Policy Brief:

The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition

JUNE 2020

United Nations

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health and human crisis threatening the food security and nutrition of millions of people around the world. Hundreds of millions of people were already suffering from hunger and malnutrition before the virus hit and, unless immediate action is taken, we could see a global food emergency. In the longer term, the combined effects of COVID-19 itself, as well as corresponding mitigation measures and the emerging global recession could, without large-scale coordinated action, disrupt the functioning of food systems. Such disruption can result in consequences for health and nutrition of a severity and scale unseen for more than half a century.

- The pandemic hits us at a time of immense global challenges. We need to tackle all the food security and nutrition dimensions of this crisis. Addressing the COVID crisis requires us to work together across sectors and borders both to mitigate the immediate impacts and to reshape food systems so they support healthy diets for all and do more to make food production and consumption aligned to sustainable development.[1]

- Measures to control or mitigate COVID-19 outbreaks are already affecting global food supply chains. Border restrictions and lockdowns are, for example, slowing harvests in some parts of the world, leaving millions of seasonal workers without livelihoods, while also constraining transport of food to markets. Meat processing plants and food markets are being forced to close in many locations due to serious COVID-19 outbreaks among workers. Farmers have been burying perishable produce or dumping milk as a result of supply chain disruption and falling consumer demand. As a result, many people in urban centres now struggle to access fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, meat and fish.

- Global markets in staple grains remain robust for now; following good harvests in 2019, stocks of most staple foods are adequate. Yet the vast majority of the world's population takes its food from local markets, and food security and nutrition remain highly susceptible to disruption.[2] High levels of unemployment, loss of income, and rising food costs are also making access to food difficult for many. Prices of basic foods have begun to rise in some countries at a time when people have less money in their pockets.

- Prior to the onset of this pandemic, more than 820 million people were already identified as chronically food insecure. The latest data shows that the food security of 135 million people was categorised as crisis

1 Food systems represent the entire range of actors, activities and the biophysical and socioeconomic environments involved in producing, processing, distributing, regulating and consuming foods.

2 http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8657en

3 https://www.fsinplatform.org/global-report-food-crises-2020

level or worse.[3] That number could nearly double before the end of the year due to the impacts of COVID-19.[4] Similarly, the number of children under the age of five years who are stunted now stands at 144 million. That is more than one in five children worldwide. The number of children who are classified as wasting is currently 47 million.[5] These numbers could grow rapidly. As of late May, 368 million school children were missing out on daily school meals on which they depend[6]. The pandemic could push about 49 million people into extreme poverty in 2020.[7] Each percentage point drop in global GDP is expected to result in an additional 0.7 million stunted children.[8] These income effects combined with other supply shocks could lead to a rapid increase in the number of people acutely food or nutrition insecure in the coming three to four months.

- Actors in all parts of the food system are impacted by this pandemic. Deep global economic shocks caused by COVID-19 will impact the cash flow and financial liquidity of producers, small and medium agri-businesses to financial institutions, due to inhibited production capacity, limited market access, loss of remittances, lack of employment, and unexpected medical costs. As countries continue to roll out sizable relief and stimulus packages, the needs of food system actors deserve focused attention. Targeted measures to alleviate liquidity constraints on vulnerable firms and households can help facilitate continued production and people's access to adequate food and nutrition. But care should be taken to adapt to local circumstances; many bottlenecks to food supply cannot be addressed by social protection alone. Government procurement and public distribution can be important expedients to preserve food system functioning and avoid food price inflation. Social protection should include smallholder farmers and their families whose numbers include more than two billion of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, and food workers in all sectors. Supporting developing countries with increased availability and rapid deployment of international funds to address liquidity shortages and free up fiscal space is therefore crucial. The Secretary-General has called for a debt standstill and, ultimately, debt restructuring for developing countries. Commodity- and tourism- dependent economies will be in particular need of comprehensive debt restructuring to enable the fiscal space necessary to support people's nutritional needs alongside efforts to stimulate growth and accelerate recovery.

- Moreover, the pandemic came at a time when food security and our food systems were already under strain. Conflict, natural disaster, climate change, and the arrival of pests and plagues on a transcontinental scale preceded COVID-19 and were already undermining food security in many contexts. For example, in East Africa, people are facing a "triple menace" of mutually exacerbating disasters, as ongoing heavy rain hampers attempts to deal with swarms of locusts in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.[9] Meanwhile, the worst locust crisis in decades threatens crops heading into the harvest period.[10]

4 https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken

5 https://data.unicef.org/resources/jme-report-2020/

6 Data on the global monitoring of school meals during COVID-19 school closures is updated frequently here

7 https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/covid-19-will-hit-poor-hardest-heres-what-we-can-do-about-it

8 Global Nutrition Report, 2020

9 https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/press-release/east-africa-red-cross-raises-alarm-triple-menace-floods-covid-19-locusts/

10 http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html

- The COVID-19 pandemic also raises the alarm on the urgent need to transform the world's food systems. Globally, food systems remain a driver of climate change and the planet's unfolding environmental crisis. Food systems contribute up to nearly a third of all greenhouse gas emissions and have contributed to substantial biodiversity loss.[11] There is an urgent need to rethink rapidly how we produce, process, market, consume our food and dispose of waste. This crisis can serve as a turning point to rebalance and transform our food systems, making them more inclusive, sustainable and resilient.

- The following brief examines these dimensions of the challenge and suggests three mutually reinforcing sets of priority actions to address the immediate, near- and medium-term needs to protect people during and beyond the crisis, and – ultimately – to reshape and build resilient food systems.

First, mobilize to save lives and livelihoods, focusing attention where the risk is most acute: Although we cannot yet fully predict the precise impacts of the unfolding crisis, we can determine the likely channels of transmission and anticipate impacts on the most vulnerable populations. We can take commensurate action to support people in a time of great need. These actions should include investment in tools that can enhance crisis response now and in the future.

> **PRESERVE CRITICAL HUMANITARIAN FOOD, LIVELIHOOD AND NUTRITION ASSISTANCE** to vulnerable groups – augmented and adapted to anticipated COVID-19 impacts.

> **DECLARE FOOD PRODUCTION, MARKETING, AND DISTRIBUTION AS ESSENTIAL SERVICES EVERYWHERE, ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF THESE WORKERS AND KEEP TRADE CORRIDORS OPEN WITHIN AND AMONG NATIONS** to ensure the continuous functioning of the critical aspects of food systems in all countries.

