

Not Going Hungry During Covid-19

Promoting local Food Systems

Governments across the Horn and East Africa are tentatively relaxing some of the restrictions on movement and public gatherings put in place to limit the spread of Covid-19. As these restrictions are lifted, or re-imposed, promoting and maintaining strong, ecologically sound, local food systems will be critical to ensuring food and nutrition security of vulnerable populations, especially as the longer-term impacts of the virus take effect

The unfolding global economic recession as a result of Covid-19, and government measures to contain it, are well documented. Within the East African Community (EAC), trade has fallen 30-40 percent over the last 3 months as global shocks to supply and demand put USD 25.3bn of annual regional exports at risk¹. The World Bank predicts that agricultural production in Africa could contract between 2.6 percent and 7 percent due to trade blockages². Displaced populations are particularly affected, a recent study found that refugees are 60 percent more likely than their hosts to work in sectors that have been most impacted by Covid-19, having had much

higher pre-Covid rates of poverty and unemployment³.

Even before the pandemic, across the Horn and East Africa over 25 million people⁴ were already food insecure as a result of repeat crises including conflict, drought, flooding, displacement, (urban) poverty and desert locust invasions. Latest estimates now show that the number of food insecure people in East Africa is estimated to increase this year to more than 41 million people as a result of COVID-19, including 14 million who are estimated to live in urban areas⁵.

¹ Gatsby Africa, Msingi and Kenya Markets Trust, July 2020: COVID-19 Impact in East Africa

² The World Bank, April 9, 2020 "[COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Drives Sub-Saharan Africa Toward First Recession in 25 Years](#)"

³ Helen Dempster et al, 2020. "Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees" Economic

Inclusion." Policy Paper 179. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development and Refugees International

⁴ [East and Horn of Africa: IPC Food Security Phase Classification, Desert Locusts and COVID-19 \(19 May 2020\)](#)

⁵ UNHabitat/WFP, August 2020: Impact of COVID-19 on Livelihoods, Food Security and Nutrition in East Africa: Urban focus

The Covid-19 restrictions widely imposed in March 2020 disrupted the production, transportation and sale of nutritious, fresh, and affordable foods⁶. School closures mean that millions of children no longer access school meals. Sharp increases in staple food prices have been experienced across the region – for example, in South Sudan the restrictions on truck driver movement imposed by the Ugandan border authorities caused maize prices to more than double between February and June; and in Somalia, reduced imports of rice, wheat flour and pasta between March and May due to Covid-19 restrictions in Dubai resulted in price rises of up to 40 percent in some markets.

Across much of the Horn and East Africa, the 2020 planting season coincided with the onset of Covid-19 restrictions, which hampered farmers' ability to access agricultural inputs on time, and the ability of humanitarian agencies to get seeds to flood and displacement affected populations. Flooding also caused loss of crops and vegetable production particularly in western Kenya and Somalia which resulted in low availability and increased prices of fresh foods in markets⁷. Pastoralists received a brief boost when Saudi Arabia temporarily lifted the ban on livestock imports in April, however the closure of export markets in several Gulf countries significantly affected trade in the Horn of Africa⁸. Movement restrictions, closure of livestock markets and closed borders have also affected livestock herders and production systems which rely on seasonal migration. The ongoing desert locust invasions will also mean less browse for livestock, reduced agricultural production and less seasonal work for farm labourers.

⁶ UN, July 2020: Child malnutrition and COVID-19: The Time to Act Is Now

⁷ WFP Joint Market and Supply Chain Update, 28 June 2020

⁸ <https://www.kenyamarkets.org/covid-19-and-pastoralists-livelihoods/>

Food Systems rely on strong local capacity

Small and medium farms make up 84 percent of all farms globally, and produce between 53 to 81 percent of micronutrients in the global food supply⁹. Across the Horn and East Africa farmers with 1-2 hectares of land producing staple cereals, small livestock and cash crops drive rural economies, creating employment, spending locally, and in many cases, also hosting and supporting displaced communities.

As the longer term economic impacts of Covid-19 are felt, and globalised food systems face increasing pressure, the more important it becomes that food production systems, and the services that support them, are localized. Stronger local food systems (including input supply, production, processing, storage, sale and transportation of food) generate both social and economic benefits by building a sense of community, and creating jobs. Shorter food supply chains also mean that communities will be better prepared, and protected, should there be a return to stringent lockdown conditions.

