



Anticipating the impacts of COVID-19 in humanitarian and food crisis contexts

BACKGROUND

Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on short- and long-term food security is difficult to predict, particularly at this early juncture, some risk factors can be identified. Lessons from previous pandemics or global crises indicate that food security could be rapidly and dramatically affected, particularly in fragile countries and, within them, the most vulnerable populations have a lot to lose. While the COVID-19 pandemic is devastating lives, public health systems, livelihoods and economies all over the world, populations living in food crisis contexts are particularly exposed to its effects.

Food crisis contexts – as defined by the *Global Report on Food Crises*¹ – are those areas where a large share of the population is acutely food insecure and in need of urgent humanitarian action, as a result of a significant shock and where the government requires external assistance to cope with the impact of a shock on food security and nutrition. The main drivers of food crises are gathered into three broad categories: i) conflict and insecurity; ii) weather extremes and natural hazards; and iii) economic shocks.

According to the 2019 edition of the *Global Report on Food Crises*, in 2018 around 113 million people faced severe levels of acute food insecurity in 53 countries and territories considered to be in food crisis.² However, the latest figures from the forthcoming *2020 Global Report on Food Crises* (to be released on 20 April 2020) are expected to show a further rise in the number of people that were acutely food insecure in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic risks further escalating these figures, with likely significant rises in humanitarian needs and food insecurity as a consequence of the pandemic itself and of some of the containment efforts. Evidence of the potential impact on number of food insecure people can be inferred by observing what occurred in previous crises. For instance, during the food prices crisis in 2007–2008, the significant growth in world food prices increased the number of undernourished people in the world by 14 percent in two years (from 848 million people to 963 million).³

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 indirect effects, such as

¹ The *Global Report on Food Crises* (GRFC) is an annual publication presenting the results of a joint assessment of acute food insecurity situations around the world by 16 partners. The 2020 edition of the GRFC will be published in April 2020, the 2019 edition is available here: www.fao.org/resilience/resources/resources-detail/en/c/1187704

² These countries include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic (the), Chad, Colombia (Venezuelan migrants), Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (the), Djibouti, Ecuador (Venezuelan migrants), El Salvador, Eswatini, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Iraq, Jordan (Syrian refugees), Kenya, Lebanon (Syrian refugees), Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nicaragua, the Niger, Nigeria (north), Pakistan, Palestine, Peru (Venezuelan migrants), Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic (the), Turkey (Syrian refugees), Uganda, Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk), Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

³ FAO. 2008. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2008. High food prices and food security – threats and opportunities*. Rome.

disruption of livelihoods, food supply chains and access to food, basic services as well as humanitarian assistance. The COVID-19 pandemic is already directly affecting 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 populations. The effects could be even stronger in countries that are already facing exceptional emergencies with direct consequences for the agricultural sectors, such as the ongoing desert locust outbreak in Eastern Africa, the Near East and Southwest Asia.

Lessons learned from previous crises should inform policy and action today. For instance, the 2014 West Africa Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak and related containment measures disrupted agricultural market supply chains, hindered crop and livestock activities and caused acute agricultural labour shortages in the region. The economic impact of the EVD outbreak had a strong negative effect on the purchasing power of the most vulnerable households, and consequently on their access to food. Other key lessons can be derived from the food prices crisis of 2007–2008, which had an impact on the livelihoods and food security of the most vulnerable people. On that occasion, immediate market and policy responses such as panic buying and export restrictions contributed to further increase the inflationary pressure. On the other hand, some countries managed to lessen the impact of soaring food prices through policies softening the pass-through of international prices on domestic markets and households. These experiences highlight the need to act quickly and anticipate the collateral effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by devising appropriate policy measures, maintaining and upscaling humanitarian food security interventions, and protecting the livelihoods and food access of the most vulnerable people, particularly those in food crisis contexts.

MAJOR POTENTIAL IMPACTS IN FOOD CRISIS CONTEXTS

Humanitarian operations: A major compounding factor for food crisis contexts is that the pandemic is likely to have significant repercussions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Resources may be diverted to support COVID-19 efforts, affecting budgets for assistance. Movement restrictions are likely to impact the mobility of supplies and staff, including the possibility to conduct field work. Humanitarian delivery costs may increase as a result. This could result in an increase in the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance, posing a serious challenge in terms of the ability of governments and organizations to address those needs. Lessons from previous crises demonstrate that actions to safeguard livelihoods, food production and food access will likely have a significant return on investment, in terms of saving lives and livelihoods and reinforcing local food systems in this critical time.