> **EXPAND NEAR-REAL TIME FOOD SECURITY MONITORING SYSTEMS** to provide timely, improved and geospatially indicative data to measure the pandemic's unfolding effects and understand better who is suffering from hunger and malnutrition and where they are.

> **ENSURE RELIEF AND STIMULUS PACKAGES REACH THE MOST VULNERABLE,** including meeting the liquidity needs of small-scale food producers and rural businesses, particularly those led by women and young people, and are supported at the international level in a coordinated manner that is responsive to evolving national financing needs.

Second, strengthen social protection systems for nutrition: Given the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, social protection systems will become the mainstay for hundreds of millions of people for the duration of the current crisis and possibly beyond.

> **FOOD AND NUTRITION ASSISTANCE NEEDS TO BE AT THE HEART OF SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES** to protect food access for the most vulnerable by increasing their purchasing power and, where necessary, by directly providing food through government or community-based programmes.

> **STRENGTHEN THE HEALTH SYSTEM RESPONSE FOR NUTRITIONAL CARE** to ensure the continuity of nutrition services, particularly the early detection and community-based management

11 FAO, The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, 2019.

of acute malnutrition and infant and young child feeding, as well as related maternal nutrition programmes.

- **PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE POPULATION GROUPS, AS WELL AS WOMEN WHO PLAY KEY ROLES IN THE HOUSEHOLD AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES DELIVERY** and support children who no longer have access to school meals.
- **TAILOR NUTRITION-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES** and consider the potential benefits of different transfer modalities; in-kind, cash, or vouchers as well as public food distribution systems should be designed to ensure access to diverse, balanced and nutritious meals.

Third, invest in a sustainable future: Accelerated investment should be a pillar of the COVID-19 response, aiming for immediate impact to sustain and improve livelihoods, while also preparing for a more inclusive, environmentally sustainable and resilient food system. Investment both during and after the COVID crisis can accelerate movement toward food systems that are more resilient to future pandemics and that offer better protections for all. The goal should be a food system that is in balance with the needs of the global population and the limits of our planet. Investments in COVID-19 response and recovery needs to be leveraged to deliver on that longer-term goal of a more inclusive and sustainable world, including by:

- **TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS** so they work better with nature and for the climate.
- **LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE, GREEN, AND RESILIENT RECOVERY** by ensuring COVID-19 dedicated resources are used in a “build to transform” approach and are evidence-based.
- **USING THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL HOSTED FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT IN 2021,** and the preparatory process, for inclusive dialogues and mobilizing multi-stakeholder action necessary to end hunger, and improve the health and well-being of people and planet.

1. An impending global food emergency due to COVID-19

We face an impending global food emergency[12] of unknown, but likely very large proportions. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the control and mitigation measures enforced worldwide, combined with the massive economic impacts of these necessary measures, are the proximate causes of this emergency. Conflict, natural disaster, and the arrival of pests and plagues on a transcontinental scale all preceded COVID-19 and serve as additional stresses in many contexts. But there are also deep structural problems in the way our food systems function, which we can no longer ignore.

This will not be a crisis akin to the food crisis of 2008, nor to the local emergencies that have resulted principally from natural disasters and human conflict during the last five decades.[13] So far this year, global food markets remain robust with abundant stocks of most staples following a good harvest in 2019.

The greater threats to food security and nutrition are likely to come via other channels, such as a collapse in global demand for internationally produced agri-food products, growing disruptions to local food markets[14] and increasing food access issues due to loss of critical income sources. The combined impacts could be a shrinkage of global, and especially local, food supply in many countries in the second half of 2020, with resulting price rises and food access issues.

By late 2020, we can expect to see further material impacts in peoples' lives through low, lower-middle, upper-middle and high-income economies. Existing food stocks are likely to have been reduced with local food shortages increasingly common. High-value commodities, like fruits and vegetables, meat, fish and dairy, while readily available for now, tend to be more vulnerable to logistical problems,[15] because their production is labour intensive and the products are highly perishable. Real-time data on food movements by commodity types is helping to reduce uncertainty and curtail any panic-driven action by countries against external or internal obstacles to trade.

In many countries, food prices are rising in cities,[16] where the highest concentration of consumers can be found, even while food prices are declining in rural areas, where food is

WHAT IS A "FOOD EMERGENCY"?

A food emergency is defined as "an extraordinary situation in which people are unable to meet their basic survival needs, or there are serious and immediate threats to human life and well-being".

12 http://www.fao.org/3/X6868E/x6868e00.htm

13 http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8833en

14 http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8657en

15 https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01181-3?proof=trueMay%2525252F

16 https://datalab.review.fao.org/dailyprices.html

produced, aggregated, sorted, distributed and transported to urban and semi-urban markets. This disparity results because rural food supply is unable to connect with demand in cities and food-importing countries. In places where these processes are labour intensive, or where there are high concentrations of people, there are typically problems related to fear of excessive contact and lack of protection for agriculture and food workers.

When milk and dairy products, fruits and vegetables, meat and fish fail to reach wholesale and retail markets, farmers, pastoralist households, fisherfolks and traders suffer major income losses. This leaves fewer resources for preparing for the next season's planting, fish catches or livestock raising and slaughter. In addition, significant amounts of food that reach retailers and consumers are wasted because of restaurant closures and hoarding by consumers who fear loss of access to retail stores.

There are ways to avoid some possible disruptions. Experience from the 2014 Ebola virus disease outbreak showed that the adoption of restriction measures caused disruptions[17] in the collection and transport of agricultural products to markets. Reduced demand for perishable products led to sharply reduced earnings for smallholder family farmers and other small-scale producers. This in turn hindered the producers' access to inputs, and disrupted production. A health crisis became a livelihood and employment crisis that became a food crisis. To prevent similar disruption, it is important for governments to designate food and nutrition services as essential, ensure food safety, and assist with food marketing or storage or adopt other measures to protect incomes and food access.

Recognising the need for swift action to prevent further spreading or deepening of the emergency, the Secretary-General launched the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19. Requirements for the plan, updated in May, have risen from the initial $2.01 billion to $6.7 billion. This significant increase is due to an increase in and better understanding of humanitarian needs, especially a growing food security emergency, and the inclusion of an additional set of ten priority countries based on an analysis of vulnerability to the pandemic and their local response capacity.

