

22 June 2020

COVID-19 and food crisis: the main operating mechanisms

The United Nations warn us: the food crisis that is resulting from COVID-19 could be the worst in more than 50 years if nothing is done to prevent it from occurring [\[read\]](#) and the number of people experiencing a food crisis could double in poor countries [\[read\]](#).

The pandemic could plunge 130 million persons into a situation of **acute** food insecurity¹ by December, according to the chief economist of the World Food Programme (WFP) [\[read\]](#) who emphasises that “94% of the global workforce live in countries where workplaces have been closed”. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that the number of working days lost during April, May and June are equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs [\[read\]](#).



Loss of production

This situation results in a reduction of world output, the closing of many markets which leads to considerable losses for agricultural producers, as well as to important disruptions in processing creating additional losses and shortages. In Africa for example, the World Bank believes that the COVID-19 crisis could imply a decrease of production by \$37 to \$79 billion (to be compared to a total GDP of around \$2500 billion) and a contraction of agricultural output by 2.6 to 7% [\[read\]](#).

¹ Acute food insecurity: corresponds to a situation when a person has run out of food or has gone an entire day without eating at times during the year [\[read\]](#).

Slowed trade

Food imports could also decrease, bringing about increased prices and supply problems in some places. This reduction would be a result of trade restrictions implemented by some countries as well as of lack of money for paying imports. Beyond the loss of production envisaged, the economic slowdown has consequences on rich country imports of energy (oil and gas) and tropical commodities, putting countries dependent on exports in an extremely difficult situation. Governments of concerned states are then be unable to play their role of providing support to their most vulnerable population groups.

Higher prices and lower incomes

Given a reduced food production and the lack of capacity to import sufficient food from abroad, it can be expected that local food prices will rise. This increase is already happening, as we have had the opportunity to report, end April [\[read\]](#)

This situation will, of course, also have dramatic consequences on household income that will likely fall substantially. Moreover, according to the United Nations, remittances paid by migrant workers to their families at home are expected to decrease by more than \$100 billion in 2020 (out of a total of \$500 billion annually). Lack of resources could oblige families to sell a part of their livestock, equipment and even land, thus mortgaging their future and pushing them towards increased indebtedness to money lenders² [\[read in French\]](#).

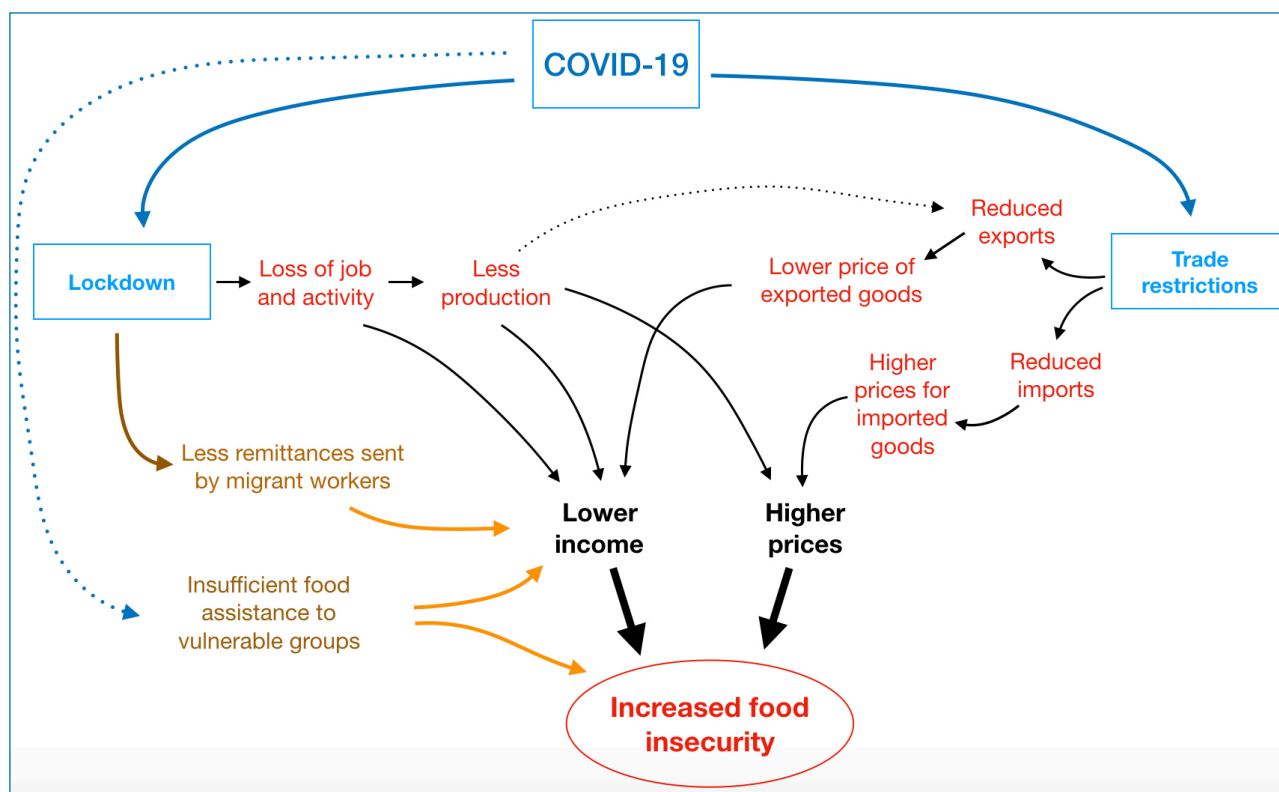
On the basis of lessons from past crises, it can be assumed that lower household income on consumption will, on the one hand, bring about a decline of consumption – which, in the case of the most vulnerable groups, will make them unable to eat sufficiently –, and, on the other hand, a substitution of the consumption of the most expensive foods (meat, milk, vegetables and fruits) by cheaper staples (cereals, roots and tubers) that might create supply problems and a surge of the price of these basic products, an impact that would further exacerbate the negative consequences of the crisis on food security [\[read here on the Asian experience\]](#).

