

Millions forced to choose between hunger or Covid-19

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On the eve of May Day 2020, in full coronavirus pandemic, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) released some hair raising statistics. About 1.6 billion workers from the informal sector are in dire straits because of the lockdowns governments have imposed to stop the spread of the virus. According to the ILO, some 60% of the world's workers are in the informal economy, working without contracts, safety nets or savings. [1] Depending on the country, women represent a higher or lower share of the informal workforce, but either way they are paid less than men. [2]

Now, because of quarantines and confinement, stoppages and curfews, there is no work. No work means no income. No income, no food. Without alternative income sources, the ILO warned, "these workers and their families will have no means to survive". [3]

If workers in the informal sector are not able to feed themselves, they are also unable to continue feeding millions, if not billions more. Informal labour is what keeps food systems functioning in most of the world: it accounts for 94% of on-farm labour globally, and a big part of the workforce in food trade, retail, preparation and delivery in many parts of the world. [4]

The coronavirus crisis has laid bare our dependence not only on well functioning health and food systems, but the gross injustices inflicted on those working in these essential sectors in the "best" of times: low wages, no access to health care, no child care, no safety protection at work, often no legal status and no representation in negotiating work conditions. This is true in both the informal and the formal sectors of the global food system. Indeed, the contrast between the wealth at the top of the largest food companies and the plight of their frontline workers is extreme. Nestlé, for instance, the world's number one food company, awarded its shareholders US\$8 billion in dividends at the end of April 2020, an amount that surpasses the annual budget of the UN World Food Programme (WFP). [5]

The only question that matters now is how to ensure everyone has access to food while keeping people safe and healthy at every step from farm to consumer. Unfortunately, this has not been the priority that has shaped food systems over the past decades. But getting there is not as complicated as it may appear.

Shutdown leading to hunger

The shutdown of much of the world economy since March 2020 has meant that many people are confined to their homes or their communities and cannot work. Factories have stopped, construction projects halted, eateries and transportation closed, offices shut. In many countries, migrant workers and students immediately tried to go home, where they have family to lean on, but many got blocked for lack of transport or border closures.

These measures seem to have been implemented without much thought about the actual workings of

food systems. Farmers have been mostly able (not always) to continue working on their farms, but they lack labour – precisely when it’s harvest or birthing time in many parts of the world – and the means to move produce and livestock off the farm to cooperatives, collection points, slaughterhouses, traders or markets. Closures of schools, offices and restaurants have choked the system, leading to enormous waste. As a consequence, milk is being dumped, animals are being euthanised and crops are being ploughed into the soil. Similarly, fisherfolk who fish at night in place like Uganda have been grounded because of curfews. [6]

In the cities, violence, abuse and corruption have accompanied these shutdowns in incomprehensible ways. In East Africa, as in parts of Asia, street vendors caught out in the streets have been met with whips and rubber bullets. [7] Riots have arisen in urban and peri-urban communities when scarce food aid arrived. [8] In Lebanon, one person was even killed in such riots. [9] And in eSwatini, formerly Swaziland, the government has simply decided that it will not feed the cities, only focus on the rural areas. [10]

Meanwhile food companies have been granted lockdown exemptions that have greatly exacerbated the health crisis, without necessarily keeping people fed. Some of the world’s worst outbreaks of Covid-19 have been at meat processing plants owned by multinational corporations in Brazil, Canada, Spain, Germany and the US. Although these plants mostly produce meat for export, they were deemed an “essential service” and allowed to operate at full capacity, knowingly putting their workers and the surrounding communities at grave risk of infection. [11] In the US, as of 6 May 2020, 12,000 meat plant workers have fallen ill and 48 have died. [12] Seafood processing plants are hotspots too, such as in Ghana, where an outbreak at a tuna canning plant owned by Thai Union is responsible for 11% of the Covid-19 cases in the entire country. [13] Supermarket workers and e-commerce platform employees have also been facing the huge difficulty of staying safe while keeping open for the purpose of rendering so-called “essential services”, exempt from the lockdowns. Oil palm plantations have mostly kept operational – to serve the production of much-needed soaps to fight the pandemic, their owners claim – but some have defied local ordinances or not provided the necessary protections for workers. [14]

