etc.)

FAO is maintaining and scaling-up humanitarian livelihoods interventions focusing on boosting food production and reducing the impact of lean seasons through inputs distribution and technical support with a focus on food crisis countries with ongoing humanitarian response plans. FAO is supporting local production of fresh foods (vegetables and animal products) to sustain local income and improved nutrition, and emergency provision of animal health support as well as fodder/feed distributions with a specific focus on pastoralists affected by movement restrictions. FAO is also advocating for key food item corridors to remain open as much as possible while safeguarding the health of farmers and food workers across the whole value chain in compliance with national public health mitigation measures. It is supporting food processing, transport, marketing, storing with a specific focus on vulnerable smallholder farmers food workers, and strengthening local producer groups to maintain negotiation power and access to markets.

FAO is raising awareness through radio transmissions on COVID-19 risk transmission through farmer field schools, livestock field schools, animal health clubs and other networks. Sensitization trainings are conducted with actors along the food supply chain on best practices to mitigate the risk of infection. For example, in Afghanistan, social distancing and hygiene-related practices are promoted in seven main markets for agriculture produce/inputs, livestock and live animals in most affected provinces. More than 27 000 individuals including landless labourers, migrant Kuchi herders and vulnerable farmer households (representing a population of about 194 000 people) will receive awareness messages and information, education on appropriate preventive practices pertaining to minimizing the transmission of COVID-19. Food security partners in Iraq are planning to introduce cash+ schemes, among other agriculture and livestock interventions in support of household livelihoods and resilience.

Key takeaway

While we address the health crisis we must take early action, based on a robust and strengthened monitoring system, to avert a potential food crisis, with effects of pandemic-related restrictions already being seen on food access and social cohesion in the most vulnerable contexts. A scale-up of assistance to food security and livelihoods is essential to avoid further deterioration of needs in particular in fragile contexts. Up to 80 percent of people in food crisis countries depend on agriculture. Movement restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are impacting agricultural input supply chains at critical times in the season, reducing informal labourers' access to farmlands and wages, area of land cultivated, harvesting capacity, and constraining transport of goods to processing facilities and markets. Upcoming planting and harvesting seasons represent a critical opportunity to ensure their food security and contribute to wider food availability for their communities and beyond. Collective advocacy and action is needed to facilitate the functioning of agricultural input supply chains at critical times in the season; as well as to ensure that people along the food supply chain are not at risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Saving livelihoods saves lives

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