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Food and Nutrition Security in the Context of COVID-19

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SUMMARY

The grave pandemic caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and its mitigation responses (together referred to as COVID-19) has profoundly affected the lives and livelihood of people all around the globe in general and the middle and low-income countries in particular most importantly in terms of food and nutrition security to an unpredictable scale. There was already the existence of food crises, hunger, malnutrition and other nutrition related disorders especially due to lack of food availability both in terms of quality and quantity, among all segments of the population especially the vulnerable segments- preschool children, adolescents, pregnant women and the elderly in the global scenario. These prevalent problems have been more aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic occurring in the recent years. Therefore, effort should be made to assess both the previously existed causes and the existing causes of food and nutrition security due to the arousal of COVID 19 from the grass-root level and find out feasible solutions with proper and accurate implementation to eradicate the problem of food crises, hunger, malnutrition, non-communicable diseases and other nutrition-related disorders to make a healthy and a better universe.

INTRODUCTION

The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its rapid and extensive spread around the globe has had enormous effects on food and nutrition security. Existing food and nutrition challenges, especially in low and middle income countries have been amplified by pandemic-related economic and food system crises that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable — women of reproductive age, young children, adolescents and the elderly (Akseer et al., 2020; Laborde *et al*., 2020). These crises have resulted in lower incomes and higher prices of some foods, putting food out of reach for many, and undermining the right to food and stalling efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: "Zero hunger." The situation is fluid and dynamic, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. According to the World Health Organization, the worst effects are yet to come (Ghebreyesus, 2020; Khorsandi, 2020). Most health analysts predict that this virus will continue to circulate for a least one or two more years (Scudellari, 2020).Food insecurity, deteriorations in diet quality, micronutrient deficiencies and other forms of malnutrition stem from fundamental, complex and dynamic changes in our food system(Global Nutrition Report,2020). The complex dynamics triggered by the lockdowns intended to contain the disease are creating conditions for a major disruption to food systems, giving rise to a dramatic increase in hunger(FAO,2020).Already, before the outbreak of the pandemic, according to the latest *State of Food Security and Nutrition* report (FAO *et al.*, 2020), some two billion people faced food insecurity at the moderate or severe level. Since 2014, these numbers have been climbing, rising by 60 million over five years. In 2019, 690 million people were undernourished, 2 billion were food insecure and 3 billion could not afford a healthy diet; and 144 million children under-five were stunted, 47 million were wasted, 38 million were overweight and at least 340 million suffered from micronutrient deficiencies(FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2020).

Projection estimates suggest that COVID-19 and the related economic recession could, by 2022, result in an additional 9.3 million children wasted, 2.6 million stunted and 168,000 child deaths in LMICs, in the absence of appropriate response4. The World Bank estimates that COVID-19 could lead to an additional 83 to 132 million undernourished adults3 and 88 to 115 million people plunged into extreme poverty (under US$1.90 per person per day) (World Bank Group, 2020). Forty-five countries required external food aid between April and December 2020 and acute food insecurity stands (FAO, 2020). To rise dramatically, particularly in countries currently experiencing conflict and insecurity (FAO, 2020; Food Security Information Network and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020; Cable *et al.2020)*. The most recent estimates indicate that between 83 and 132 million additional people (FAO *et al.*, 2020)—including 38-80 million people in low-income countries that rely on food imports (Torero, 2020)—will experience food insecurity as a direct result of the pandemic. At least 25 countries, including Lebanon, Yemen and South Sudan, are at risk of significant food security deterioration because of the secondary socio-economic impacts of the pandemic (FAO and WFP, 2020). In Latin America, the

number of people requiring food assistance has almost tripled in 2020 (UN, 2020a). Food productivity could also be affected in the future, especially if the virus is not contained and the lockdown measures continue.