Additionally, the COVID-19 response plan seeks to preserve the ability of the most vulnerable people to meet additional food consumption and other basic needs by maintaining their productive activities and ensuring access to social safety nets and humanitarian assistance. It also seeks to maintain the continuity of the supply chain for essential commodities, such as food and agricultural inputs, and essential nutritional commodities, including ready-to-use therapeutic foods for malnourished children.

17 http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5641e.pdf

2. Those most vulnerable to a food and nutrition crisis

It is essential to recognize that those people most vulnerable to food and nutrition crisis in the context of COVID-19 are those who were already exposed to critical food and dietary deprivations before the onset of the crisis.

More than 820 million people were already classified as food insecure.[18] According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system that is used worldwide to establish objective measures of risks of food and nutrition failure and to prioritize resources and action, this number included 135 million people who are at or above crisis and emergency status.[19] The World Food Programme estimates that an additional 130 million people could fall into this category by the end of the year.[20] Near real-time household food security monitoring and model-based estimates suggest that deteriorating employment conditions and other factors may have pushed as many as 45 million people into acute food insecurity since February 2020, the majority of whom (33 million) reside in South and Southeast Asia, and most of the remainder in Sub-Saharan Africa.[21]

The number of children under five years of age who are too short for their age, or stunted, now stands at 144 million, or more than one in five children worldwide. Currently 47 million children under five years of age fall within the wasting category, seriously underweight for their age.[22] Both numbers are an improvement from the recent past, but such gains can be easily reversed. Stunting and wasting in early childhood both have life-long effects; children who suffer them cannot achieve their full physical or mental potential. Wasting increases the probability that children become poor and suffer ill-health throughout their lives, and that they and their children after them will die early.

There are already numerous indications that these numbers could grow rapidly without early interventions to save lives and restore livelihoods. The coronavirus is expected to slash the global economic output by $8.5 trillion over the next two years.[23] Estimates suggest that the number of people who could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 may reach as high as about 49 million people, with around half of this increase occurring in Sub-Saharan African countries.[24] Were this to happen, the number of people who are acutely food or nutrition insecure

18 State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2019

19 2020 Global Report on Food Crises

20 https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072

21 https://hungermap.wfp.org/

22 Global Nutrition Report, 2020

23 https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/world-economic-situation-and-prospects-as-of-mid-2020/

24 https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/covid-19-will-hit-poor-hardest-heres-what-we-can-do-about-it

OVERLAPPING THREATS

In East Africa, the March to May rainfall period was one of the wettest the region has seen since 1981, following an already record wet 2019 October to December rainfall period. The early onset of rains and above-average rainfall since February promoted land preparation and planting activities across Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, along with the Belg season in Ethiopia.

However, the abundant rains have also caused localized flooding, mudslides, flashfloods, and river overflows over the past months causing casualties, population displacement, infrastructure damage, and crop damage in parts of Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and Yemen. While the rains bring benefits for planting and crop development, localized losses and crop damage are expected in areas worst affected by flooding.

Abundant rains have also promoted the breeding and development of Desert Locusts and protracted the outbreak across the region, which continues to pose a significant threat to main season crops. The situation is particularly worrisome in Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. Swarms of Desert Locusts there are extremely large, highly mobile, and are damaging food crops and forage.

The Desert Locust is the most destructive migratory pest in the world. In response to environmental stimuli, dense and highly mobile Desert Locust swarms can form. They are ravenous eaters who consume their own weight per day, targeting food crops and forage. Just a single square kilometre of swarm can contain up to 80 million adults, with the capacity to consume the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people.

When combined with the COVID-19, flooding and the spread of these locusts, East African people find themselves combatting a "triple menace".

- https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Special_Report_East_Africa_202005.pdf
- http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html

will expand rapidly in as little as three months.[25] An additional 130 million people may join the ranks of people living in extreme poverty by 2030.[26]

Many of these vulnerable people are themselves involved in food production or food systems-related work to secure their own food access. They include:

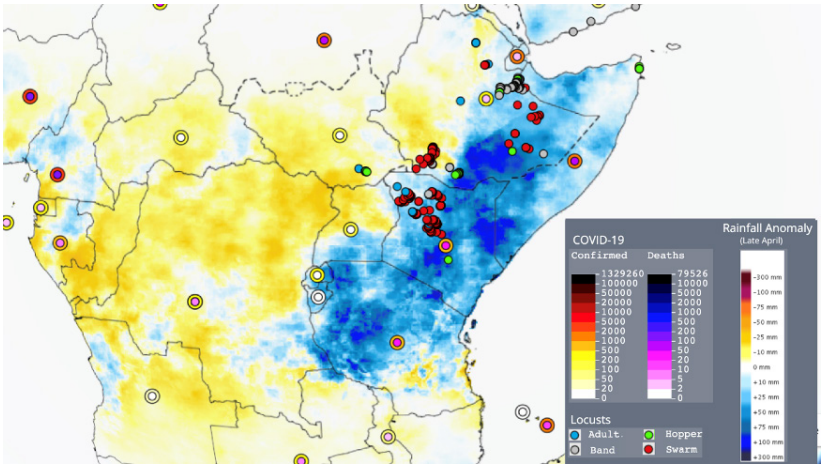
- More than 2 billion small producers, farm laborers, rural workers, and their families, who represent a large proportion of the moderately and severely food insecure, may be disproportionately affected by economic shock;
- Women, on average, comprise 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries and account for an estimated two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers. Of those women in the least developed countries who report being economically active, 79% report agriculture as their primary source of livelihood (48% of economically active women worldwide).[27]

25 http://www.fao.org/3/ca8800en/CA8800EN.pdf

26 https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/world-economic-situation-and-prospects-as-of-mid-2020/