This potential disaster in the most affected countries could trigger a new wave of migrations, both international and national, as occurred in India, with likely negative consequences for women [\[read\]](#).

The diagramme below sums up the main processes linking the COVID-19 crisis to [food security](#).

² In countries like Haiti, Nepal and Tajikistan, these remittances represent between one fourth and one third of GDP!

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Africa: an already fragile context before the outset of the COVID-19 crisis

It is important to remember that, in the case of Africa, COVID-19 occurs in a particularly unfavourable context. As stated by Coumba Sow, the FAO Resilience Coordinator for West Africa, “COVID-19 could not have come at a worse time for vulnerable communities across West Africa” [read]. Simeon Ehui, regional sustainable development director for Africa at the World Bank, reminds us that in 2018 there were already 239 million undernourished people in Africa and he mentions the case of Nigeria, the most populated country on the continent, where the number of undernourished increased by 180% during the last decade [read]. In addition, it is estimated that this year’s locust invasion “ravaging parts of the Horn of Africa could result in \$8.5 billion in crop and livestock losses, severely reduced harvests, and less food in markets” [read] and put in danger, according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), almost 5 million people in East Africa where the attack is the “most serious outbreak in 70 years” [read].

The response in motion: innovations and resources

The United Nations and national as well as international NGOs are rallying to assist the most vulnerable population groups. However, given the health context, usual modalities of intervention carry a risk for beneficiaries. Therefore, these organisations try to design and implement new approaches.

For example, WFP works on various technological innovations including a computer application relying on the blockchain technology where QR codes are

used instead of fingerprints of the beneficiaries of different humanitarian agencies. This avoids physical contact while allowing coordination among organisations operating in a particular zone.

Furthermore, WFP is working on the design of automated dispensing machines for the distribution of food rations while respecting rules of social distancing, WFP is thus developing a grain ATM for delivering grain rations 24 hours/day that will be located in retail shops and food distribution sites. This project will make possible the use by beneficiaries of swipe cards and mobile phones to get the goods they need when they need them [\[read\]](#).

To avoid a disastrous crisis, considerable financial resources will need to be raised (several tens of billion dollars and beyond).

To know more:

- Arif Husain, [After the Pandemic, a Global Hunger Crisis](#), New York Times, 2020.
- Paul Anthem, [Risk of hunger pandemic as coronavirus set to almost double acute hunger by end of 2020](#), 2020.
- FAO, [COVID-19 could not have come at a worse time for vulnerable communities across West Africa](#), 2020.
- FAO, [Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), FAO, dedicated Webpage.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [The COVID-19 dilemma: Health or the economy? 2020](#).
- [COVID-19 and food: the economic and food crisis hits the more vulnerable – some insights](#), 2020.
- [Food security and sustainability: should we add a sustainability dimension to food security? 2020](#).
- [Food security: definition and drivers](#), 2013.