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# **COVID 19 (Pakistan): Urgent support needed for farmers, peasants, rural poor, migrants, and urban workers in Pakistan**

Tuesday 31 March 2020, by [Crofter Foundation](#), [TARIO Farooq](#), [ZIA Saima](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2020).

**We, the members of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee/Crofter Foundation, express our concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our food systems.**

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Representing small scale farmers, rural women and youth, Indigenous Peoples, migrant and agricultural workers, we believe that the current agro-industrial food system and neoliberal economies of South Asia are ill-equipped to deal with such a crisis.

Pakistan has very dense population and government repeated failed to provide adequate housing to our most vulnerable populations means that failure to act now will lead to catastrophic consequences. Living in crowded conditions, often without access to running water, our poorest citizens will be unable to self-isolate, practice social distancing, and frequent hand washing.

Moreover, the working poor will not be able to feed themselves amidst the shutdowns in factories and businesses in Pakistan. Cases are increasing in the whole country at daily basis on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020, 1625 cases and 18 deaths officially reported all over the country.

Governments in many countries announced economic and relief packages before going for the lock down but Pakistan lag behind other countries to announce any significant plan for the small scale farmers, migrant workers, small business owners, contract workers and daily wagers. Vulnerable workers living in precarious economic conditions, who already struggle to find daily work, are not only concerned about their health, they are struggling to figure out how they will put the next meal on the table for themselves and their families.

Public health structure in Pakistan is already very vulnerable. Over the years, government drastically cutting spending on public health, to allow for the privatization of these services. The spread of the disease spreads from cities to villages, means that those at risk include agricultural workers, small and marginal farmers, old age pensioners, widows, people with disabilities, slum dwellers, garbage collectors, the homeless and other vulnerable communities. In the midst of lockdowns, cases of domestic abuse and violence against women have also increased.

Government should focus on vulnerable communities but rather its again announced more extenuation packages to industries and banks but not even providing minimum wage to the workers who are not able to earn their daily wages because of lock down.

The sudden complete lock down on 16<sup>th</sup> March without consideration the effect on daily wage earners, peasants and small farmers has devastating negative impact on these section of the society. Vegetables, fruits, flowers, dairy producers and daily wage earners in the villages lost almost all their income. The milk price went down from 100 Rupees a kilo to 20/30 Rupees and so was condition of yoghurt and other dairy products.

We can learn from this COVID-19 crisis that agro-industrial food system and corporate food regime increase the vulnerability of our food systems to global pandemics. The crisis has threatened food supplies around the world, but it is those food supplies that are based on long-distance and international trade that are the ones that have been disrupted the most.

Scientists have documented how the damage to soil by agro-toxins and industrial production of meat has increased the threat of new pandemics. Farmers around the world have already suffered from the mass culling of animals due to bird flu, swine, and mad cow disease.

This crisis is also can be a wakeup call for the whole world and especially for Pakistan which mainly depend on its agriculture and is in position to produce enough food for its population. It is time to replace it with a food system centred on peasant agro-ecology.

### ***We demand:***

#### **Immediate health services and public awareness**

##### **\* Testing:**

Government needs to increase screening for the COVID-19 outbreak. Testing must be made freely available for everyone.

##### **\* Quarantine:**

Adequate and safe quarantine arrangements need to be made, including at the local level in rural areas.

##### **\* Supplies:**

Ensure proper medical infrastructure and free supplies at each local headquarters. A kit that includes soap, hand wash, sanitizer, and masks should be distributed to every poor household. Immediately increase the production and availability of materials necessary to deal with the crisis (testing kits, masks, respirators, and medicines).

##### **\* Protecting doctors and health workers:**

Doctors must be supported through the provision of certified personal protection equipment (PPE) throughout the healthcare system. This equipment is essential for general practitioners, who are often the first responders to infectious diseases.

##### **\* Awareness campaigns:**

Proper awareness campaigns to be held in rural areas and for urban poor to give them information about COVID 19 and the steps that they should take to protect themselves and others around them. The importance of solidarity must be emphasized and discriminatory behaviour strongly condemned.

##### **\* Stopping misinformation:**

Take strong action against groups spreading false and unscientific rumours.

##### **\* Including grassroots:**

Grassroots movements must be included and called upon to support such public awareness efforts.

\* Role of media:

The media has a social and moral responsibility to spread awareness about the ongoing crisis. Some of the current media coverage engages in fear-mongering and is adding to public anxiety. The media should adhere to journalistic ethics and stop creating fear among the people.

### **Addressing economic vulnerability**

\* Economic support:

Government must support small scale farmers, landless peasantry, agriculture workers businesses, workers and unemployed populations by providing direct cash transfers and basic income support

\* Public spending:

Governments must increase public expenditure on social, economic, income, and food security measures to deal with the ramifications of an imminent and protracted economic recession particularly on health sector.