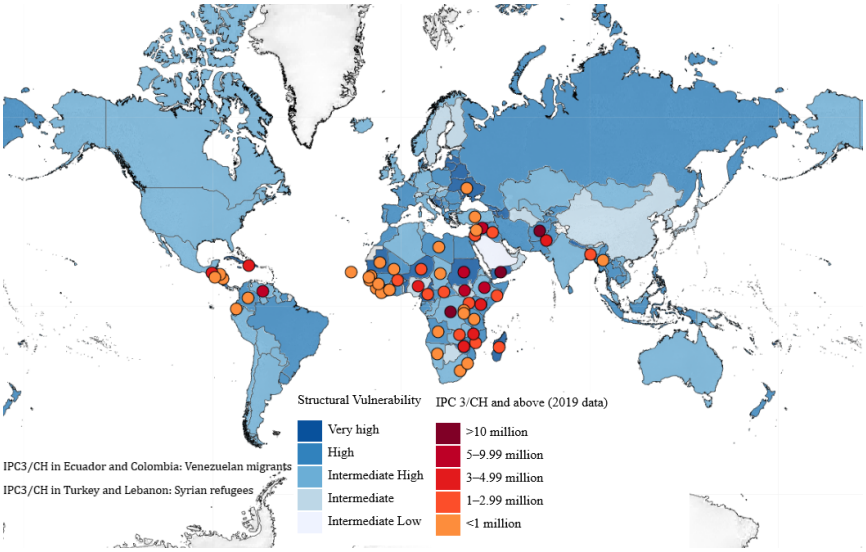
27 http://www.fao.org/gender/resources/infographics/the-female-face-of-farming/en/
See also Policy Brief on COVID-19 Impact on Women

FIGURE 1: A "TRIPLE MENACE" IN EAST AFRICA: COVID-19, LOCUSTS AND HEAVY RAINS



Source: FAO/Desert Locust Watch, Johns Hopkins CSSE /COVID-19 Data Repository, CHRIPS (Climate Hazards Group InfraRed Precipitation with Station data)

FIGURE 2: STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY AND KNOWN FOOD INSECURITY HOTSPOTS



Source: FAO/Hand-in-Hand, IPCinfo

Measuring the impacts of the CoVID-19 crisis, including deep economic recession, on food security is challenging because the full effects are not yet clear. Figure 2 overlays two different types of information: "structural vulnerability" and pre-COVID-19 hotspots. The information on "structural vulnerability" does not provide any measure of food insecurity, but is based on six possible channels of transmission that are used to construct a scale of exposure to COVID-19 crisis impacts on the food and agriculture sectors. Countries are shaded light to dark blue depending on the number of channels they are exposed to. The six channels are: Agricultural Supply, Exchange Rates, Energy Markets, Credit Markets, Trade, and Agricultural Demand and Macroeconomic Factors.

• http://www.fao.org/3/ca8430en/CA8430EN.pdf

FIGURE 3: JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS AT RISK IN THE FOOD SYSTEMS (IN MILLIONS)

	Food systems		COVID-19*			
	Jobs	Livelihoods	At-risk-jobs	% of food systems jobs	At-risk-livelihoods	% of food systems livelihoods
Primary production	716.77	2,023.80	152.35	21%	404.76	20%
Food processing	200.73	484.54	120.44	60%	290.72	60%
Food services	168.97	339.44	101.38	60%	203.66	60%
Distribution services	96.34	241.48	57.81	60%	144.89	60%
Transportation services	41.61	101.05	16.64	40%	40.42	40%
Machinery	6.51	13.18	1.72	26%	3.48	26%
Inputs	4.89	11.06	1.29	26%	2.92	26%
R&D	0.13	0.29	0.02	15%	0.03	10%
Total	**1,280.93**	**3,214.84**	**451.64**	35%	**1,090.89**	34%

Source: Unpublished FAO/IFPRI estimates, based on ILO 2020 – ILO extrapolation scenario. Not annualized. Jobs represent formal employment; livelihoods cover a broad array of self-employed, informal, migrant and seasonal labor.

Food systems directly employ over 1 billion people. COVID-19 mitigation and control measures and the emerging economic recession are having a profound economic impact putting the jobs and livelihoods of tens of millions at risk, particularly in primary food production, processing, services and distribution.

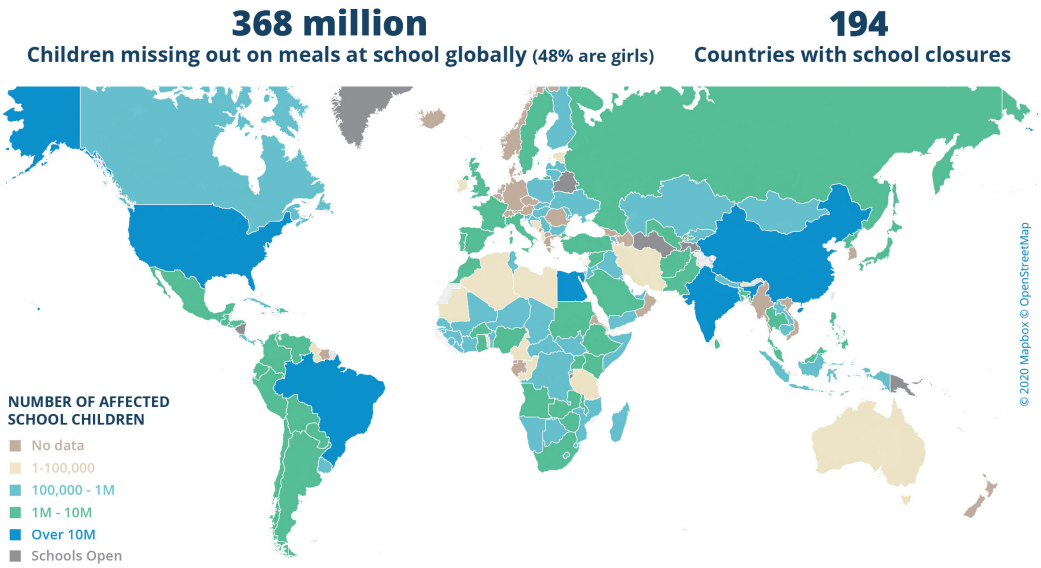
- Rural youth, the majority of whom are employed in the informal economy as contributing family workers, subsistence farmers, home-based micro-entrepreneurs or unskilled workers;[28]
- Migrant, seasonal workers and displaced communities who harvest food and agriculture products, but are blocked by the closing of internal restrictions or external borders and exposed to risks of contagion as they move;[29]
- Workers engaged in collecting, processing, marketing, and distributing food, including wholesale and retail as well as informal food sellers are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 exposure and to disruption to their livelihoods;
- The rural poor whose incomes depend on the agri-food economy face additional constraints for accessing food and basic health services; and,
- Refugees and displaced populations with limited legal access to work, the right to cultivate land, the right to move freely

28 http://www.fao.org/rural-employment/work-areas/youth-employment/en/

29 See Policy Brief on COVID-19 and People on the Move

30 Ibid

FIGURE 4: GLOBAL MONITORING OF SCHOOL MEALS DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES (AS OF 20 MAY)