Migration and displacement: The agriculture sector plays an important role in influencing migratory patterns. Transhumant pastoral populations are likely to be hard hit by any border closures, as they rely on seasonal movements of livestock for their food and income. The disruption of traditional transhumance patterns and the creation of new ones may lead to tensions and even violent conflicts between resident and pastoralist communities, resulting in local displacement and increased levels of poverty and food insecurity. In addition, risk of youth enrolment in extremist groups cannot be ruled out as a negative coping strategy in these contexts. The impact on these communities is of particular concern in the Sahel as the lean season nears. In addition, if food supply chains become disrupted and livelihoods untenable, vulnerable populations are more likely to move in search of assistance – especially in fragile contexts and remote areas where movement restrictions may be much more difficult to control. Such movements would further threaten to spread the virus, heighten social tensions, provoke displacement, and undermine livelihoods.

The impacts of the crisis will affect migrants differently, depending on their migratory or working status. If response measures are not adequately designed and timely put in place, many migrants risk remaining unprotected and vulnerable to exploitation, poverty and food insecurity. Different typologies of migrants (e.g. refugees; internally displaced persons; migrant workers; internal or international; permanent, temporary or seasonal; documented or undocumented) will have different access to work, social protection programmes, recovery measures and healthcare systems. The economic downturn that is arising with the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to impact not only migrants, but also their families in countries of origin through a sudden dramatic reduction or sudden halt in remittance flows; this could have a particularly acute impact on refugee camps and countries that heavily rely on remittances for food security and nutrition.

Impact of containment measures on food production and supply chains: In food crisis countries, up to 80 percent of the population relies on agriculture for their livelihoods. Therefore, any further disruptions to food production and related value chains, for example in the form of reduced availability of critical inputs or restricted access to lands or markets, could be catastrophic for vulnerable populations. If one takes the 2014 West Africa EVD outbreak as a guidance, movement restrictions could, for instance: i) derail agricultural input supply chains at critical times in the season; ii) reduce informal labourers' access to farmlands, and, as a result of this, also both their wages and the area of land cultivated; iii) constrain transport of goods to processing facilities and/or markets. In Liberia during the EVD outbreak, 47 percent of farmers reported having uncultivated farmland. Furthermore, import/export restrictions, as well as challenges to transport key food items between rural to urban areas and access processing units and markets, would affect both producers and consumers. Such disruptions of the food supply chain are likely to have significant adverse repercussions, particularly for the most vulnerable population groups, including informal labourers, the urban poor, displaced populations and others, relying on markets to meet their food needs. Lastly, food crisis countries that rely heavily on food imports (i.e. Yemen) or on exports of natural resources (i.e. Nigeria or South Sudan) to meet their food consumption requirements, may experience a further deterioration of food security.

Social tensions and conflict: the COVID-19 pandemic could also have negative effects on social and political stability, creating the conditions for unrest, especially in the most vulnerable food crisis countries. Uncertainty of future impacts of the pandemic combined with restrictions on movement, soaring unemployment, limited access to food, and the erosion of already fragile livelihoods may generate discontent among the population, fuelling violence and conflict. Furthermore, the postponement of elections may jeopardize the democratic process and generate tensions between ruling parties and oppositions, with possible consequences for political stability. Conflict takes place in deeply divided societies, where national government is often seen as owned by and/or serving one side of the division(s). In such contexts, COVID-19 responses need to be taken into consideration local conflict dynamics and need to be conflict-sensitive to ensure trust of local populations. Crises can also be used as an opportunity for military and political gains in ongoing conflicts. Indeed, how crisis response is delivered, and how it can enable other agendas, can become independent conflict accelerants, as can perceptions of bias in terms of which communities' needs are viewed as being prioritized. Finally, the disease could hinder international mediation efforts for conflict resolution, as well as peacekeeping operations, with consequent negative effects on vulnerable and food insecure conflict-affected people. All these impacts may further increase the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, which are already a great concern in food crisis countries. However, it is also important to note that moments of crisis can also provide turning

points in a conflict, depending on how the parties behave and whether peace actors can seize opportunities for collaboration. The December 2003 tsunami arguably helped reinvigorate a peace settlement process, which was all but dead, between the Free Aceh Movement and Indonesian government, resulting in a peace agreement.

Food prices: possible instability generated by an outbreak and associated behavioural changes could result in temporary food shortages, price spikes, and disruption to markets. Such price rises would be felt most by vulnerable populations who depend on markets for their food as well as those already depending on humanitarian assistance to maintain their livelihoods and food access. As observed in the 2007–2008 food prices crisis, the additional inflationary effect of protectionist policies through import tariffs and export bans could cause a significant increase in the number of people facing severe food insecurity worldwide.