Despite varying burdens and differential mitigation responses to SARS-CoV-2 across the globe, the impacts on national, regional and local food systems have consistently resulted in job losses, income shortfalls and food shortages. Rises in food waste have also been observed in some LMICs due to lower demand for perishables, limited transportation and storage capacities, and retail food price volatility (United Nations,2020; World Bank Group,2020). These disruptions compound existing inequities in food access and expose the fragility of food systems due to conflict, weather extremes and pestilence7. Most LMICs are ill-equipped to weather the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, given their susceptibility to external shocks, limited financial resources and weak provision of public services.

Impact of COVID-19 on Food and Nutrition Security

Covid-19 is a respiratory disease and there is no evidence that food is a carrier of this disease. However, the virus and the measures taken, to prevent the spread of this disease has had significant implications on food and nutrition security and food systems. Initial and ongoing uncertainty surrounding the nature of the spread of COVID-19 led to the implementation of strict lockdown and physical distancing policies in a number of countries. These measures caused a serious slowdown in economic activity and disrupted supply chains, unleashing new dynamics with cascading effects on food systems and people's food security and nutrition. Below we outline these dynamics. (As proposed by the HLPE in its 15th report, these trends are affecting the six dimensions of food security—availability, access, utilization, stability, agency and sustainability—which are essential for ensuring the right to food (HLPE, 2020b).

A number of overlapping and reinforcing dynamics have emerged that are affecting food systems and food security and nutrition thus far, including: disruptions to food supply chains; loss of income and livelihoods; a widening of inequality; disruptions to social protection programmes; altered food environments; and uneven food prices in localized contexts (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Clapp and Moseley, 2020; Laborde *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, given the high degree of uncertainty around the virus and its evolution, there may be future threats to food security and nutrition, including the potential for lower food productivity and production, depending on the severity and duration of the pandemic and measures to contain it. Below is a brief overview of these dynamics, which are also depicted in Figure 1.