Data on the global monitoring of school meals during COVID-19 school closures is updated frequently here. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

and other freedoms, currently are reliant on the informal sector, or humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.[30]

Many more of the people enduring hunger and malnourishment are those for whom regular, reliable, and safe access to nutritious food is blocked by factors beyond their control. They include:

- At the end of May, 368 million school children were missing out on school meals for the major share of their daily nutritional needs;[31]
- People receiving nutritional care services such as women and children in the first thousand days from conception, the sick, older people, and people with special needs;
- Children separated from their mothers or caretakers for any reason;
- Job and income losses impact the ability of the 200 million migrant workers in over 40 countries sending remittances to their 800 million family members in more than 125 countries. Remittances worldwide are expected to decrease by 20 per cent in 2020. This translates into a drop of US$110 billion in available resources for food and other necessities for millions of migrant families; [32]
- 490 million people living in countries affected by conflict;[33]
- 70 million refugees, displaced people, and asylum-seekers around the world who may not be included due to exclusionary

31 https://www.wfp.org/news/new-digital-map-shows-terrible-impact-covid-19-school-meals-around-world

32 https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history

33 SOFI, 2019

state policies, the lack of proper documentation, or who are do not have access to jobs and self-reliant activities;

- The urban poor, whose dietary quality and conditions of living are seriously degraded, as half the world's population is in urban lockdown; and
- Obesity is also associated with higher lethality of COVID-19.[34] Nearly 678 million people are classified as obese and more than 2 billion people overweight. Among children under five, 40.1 million are overweight.[35]

INTEGRATE DATA PLATFORMS AND ACCELERATE THE DATA REVOLUTION FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION

Understanding who is suffering from hunger and malnourishment is essential to build momentum for action, to guide decision-making and to engage and empower the vulnerable as agents. To save lives in this and indeed in any future crisis requires robust tracking and monitoring. The need to invest in enhanced monitoring systems and predictive analysis has become apparent in the context of COVID-19. The data community needs to adapt and integrate its tools to provide timely, reliable measurement of the impact of COVID-19 on food security and to make the data easy to access, interpret and use by policymakers to enable them to make evidence-based decisions. This could be further enhanced if the humanitarian and development community came together to better address the gaps in existing data collection systems, identify data and analysis standards where they don't exist as well as engage with countries where there is limited data or consistent divergences in their interpretation.

34 https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31024-2/fulltext

35 Global Nutrition Report, 2020

3. Emergency financing needs to pre-empt the impacts of the pandemic and economic shocks

All food system actors are affected by this crisis. Producers, small and medium agri-businesses and financial institutions could suffer from a sudden drop in cash due to inhibited production capacity, limited market access, loss of remittances, lack of employment, and unexpected medical costs. Credit providers, including banks and cooperatives, may become unavailable. The cash flow issue will be magnified for those who have outstanding loans or lost income.

As countries continue to roll out sizable relief and stimulus packages, there is a high risk that they will not reach the most vulnerable. The focus should be on targeted measures that alleviate liquidity constraints on vulnerable firms and households. This is especially true for poor people in rural areas who may require specific tailoring of these packages to meet their unique liquidity needs. Finance institutions and agri-businesses that cater to the needs of small-scale producers and small businesses need to maintain liquidity through a range of financial tools. They need to be able to provide emergency loans on highly concessional terms, business continuity grants and loans, or moratorium or cancellation of loan repayments for their clients.

Many countries will require additional fiscal space to pursue such programmes. The projected cumulative output losses during 2020 and 2021 will wipe out nearly all output gains of the previous four years. Governments across the world are rolling out fiscal stimulus measures—equivalent overall to roughly 10 per cent of the world GDP —to fight the pandemic and minimize the impact of a catastrophic economic downturn.[36] The international community will need to support developing countries facing increasing fiscal challenges, particularly related to debt or sudden drops in economic performance due to the pandemic. The Secretary-General has called for a comprehensive relief package for developing countries, an across-the board debt standstill, debt restructuring, and other measures in this regard.[37]

36 https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/world-economic-situation-and-prospects-as-of-mid-2020/

37 See also: The Policy Briefs on Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and the Impact of COVID-19 in Africa as well as information related to the High-Level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond (28 May)

4. Recommended priority actions

1. MOBILIZE TO SAVE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS, FOCUSING ATTENTION WHERE THE RISK IS MOST ACUTE.

1.1 Preserve critical humanitarian food, livelihood and nutrition assistance to vulnerable groups – adapted to anticipated COVID-19 impact

Given the nature of the pandemic, new and adaptable models of food and nutrition distribution that minimize physical contacts are necessary. Governments and humanitarian actors need to anticipate where crises will unfold, who will be most affected, and what will be the most cost-effective responses. Most important, they need to scale-up preparedness and prevention measures now. These efforts include:

- Providing life- and livelihood-saving food and cash-based assistance in the most fragile places, including through forward procurement and pre-positioning of buffer stocks to sustain existing programmes;
- Protecting breastfeeding and ensuring timely access to complementary and therapeutic foods for infants and young children, as well as micronutrient supplements and other essential nutrition commodities;
- Leveraging, adapting, and scaling-up large-scale social safety nets, such as school meals programmes;
- Ensuring safe passage of humanitarian personnel and cargo, at local, national and global levels. Where necessary, humanitarian diplomacy may be key to facilitating such access, protecting humanitarian operations and enabling aid convoys to reach civilians; and,
- Ensuring humanitarian access and establishing common humanitarian services, including aviation, shipping, storage and transport, as well as engineering services in areas affected by the pandemic.

1.2 Declare food production, marketing, and distribution essential services everywhere to keep trade corridors open to ensure the continuous functioning of the critical aspects of food systems in all countries.

It is essential that food and nutrition care workers be protected against exposure to COVID-19, in the same manner as front-line workers and other essential staff. This is particularly important where workers interact with the general public or with large numbers of people, as in wholesale markets, food-processing plants, food pantries, or in close contact with clients, for example breastfeeding counsellors, community-based nutrition agents, and grocery workers. Special rules for social distancing, staggering hours, or mechanizing sorting and counting processes can be useful where masks and other personal protective equipment are in short supply.