Access to food: the potential combined impact of COVID-19 on unemployment, households' purchasing power, food prices, and food availability in local markets could severely jeopardize access to food in the most vulnerable countries. In the case of the 2014 West Africa EVD outbreak, travel restrictions and suspension of operations of periodic markets disrupted trade flows of food commodities and other necessities, causing food shortages in local market and the consequent impact on food security.

Deepen existing vulnerabilities: the combination of the above impacts could deepen the already high vulnerabilities of acutely food insecure populations and threaten recent development gains in food crisis contexts. The impact on food security may lead vulnerable household to resort to negative coping strategies, which will have lasting effects on their lives and livelihoods, including reduction in number of meals, increased school drop-out rate, decreased means to cover health expenditures, gender-based violence, selling of productive assets, etc. The situation is of particular concern for IDPs and refugees, whose vulnerabilities are already high. Increased food prices, disruption of markets and employment opportunities in agriculture, and limited humanitarian assistance would have a particularly important impact on them.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Step up government coordination and partnerships. Reducing the impact of the pandemic on acute food insecurity cannot be done in isolation and requires the involvement of actors well beyond the agriculture and food security sectors. Governments should be encouraged to adopt policies and make investments to support agricultural production and maintain critical supply chains, whilst ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable, including through the expansion of safety nets. Moreover, governments should ensure coordination in the response across sectors, mainstreaming health and safety measures. Strong partnerships are needed between national institutions, United Nations organizations, non-governmental organization (NGOs), farmers' groups and all other relevant stakeholders, including coordination structures, such as the Global Network Against Food Crises and the Global Food Security Cluster. Efforts should be coordinated at every stage of the response, including harmonized monitoring and assessment of impacts, design of policy measures, targeting and implementation of assistance to the most vulnerable people, as well as communication and awareness raising campaigns.

Adapt and strengthen food security and agriculture monitoring and assessment for evidence-based programming. Given the unprecedented nature of the crisis, creating a better understanding of the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and related vulnerabilities is of paramount importance and urgency. In food crisis contexts, data collection and data sharing modalities should be adapted to ensure continuous monitoring of changes in food security levels, food and agricultural supply chains, food production and availability, and

food and agricultural input prices, to anticipate supply shocks and identify possible risks that may threaten food systems. Particular attention needs to be given to monitoring and assessment modalities, with on-the-ground data collection avoided as much as possible and remote options prioritized (e.g. key informants, cell phone-based surveys, use of secondary data). Regional institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Food Security and Nutrition Working Group or the Food Crisis Prevention Network in West Africa, could play a fundamental role in providing member countries with the necessary analytical support, whilst guaranteeing a harmonized approach in the monitoring of potential impacts.

Preserve critical humanitarian food and livelihood assistance. One of the immediate priorities will be to ensure that critical ongoing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable groups is not hindered and is adapted to potential COVID-19 impacts. Corridors should be established to ensure the flow of food between rural, urban and peri-urban areas. Furthermore, support to livelihood diversification and home-based food production could increase local food availability and income opportunities, to offset disruptions to the food supply chain. Unconditional cash transfers, especially through mobile payment systems, could provide support to incomes and an effective assistance modality, especially in countries where access to affected areas is limited. It is also crucial to ensure the free and predictable flow of emergency food assistance so that needs are fully met. Local purchases of food and agricultural inputs for humanitarian purposes should be exempt from restrictions, and the establishment of efficient and effective humanitarian food reserves should be considered.

Adapt interventions to minimise social tensions. The design and implementation of all interventions should be informed by a local context analysis so as to 'do no harm' and reduce the possibility of social tensions. Interventions should be accompanied by clear and factual messages on the COVID-19 pandemic to beneficiaries, delivered through appropriate channels, to mitigate individuals or groups manipulating information to further political or other purposes. Moreover, all stakeholders involved in the response should monitor and use existing conflict incidence reporting, displacement tracking mechanisms, and other similar tools to understand trends, develop possible scenarios, and put in place adequate livelihood support modalities. Particular attention should be paid to IDPs and refugee populations due to their specific risks and heightened vulnerabilities.

Ensure the continuity of the critical food supply chain and the functioning of agri-food systems. It is crucial to maintain and support the continuous functioning of local food markets, value chains and agri-food systems in food crisis contexts, including through ongoing and scaled up support to food processing, transport, marketing, and so forth; strengthening of local producers' groups to maintain negotiation power and access to markets; and, advocating for trade corridors to remain open as much as possible during COVID-19 related movement restrictions.

Reinforce and scale-up social protection systems. Access to food will have to be stabilized by supporting incomes and purchasing power of the most vulnerable who are affected or at high risk of COVID-19. Where possible, this entails working closely with governments to rapidly scale-up social protection systems and expand their coverage to include vulnerable people whose food security might be affected by the disease.

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