\* Workers:

Informal workers in all sectors, especially those on the contract or verbal employment, must be registered on an immediate basis and provided with income support above minimum wage

\* Transport:

Migrant workers should be supported with special trains or other means of transport to return to their villages safely if they so desire.

\* Pensions:

Provide pensions for older people, widows, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups in advance for at least three upcoming months

\* Debt:

Immediately suspend loan and credit recoveries from farmers, agricultural workers, and migrant workers.

\* Support packages:

Announce special relief packages for landless, small and marginal farmers, fisherfolks and pastoralists.

\* Women's income opportunities:

Support Women's collectives like Self Help Groups in making masks and sanitizers.

\* Utility payments:

Immediate absorption of all utility payments by the state—water, electricity, and internet provided as part of a human right; where these utilities are not universally accessible, we call for them to be provided with immediate effect.

\* Prisons:

The overcrowding of prisons in Pakistan needs to end immediately. Government must release political prisoners, under trial prisoners and prisoners imprisoned on non-threatening crimes. Healthcare facilities in prisons must be improved before the COVID outbreak reaches there.

### **Access to food**

\* Prioritisation:

National and local agriculture supply chains must be maintained on priority to avoid shortage of food

items or market loss for farmers.

\* Essential services:

Food production and transport should be declared essential services.

\* Supporting farmers:

Farmers and agricultural workers must be provided safety equipment, financial support, and transport services to ensure the continuity of food supplies.

\* Don't restrict the movement of food:

Food supplies within national borders must be allowed to move smoothly, even during curfews. Reports of trucks carrying agricultural produce being stopped due to curfews are worrying.

\* Food rationing:

Ensure the distribution of food grains, cooking oil, sugar, and other necessary materials in advance to all the poor in rural and urban areas.

\* Feeding the poor:

Set up makeshift kitchens in big cities and district headquarters to distribute food packets amongst migrant labour and vulnerable populations safely.

\* Stop profiteering:

There is a need for a strict crackdown on wholesalers and other food traders hoarding and profiteering by creating artificial food shortages.

\* Panic buying:

Government and retailers need to put in place restrictions on the food quantities consumers can purchase to stop panic buying.

## **International and regional solidarity**

\* Regional cooperation:

It is essential to increase regional cooperation across a number of key areas, including information, equipment, surveillance, medical and food supplies.

\* Vaccines and medicine:

Developments in medicines and vaccines must be shared across the SAARC region and around the world. The case for ending the patenting of medicines has become even stronger. Global health must be re-organized under principles of care and solidarity, rather than maximising profits.

\* Debt relief:

International debt relief is essential to allow our countries to respond to a global pandemic. IMF structural adjustment programmes have crippled the economies of countries like Pakistan where food prices have spiralled due to currency devaluation and economic contraction.

## **Transform our food, health, and economic systems**

### ***The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to:***

#### *Reject neoliberalism, support vulnerable populations:*

Neoliberalism has eroded our economic, health, and food systems. We need an economic system that meets the needs of the most vulnerable and impoverished populations through safety nets, including

universal basic income, free healthcare, and social security measures.

*Reject agro-industrial food system, support agro-ecology:*

We know that the global agro-industrial food system will continue to produce new pathogens, such as COVID-19.

Our food system must be localised, diversified and in harmony with nature. We need a food system that is built on principles of food sovereignty and peasant agro-ecology.

### **Building solidarity in difficult times:**

Faced with a crisis, solidarity must become the principle that organises our society, our economy and our international relations. This is the spirit shown by our health workers, medical professionals, sanitation workers and workers across food supply chains. We stand in solidarity with them.

**Saima Zia**

Crofter Foundation

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Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee

31 March 2020

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## **ESSF has already published an urgent call for solidarity funds for Pakistan**

[Covid-19 \(Pakistan\): Worker families in dire need of aid - Emergency Announcement : Urgent call for financial solidarity](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52604)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52604>

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## **International Donations**

**International donations can be done through ESSF, if it is easier to do so.**

**To send donations:**

**Cheques**

*cheques to ESSF in euros only, payable in France, to be sent to:*

ESSF

2, rue Richard-Lenoir

93100 Montreuil

France

**Bank Account:**

Crédit lyonnais  
Agence de la Croix-de-Chavaux (00525)  
10 boulevard Chanzy  
93100 Montreuil  
France  
ESSF, account number 445757C

**International bank account details :**

IBAN : FR85 3000 2005 2500 0044 5757 C12  
BIC / SWIFT : CRLYFRPP  
Account holder : ESSF

**Through PayPal**

You can send money through Paypal: see the [PayPal button](#) on ESSF English home page:  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=sommaire&lang=en>

**Through HelloAsso**

You can also send money through the association HelloAsso: see its button on ESSF English home page: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=sommaire&lang=en>  
Or go directly to:  
<https://www.helloasso.com/associations/europe-solidaire-sans-frontieres/formulaires/1/widget>

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**P.S.**

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