The cure is at risk of becoming worse than the disease. People who have no work or wages since the pandemic broke – most of the informal sector, but also workers from the formal sector – are now facing the growing reality of hunger. The WFP says that the risk is highest right now in about ten countries, most of them engulfed in armed conflict, such as Somalia or South Sudan. But the lack of access to food due to Covid-19 work closures, and the resulting global recession that we are told will last for months, is now threatening many other countries. In India, 50% of rural people are eating less due to the lockdown. [15] Worldwide, the number of people suffering acute hunger could double from 135 million today to 265 million by the end of the year, WFP says. [16]

Already, those hardest hit have been feeling the pain. The saying “I would rather die of coronavirus than hunger” is commonly heard in Haiti, Angola, Lebanon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mayotte, India and Latin America, according to news reports. [17] In Belgium, it’s “Either we die of hunger or of coronavirus. We have to choose.” [18] In West Africa, the saying is “Hunger will kill us before corona does”.

What’s clear is that if this spreading hunger does reach the scale of a global crisis, it will not be for lack of production or even because of hoarding. There is plenty of supply. It’s the distribution system that has shown its incapacity to feed us safely – especially the highly concentrated and globalised part that cannot respond to the crisis.

Creative community responses

One of the first measures many authorities took to halt the spread of coronavirus was to shut down restaurants, cafés, food stalls and fresh markets. As a response, communities have devised many other ways to get food to where it is needed, often using social media. On Facebook and Whatsapp, groups have been formed to collectively identify where food stocks are located or to collectively procure produce from farmers. Shuttered restaurants and canteens are using their resources to access and repackage bulk food supplies like flour or grains, repackage them and sell them in small quantities. “Repurposing” has become the word of the day, as communities come together, or take form, to find and move food through creative means.

Farmers have also devised innovative ways to sell and move their produce. In Europe, they have started home sales, deliveries to hospitals and online sales, in addition to connecting with consumers directly through community-supported agriculture schemes and farmers’ markets. [19] In Asia, farmers have been going online through social media or ecommerce tools to organise alternative markets. [20] For example in Karnataka, India, farmers have started using Twitter to post videos of their produce and connect with buyers. Others are resuscitating traditional systems of bartering, to overcome their lack of cash and match supply with demand. [21] In Indonesia, a union of fisherfolk in Indramayu, West Java, has started an initiative to barter with local farmers’ groups through a collective action called “fisherfolks’ food barn”. As restaurants and markets have shut down, the fisherfolk have no buyers. So they exchange fish for rice and vegetables with farmers. This is providing food and livelihood security to the different communities. [22]

In Latin America, rural communities are the ones least affected by the virus. Many of them are organising to give away food to the poor in the cities. In Cauca, Colombia, the Nasa people - who consider themselves longterm survivors of viruses, wars and the incursion of agribusiness - have collectively organised a “food march” and brought supplies from their harvest to impoverished neighbourhoods in the cities, defying the lockdown. [23] In Brazil, without any state support, the Landless Workers Movement has donated 600 tonnes of healthy food to hospitals, homeless people and other vulnerable communities in 24 states across the country. [24] Members are also converting urban cafés into soup kitchens and educational facilities into makeshift hospitals, where allied healthcare workers are rendering their services. [25]

In Zimbabwe, the lockdown has crippled the movement of agriculture produce off of large farms across the country. Small farmers, with limited support, are hustling to fill the gap, finding new ways to get vegetables and other supplies to markets. Peasant movement organisers say this shift in the food matrix shows that the country’s 1.5 million small holders are capable of feeding the nation. [26]