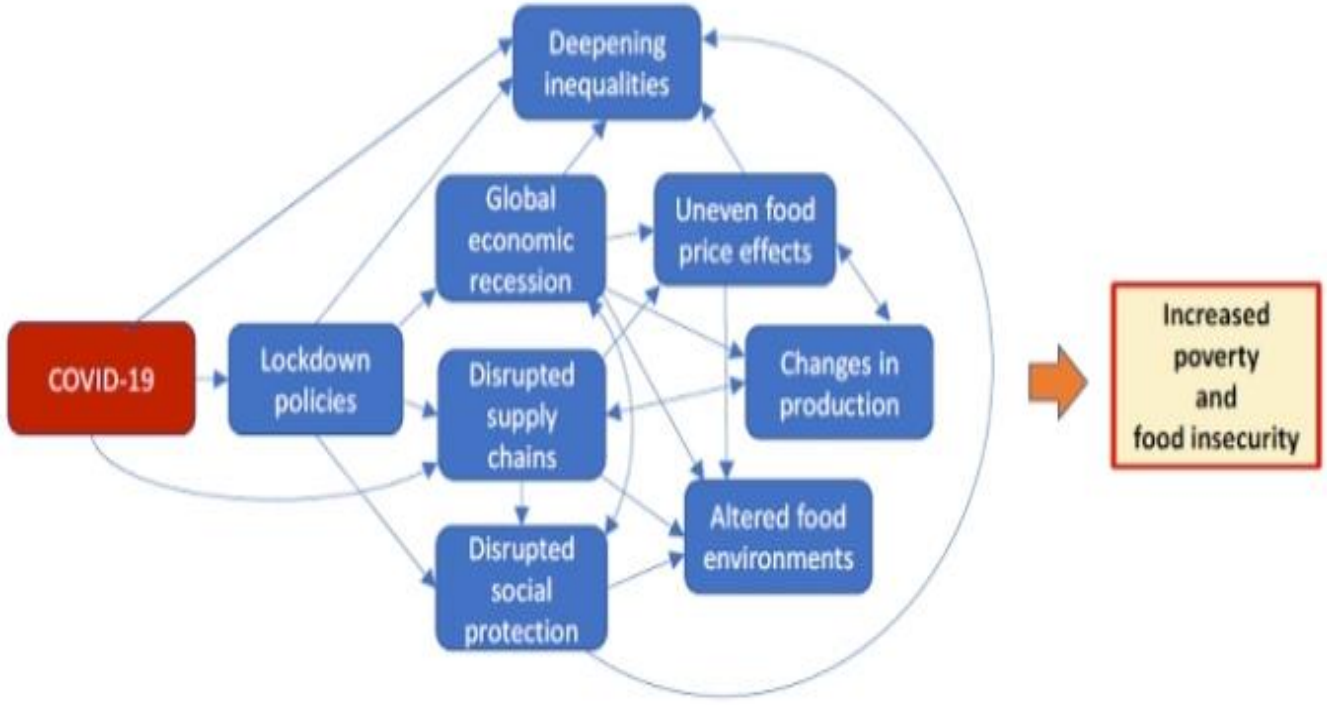

Fig.1: The dynamics of COVID-19 that threaten food security and nutrition (Source: HLPE, 2020).

There have been major disruptions to food supply chains in the wake of lockdown measures, which have affected the availability, pricing, and quality of food (Barrett, 2020). The closure of restaurants and other food service facilities led to a sharp decline in demand for certain perishable foods, including dairy products, potatoes and fresh fruits, as well as specialty goods such as chocolate and some high value cuts of meat (Lewis, 2020; Terazono and Munshi, 2020). As the pandemic-related lockdowns took hold in many countries in March-May of 2020, there were widespread media reports of food items being dumped or ploughed back into the fields because of either collapsed demand or difficulties in getting these foods to markets (Yaffe-Bellany and Corkery, 2020). Farmers without adequate storage facilities, including cold storage, found themselves with food that they could not sell.

The movement of food through the channels of international trade was especially affected by lockdown measures. As borders closed and demand for certain food items dropped, food producers reliant on selling their crops via distant export markets were highly vulnerable, particularly those producers focused on perishable food and agricultural products, such as fresh fruits and vegetables or specialty crops, such as cocoa (Clapp and Moseley, 2020). In the early months of the outbreak of COVID-19, some food exporting countries also imposed export restrictions on key staple food items like rice and wheat, which led to some disruptions in the global movement of these staples as well as higher prices of these crops relative to others (Laborde *et al.*, 2020). Certain countries, including those with high prevalence of food insecurity, are highly dependent on imported food and on commodity exports (FAO *et al.*, 2019), which may make them particularly vulnerable to these types of supply chain disruptions. Many of these export restrictions were lifted by August 2020, although the risk remains that such restrictions might be re-imposed, depending on the severity of any future spikes in the disease and the re-imposition of lockdown measures. Disruptions to food supply chains also resulted when food system workers experienced high rates of illness, leading to shutdowns and some food processing facilities such as meat packing, for example (CFS, 2020; Stewart *et al.*, 2020). Labour-intensive food production has also been especially affected by COVID-19 among food system workers, including production systems that rely on migrant farmworkers (discussed in more depth below), who face barriers to travel and who often work in cramped conditions on farms and in food production facilities, some of which had to close temporarily to contain outbreaks (Haley *et al.*, 2020). These inequities affect women and their prominent roles in food systems, including as primary actors ensuring household food security and nutrition, as well as being food producers, managers of farms, food traders, and wageworkers. According to FAO, the agricultural activities of rural women have been affected more than those of men (FAO, 2020b). This gender dimension is important because women, in their caregiving roles for the sick, children, and the elderly, are likely at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19, with knock-on implications for food production, processing and trade (Moseley, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Significant discourse on transformation of global food system that defines and prioritizes healthy, nutritious and sufficient diets has been emphasized by various agencies and scientists alike, since the very beginning of the 21st Century. The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought out important vulnerabilities within the food systems and profoundly emphasizes the urgent need for holistic systems approach to meet the united efforts towards the global targets and goals for a healthy universe. The 2021 Food Systems Summit provides a platform to rethink and redesign food systems and plan long-term feasible health reforms to develop resilient communities, conserve and sustain rural agrarian populations and promote sustainable supply chains and food and nutrition security.

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