- Accelerating inter-regional trade can increase regional demand, smoothing the significant demand shock because of the recession. Establishing barriers to trade or disrupting domestic and global food supply chains, as a part of COVID-19 control and mitigation measures, such as import or export bans on particular commodities, should be avoided. Where they are necessary, they should be consistent with WTO rules and be targeted, proportionate, transparent, and temporary.[38] In particular, as noted by the G20 Agriculture Ministers, states should guard against any measures that could lead to excessive food price volatility in international markets or threaten the food security and nutrition of large proportions of the world population.

1.3 Expand the use of frequent food security monitoring systems to provide up-to-date information on the impacts of the outbreak and understand better who is most at risk.

The crisis requires additional, stepped-up monitoring and assessment to track and forestall nutritional impacts of the pandemic response and economic shock. The Food Insecurity Experience scale (FIES)[39], a measure for SDG indicator 2.1.2, improves the visibility of hunger and can be adapted for monthly or higher-frequency monitoring during times of crisis. This is essential to track the evolution of severe food insecurity, especially to identify new geospatial hotspots .

Despite continuous improvements, in crisis situations there are many limitations in the collection of data and predictive analysis in the area of food security and nutrition due to insufficient data availability and challenges of comparability across different metrics, among other factors.

While existing tools can be further improved to better understand the impacts of COVID-19, there is also a need for governments, technical experts, food producers, marketers, and other food market participants to share data, information and analysis to develop a stronger understanding of the pandemic's various effects on food security, nutrition and overall food system functioning in real-time. To ensure thorough, timely collection and analysis of data related to food systems functioning, several options are available:

38 https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news20_e/ddgaw_20apr20_e.htm

39 http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/fies/en/

- Mobile or remote data collection through phone interviews and surveys to understand the situation on food consumers and producers;
- Remote sensing, artificial intelligence and other available real-time data to monitor the health and intensity of cultivation, density of population in aggregation points and marketing centres, and accumulation of food spoiling and waste;
- Country-level application of tools for earth observation and for monitoring of crop calendars and prices to strengthen national capacities in managing food security information; and,
- Crop calendars,[40] which show critical planting and harvesting periods, can be overlaid with information on COVID-19 outbreaks at the subnational level. Such information can help countries to strategically plan sowing, planting, and harvesting tasks to ensure continued food supply before, during, and after lockdowns.

1.4 Maintain liquidity and promote financial inclusion, particularly in rural areas

A comprehensive and coordinated effort by all development partners is essential. To reach the most vulnerable, many countries will require external financing, grants on concessional terms and potentially debt relief or debt refinancing from the international financial community. Without adequate financing, temporary liquidity issues could turn into solvency problems, particularly for those economies that are highly dependent on sectors such as tourism or trade in commodities being hurt by the crisis as well as those who may have already been under debt distress, thus resulting in long-term effects on economic activity. It is therefore recommended that countries and other relevant stakeholders work to:

- Ensure relief and stimulus packages target and reach the most vulnerable, including meeting the liquidity needs of small-scale food producers and rural businesses;
- Accelerate efforts aimed at expanding access to financial services, including through the deployment of technological and product innovations;
- Maintain an emphasis on financial inclusion. Increasingly, digital financial technologies are becoming necessary to expand credit supply to underserved areas and can be especially helpful in areas under lockdown; and,
- Offer comprehensive and coordinated financing options to countries in need to ensure their ability to meet short-term liquidity needs, as articulated at the 28 May High-Level Event on Financing for Development.[41]

40 http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/covid-19-crop-calendars/en/

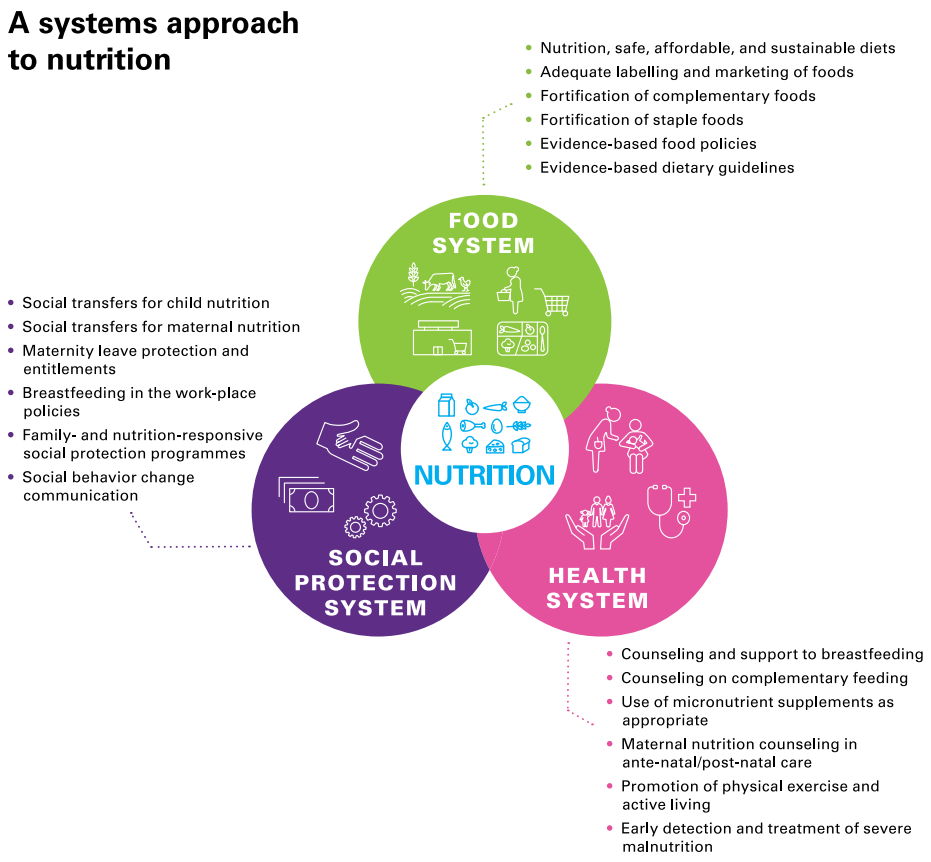
41 High-Level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond

2. STRENGTHEN SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS FOR NUTRITION.

The societal disruptions and economic shocks arising from COVID-19 control and mitigation measures have been severe. Fortunately, in much of the world, governments and financial institutions have responded with unprecedented speed. Investments in social protection can serve as powerful instruments for strengthening people's access to food, nutrition, and essential services, particularly for vulnerable groups in both urban and rural settings.