Local governments, private citizens and companies have also been doing their share. In Vietnam, public dispensers called “rice ATMs” have been invented to allow families to access a free daily ration of rice without physical contact or hoarding. [27] In India, the state of Kerala has launched a campaign called “Subhiksha Keralam” aimed at achieving self sufficiency in food production through subsidies, infrastructure and other support mechanisms. [28] In Thailand, mobile vegetable shops have been revived under the quarantine with support from Bangkok’s local authorities. The city wholesale market is providing small producers and traders hundreds of trucks to allow them to shift to door-to-door deliveries. [29] And in many parts of Africa, motorbike delivery services are adjusting their practices to help get food supplies to people who need them. [30]

Whether it’s through solidarity, mutual aid, volunteer work or cooperatives, and whether it’s formal or informal, this surge in community-oriented efforts to get food to where it’s needed is crucial and needs resourcing, urgently. While grassroots initiatives are not “the” solution, they certainly point in the right direction.

Shift to community-based food systems

To prevent the disaster that both ILO and WFP are warning us about, we would call for three kinds of measures.

Immediate:

1) Resource community initiatives: As a matter of urgency, we need massive recognition of and support to community efforts to feed those in need. Funds, tools and other resources should be allocated to these efforts. This can mean funding or materials for neighbourhood groups or indigenous communities who need personal protective equipment, rooms or spaces in which to organise and transport food pantries. It can mean resources for regional and local governments to do the work together with community-based organisations, cooperatives and farmers. And it should mean support from local governments themselves, whether through policy measures or infrastructure. Many are already doing this, but it needs scaling up, massively and quickly. While the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other donors help governments face health crisis funding needs, most of it is going to big business. It would be better to allocate more to local governments so they can support community efforts.

Longer term:

2) Improve conditions for farmers and workers: We need to uplift the position of food system workers, from production or procurement all the way to retail, delivery and food service. This means things like: higher wages or a universal basic income that will pay low-income workers much better or reach people outside the wage economy; a seat at the table to redefine work and renegotiate work processes, as many unions are clamouring for; full rights to health care, hazard pay, safe working conditions and child care; and, perhaps most importantly, a better status in society. Farmers must also be supported with safe systems to get produce to markets and fair prices that provide for their livelihoods. At the same time, farm labourers must receive decent wages and healthy work conditions. The Covid-19 crisis has made it clear how important farm work, transportation, food distribution and delivery are to our well being. People working in the system are frontliners as much as the health care workers. They deserve a better place, better pay and a fairer distribution of benefits - and now is the time to make that structural change.

3) Rebuild public food systems: We need to reinvent and reinforce public, community-controlled markets in the food sphere, from the local level up. And we need to connect these markets to the produce of small scale farmers and fishers. The coronavirus lockdown has shown us, quite starkly, how we cannot rely on global trade as a strategy and how corporate sector control over key segments of our food supply makes survival precarious. We need to put an end to public funds going to large food or agribusiness corporations, except as support for workers. We also need to address concentration in the food industry through measures like anti-trust or anti-factory farm legislation, and direct support towards small scale fisheries, abattoirs, dairies and wholesale markets. We know that more pandemics will come. Now is the chance to move forward and consolidate a public orientation to our food systems, somewhat like in the health sector where we have public medical research, public hospitals and generic medicines outside the grip of patent laws that serve corporate greed. Food is not merely a public good; it's a social good and needs to be guaranteed, protected and provided to all like healthcare.

If one thing positive comes from this crisis, it could be that we regain and reassert public systems in our countries, after decades of privatisation and encroaching corporate control. These systems should support and build on solutions that local communities are already providing. Food, like health, is a crucial place to start.

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<https://grain.org/e/6465#.XsE6dyHDAHs.twitter>

Footnotes

[1] Domestic workers who are contracted and farmers or vendors who have registered businesses are not part of the informal economy definition.

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