Central to achieving this is empowering community groups, faith based groups, local government, local private sector and local NGO staff to take the lead in sharing information, knowledge and equipment and establishing support systems. Promoting and incorporating nature-based solutions and the use of low-input, high-output agricultural techniques that use locally available resources, build healthy soil, manage water efficiently and encourage farmers to keep their seed so that they can plant next season,

⁹ Herrero, M., Thornton, P. K., Power, B., Bogard, J. R., Remans, R., Fritz, S., & Watson, R. A. (2017). Farming and the geography of nutrient production for human use: a transdisciplinary analysis. *The Lancet Planetary Health*,1(1), e33-e42

will help ensure that truly sustainable food production systems are realised.

As the experience of Covid-19 has shown, in any scenario where international or national transportation systems are blocked or delayed, markets and ultimately food prices – particularly for fresh, nutritious items such as vegetables – are impacted. Urban populations are particularly vulnerable to changes in the food supply system, as they are almost fully reliant on a market over which they have no control. One possible approach to reducing this vulnerability is through boosting urban agriculture: this has significant potential to fill nutrition gaps, boost local food security particularly in “food deserts” in poorer areas, and create local jobs in food processing or other related activities, in which women may more easily participate. By working together, governments, town planners, local businesses (including transport and distribution companies), NGOs and community groups can allocate and design spaces for this, train people, and quickly start producing significant quantities of fresh food in an inclusive way.

While it is unclear exactly what the full impact of Covid-19 will be for the Horn and East Africa, it is recognised that food systems and other resource management practices that rely on increasing deforestation, land clearance, and ever closer contact between humans and wild animal pathogen host species will only increase the likelihood of similar pandemics in future.

A coordinated “one health” approach to human, animal and environmental health is needed to mitigate this threat¹⁰. There is a need therefore for closer collaboration across the humanitarian, development, public and private sectors as well as academia, to monitor and adapt the response to the virus across sectors, in line with evolving needs and contexts. This should help ensure that

challenges to the food system are understood, locally adapted solutions found, and ultimately collaborations are formed that result in a safer, more local, more resilient food system which supports both human and planetary health.

Humanitarian and Development actors, and the private sector should:

- Ensure vulnerable households have access to nutritious food by providing assistance through cash, vouchers or in-kind, in coordination with national safety net or social protection schemes.
- Advocate for food producers to continue to be classified as essential workers, with movement rights to fields/gardens and markets.
- Scale up support to food producers of all sizes to increase local production in 2020 and 2021, and to reduce food losses post-harvest.
- Encourage and support farmers to keep their seed until the next season by providing improved seed storage solutions, training and food assistance where needed during the lean season.
- Promote urban agriculture through training and working with local authorities, town planners and community groups to design and install spaces for this.
- Promote environmentally and climate change appropriate food production techniques such as those found in the [Resilience design in smallholder farming systems approach](#) to ensure sustainable settlements and locally adapted food production systems are promoted.

Governments should:

- Expand social protection systems to include Covid-19 affected people who cannot afford to meet their basic food and nutrition needs.

¹⁰ IFPRI, 2020: COVID-19 and Global Food Security <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/utils/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/133762/filename/133971.pdf#page=127>

- Continue to consider the broader impacts on food production, incomes and livelihoods when deciding on disease control measures. Monitor and intervene if staple food prices rise, and act to prevent hoarding and panic buying.
- Keep supply chains for food and related storage, preservation and cooking equipment moving, by monitoring and addressing logistics bottlenecks, including across borders.
- Continue to classify food producers, processors and transporters as essential workers, with movement rights to access fields and gardens, and bring produce to market.
- Promote – including through provision of subsidies or grants, and access to affordable financial products for food producers – resilient, climate-smart, health-focussed approaches to national food production at all levels, including urban agriculture and smallholder producers, with a focus on building healthy soil and careful water management.
- Review and amend policies to allow the inclusion of displaced people into agricultural and food system employment opportunities, including through incorporating agri-food systems into public works schemes.

Donors should:

- Adopt policies on food system support, including monitoring protectionism in food exporting countries, and make these explicit in Covid-19 response plans or strategies
- Help scale up the use of resilient, climate-smart approaches with potential to ensure food access to the most vulnerable in all contexts (urban, rural, displacement)
- Help bring universities, businesses, NGOs and governments together to come up with innovation in technologies and business models that will support the most vulnerable to manage the impacts of Covid-19 and remain food secure.
- Take a holistic view of hunger reduction including the political dynamics which underlie most food shortage and famines, and work with partners at all levels to prevent future catastrophes.

Links to other relevant information:

NRC Livelihoods and Food Security: <https://www.nrc.no/what-we-do/activities-in-the-field/food-security/>

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