With the right investments and policies, social protection, healthcare systems, and food systems can work together to provide blanket coverage of a population's nutritional needs. Such actions ensure that public expenditure is used to keep local and national agri-food markets functioning, strengthen health responses for nutritional care, and empower women and caretakers who make household decisions about food choice. Such actions protect food workers and close gaps in food distribution to reach the most vulnerable.

FIGURE 5: INTEGRATING A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO NUTRITION IN THE COVID-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESPONSE



Source: UNICEF, 2020

2.1 Food and nutrition assistance should be at the heart of social protection programmes

Poor people spend more than half of their income on food, and their ability to purchase food has been severely hampered by the loss of income streams. There is a high probability of a dangerous decline in dietary quality in many countries stemming from pandemic-induced income losses, as well as from the freezing of food transfer schemes such as school feeding programmes and the breakdown of food markets due to both demand shocks and supply constraints.

Social protection programmes can protect food access by increasing purchasing power for those who need it or by directly providing food through government or community-based programmes. Ensuring access to a diverse healthy diet, in addition to staples, is important. There is also a need to substantially expand the capacity of community-based and facility-based programmes to address acute malnutrition and the coverage of social protection networks for nutrition.

2.2 Strengthen the health system response for nutritional care

Malnutrition will also increase due to healthcare failures, as already strained healthcare systems are forced to divert resources from a range of nutritionally important functions — including antenatal care, micronutrient supplementation, and prevention and treatment of childhood diarrhoea, infections, and acute malnutrition — toward combating COVID-19.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to ensure the continuity of nutrition services, particularly early detection and community-based management of acute malnutrition and infant and young child feeding, as well as related maternal nutrition programmes. This should be done with adequate measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission[42] in the context of general principles of the continuity of essential health services.[43]

It is also critical to develop plans to cope with a deteriorating nutrition situation that may be exacerbated by response measures to COVID-19 that disrupt food systems. For example, due to the pandemic, it may become difficult to diagnose and manage nutrition failures in large populations. Currently, out of approximately 47 million wasted children globally, only 10 million children receive support. Accelerating implementation of the Global Action Plan on Wasting[44] will be vital to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The Plan includes measures to prevent and manage wasting through support to mothers and children, particularly in countries that already have a high prevalence of wasting. The first thousand days of a child's life from conception is a critical window to build a foundation for healthy growth and development.

2.3 Protect the most vulnerable population groups, starting with women who play key roles in the household and essentials services delivery

Social protection schemes need to put the needs of women at the forefront. Women often work as primary care givers at home and as frontline staff in health care. Programmes

42 https://www.nutritioncluster.net/sites/default/files/2020-04/Sudan%20NUTRITION%20SECTOR%20OPERATIONAL%20GUIDANCE%20ON%20CMAM%20%20IYCF%20during%20COVID-19%20response%20Final.pdf

43 WHO, 2020 https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331561/WHO-2019-nCoV-essential_health_services-2020.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

44 https://www.who.int/who-documents-detail/global-action-plan-on-child-wasting-a-framework-for-action

need to also identify and target vulnerable groups, including families who may resort to child labour as a coping strategy.

Some target groups may be more difficult to reach given the restrictions on movement. They include refugees, children who used to benefit from school feeding programmes and community nutrition programmes, as well as large numbers of informal workers, such as agricultural workers, fishers, foresters and casual labourers, many of whom are migrant workers.

In some countries, COVID-response plans have included adaptations of multicomponent school-based food and nutrition programmes to ensure continued service, despite school closures. These programmes, especially those that address other health aspects, such as access to water and sanitation, and deworming, have been increasingly recognized as an important programmatic area for sustainable development. They can play a crucial role in crisis response.

2.4 Tailor social protection programmes to be nutrition-sensitive

In designing social protection programmes, the potential benefits of different transfer modalities, like in-kind, cash, or voucher, should be considered first. Cash transfers and vouchers should be accompanied with additional technical advisory support, transfer of assets, including knowledge and skills, as well as access to basic services, such as health, nutrition, and education. Such actions and provisions can make a significant difference in situations where markets function, but food price inflation makes it hard to buy food, especially foods that contribute to a healthy diet.

With widespread unemployment and loss of income, poor households will respond by purchasing the cheapest calories they can find to feed their families. In poor countries calories from nutrient-rich, non-staple foods like eggs, fruits, and vegetables are often as much as 10 times more expensive than calories from rice, maize, wheat, or cassava.[45] In the face of drastic declines in income, vulnerable households will quickly give up nutrient-rich foods in order to preserve their caloric intake.

Food assistance through public distribution systems should offer diverse, balanced and nutritious meals. In places where markets are functioning, a mixed modality of using vouchers together with social protection programmes can help address micronutrient deficiencies.

Given that physical distancing and mobility restrictions may be in place for many months, governments, development partners, and microfinance institutions should search for ways to stimulate innovative and safe food delivery systems, especially those that create jobs. Institutional buying through public food procurement can help provide nutritious food and overcome crisis-induced production and marketing bottlenecks. Expanding public procurement policies can also help make up for small-scale producers' lost income when access to markets is limited and demand is low during crises.

45 https://www.ifpri.org/blog/covid-19-nutrition-crisis-what-expect-and-how-protect

3. INVEST IN A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Dedicated investments to address the disruptions in the food systems resulting from national policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis are needed. But even in the midst of crisis, opportunities exist to innovate and "build to transform." This is essential in order to lay the foundation for an inclusive, green, and resilient post-crisis recovery. The crisis investment response should prioritize actions which solve short-term problems and protect against shifting the burden of economic adjustment onto those least able to bear it.

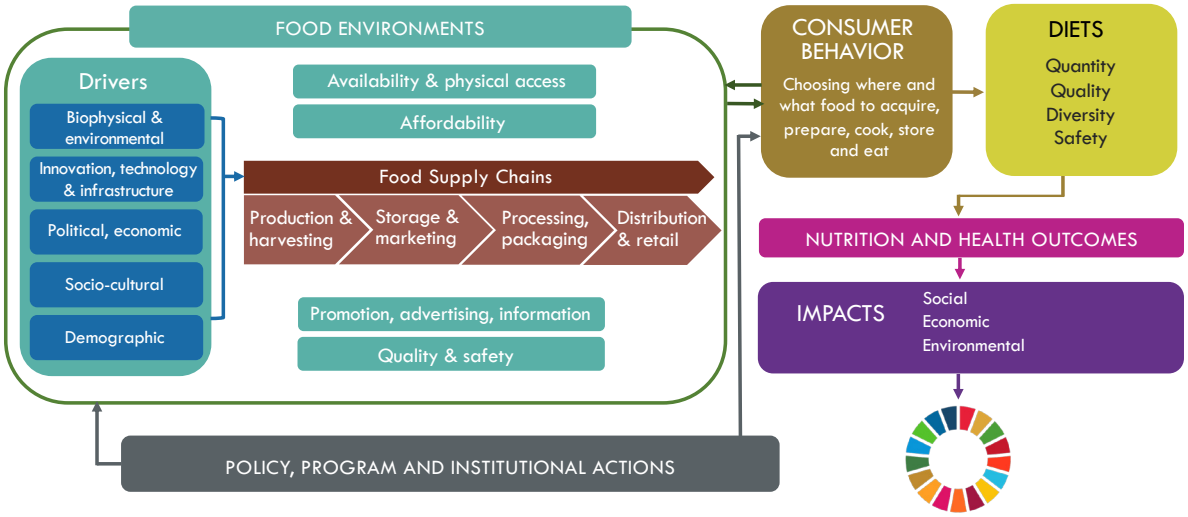
Today's food systems are also failing the planet itself, significantly contributing to the climate disruption that threatens our world. Food systems contribute up to 29 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions; livestock contributes 14.5 percent of all anthropogenic GHG emissions, of which 44 percent is in the form of methane.[46] All too often, food systems activities undermine biodiversity, contributing to the mass extinction of species, ecocide, soil loss, land degradation, drinking water pollution, air pollution, overdrawn aquifers, greenhouse gas emissions, antimicrobial resistance and the spread of zoonotic diseases. As we address the socio-economic dimensions of the crisis, we should reconsider the ways that we produce, process, market, consume, and handle the waste of foods – and build back better. The Food Systems Summit in 2021 can serve as rallying point for the global community to commit to ambitious actions to transform our food systems in service of the SDGs and our shared objectives on climate.

THE PRICE OF FOOD: IMPACTS OF FOOD SYSTEMS ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

- 25-30% of total Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) emissions are attributable to the food system. (IPCC, 2019)
- Around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss. (IPBES, 2019)
- A third of fish stocks are overfished. (FAO, 2019)
- When forest land is converted to crops, soil carbon decreases by 42%; when pasture is converted, the reduction is 59%. (FAO, 2015)
- Between 2,000 and 5,000 litres of water are needed to produce a person's daily food. (FAO, 2012).

46 FAO, Tackling climate change through livestock: A global assessment of emissions and mitigation opportunities, 2019.

FIGURE 6: THE ENTIRE FOOD SYSTEM IS CRUCIAL FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE AND DELIVERING ON THE SDGS



3.1 Food systems need to be transformed to work better with nature and for the climate

More efficient, sustainable, and resilient food systems require careful management of land, soil, and water through integrated approaches. Such food systems also require reduction of post-harvest food losses at every stage of the value chain with improved practices. These include access to low-cost handling and storage technologies, and packaging. Change in date labelling in packaged food, in-store promotion of healthier options of products, and awareness raising campaigns will help reduce food waste.

Resilience to climate change can be achieved through water and energy-saving irrigation, conservation agriculture, and controlled environment farming, livestock grazing management, energy-efficient cold storage, biogas production, and renewable energy. Conducive policies can help drive positive behavioural change and increase the attractiveness of sustainable and resilient alternatives.

3.2 Lay the foundation for a more inclusive, green, and resilient recovery

Resources devoted to tackle the COVID-19 crisis need to be used in a "build to transform" approach — to achieve food system transformation that contributes to the 2030 Agenda. International Financial Institutions have already responded with new funds and proposals and are re-directing existing loans to focus on more resilient food systems. Resources should be used to invest in resilience rather than subsidies, providing a return on investment.

The transformation of food systems needs to be guided by data and advanced analytics to better understand trade-offs between measures. Data platforms are fundamental to ensure that investments are well-targeted. Countries should attract private sector investment using public policies that enhance returns and promote digital services among poor farmers so that they can better access knowledge, markets and funding. Blended finance should be used

to leverage more resources and encourage private sector investments in socially and environmentally responsible food systems.

3.3 2021 Food Systems Summit: The future is now

The Food Systems Summit in 2021, and the preparatory process leading to it, offers governments and all stakeholders a critical opportunity for inclusive dialogues and for mobilizing multi-stakeholder action, both around the short-term socio-economic response and medium-term priorities to "build to transform."

Stakeholders should take advantage of the preparatory process as an important platform to forge an improved and accelerated approach to the complex task of transforming food systems. This can be a rallying call for re-committing to the 2030 Agenda in this area and accelerating progress towards the SDGs more broadly.

The current pandemic has highlighted our fragility, but also the interconnected nature of our world. It underscores the need to work together to address global challenges. Multi-stakeholder collaboration is needed at all levels, and there are many experiences and practical approaches to working together – even in a crisis where time is of the essence.

The international community offers many such tools. The Food Systems Summit in 2021 will offer one avenue for action, but there are many other existing institutions serving as spaces within which actors can be mobilized and actions coordinated. Multi-stakeholder platforms that ensure effective representation and voices of all stakeholders can help mobilise rapid and innovative responses to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agriculture and food sectors.

WORKING TOGETHER IN TIMES OF CRISIS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY (CFS)

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is an example of how existing institutions can be adapted and revived in times of crisis to meet new needs. Originally formed at the global level in 1974 in response to another serious global food crisis, the CFS was reformed in the food crisis of 2009 to bring the voices of producers, civil society and the private sector into global-level discussions on food security and nutrition. This reform was accompanied by the establishment of a High-Level Panel of Experts to provide a science base for the Committee's deliberations. While final ownership of policy decisions rests with Member States, in CFS non-state actors participate in policy dialogue and negotiations alongside Member State delegations, giving its final products added strength and legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis threatens the food security and nutrition of millions of people, many of whom were already suffering. A large global food emergency is looming. In the longer term, we face possible disruptions to the functioning of food systems, with severe consequences for health and nutrition. With concerted action, we can not only avoid some of the worst impacts but do so in a way that supports a transition to more sustainable food systems that are in better balance with nature and that support healthy diets – and thus better health prospects - for all.