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Political Science

COVID-19: UNPRECEDENT CHALLENGES ON FARMERS' FOOD SECURITY, LIVELIHOODS AND THEIR HEALTH

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

Globally, the COVID-19 crisis is primarily viewed as an unprecedented public health challenge. While it is not as deadly as the H1N1 flu epidemic, it is unprecedented in the rapid transmission of viral agents from one human to another worldwide. However, it is profoundly and widely affecting socio-economic activity, work life, food systems, and many other sectors. Thus, the pandemic's effects go far beyond just public health as it has wiped out or disrupted various jobs, put almost half of the world's 3.3 billion workforce at risk of losing their livelihoods. Potentially, many breadwinners will lose their jobs, and in the worst scenario, get sick and die. Moreover, Farmers' livelihoods and food security is a key concern in rural communities During COVID-19, which impacted financial, psychological, physical, and human assets, respectively.

INTRODUCTION

The World Food Programme warns that the world is facing an "epidemic of hunger." In addition to the 135 million people who were food insecure before the COVID-19 crisis, up to 130 million (nearly double) more people may face acute food insecurity. Along with this, tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the 2022 (as per WHO and FAO reports).

Most measures undertaken by governments to control COVID-19 have affected the livelihoods and the food security of communities. Border closures, quarantines, social distancing, curfews, and trade restrictions prevent farmers from accessing farms and markets—including the purchase of inputs and the sale of their products. Controls also prevent workers from harvesting agricultural products, triggering significant socio-economic consequences for people's livelihoods. While these restrictions are crucial for limiting the spread of the disease, they often disrupt chain markets and trade in agricultural and non-agricultural products, thus affecting the nutrition and food security of all, with particular consequences for those who are forced to travel for their livelihood. In particular, rural residents and farmers in developing countries are more vulnerable because most of them lack, in their local community, access to resources including clean water, schools, health centers, transportation, communication facilities, and social support, all of which are typically readily available in urban areas. The lack of these resources, services, and support put these populations at a higher risk and vulnerability. Residents of rural areas are more vulnerable to the prevalence of COVID-19 than residents of urban areas because hospitals and information centers designated for COVID-19 disease are in urban areas. Rural access to medical centers is difficult due to distance and travel costs; thus, there are barriers to prevention and treatment, resulting in a higher vulnerability of the COVID-19 disease.

Millions of enterprises face an existential threat (ILO report, 2022). Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lacks social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food.

The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and has laid bare its fragility. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets and agricultural workers from

harvesting crops, thus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed millions of livelihoods at risk. As breadwinners lose jobs, fall ill and die, the food security and nutrition of millions of women and men are under threat, with those in low-income countries, particularly the most marginalized populations, which include small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples, being hardest hit.

Millions of agricultural workers – waged and self-employed – while feeding the world, regularly face high levels of working poverty, malnutrition and poor health, and suffer from a lack of safety and labour protection as well as other types of abuse. With low and irregular incomes and a lack of social support, many of them are spurred to continue working, often in unsafe conditions, thus exposing themselves and their families to additional risks. Further, when experiencing income losses, they may resort to negative coping strategies, such as distress sale of assets, predatory loans or child labour. Migrant agricultural workers are particularly vulnerable, because they face risks in their transport, working and living conditions and struggle to access support measures put in place by governments. Guaranteeing the safety and health of all agri-food workers – from primary producers to those involved in food processing, transport and retail, including street food vendors – as well as better incomes and protection, will be critical to saving lives and protecting public health, people's livelihoods and food security.

In the COVID-19 crisis food security, public health, and employment and labour issues, in particular workers' health and safety converge. Adhering to workplace safety and health practices and ensuring access to decent work and the protection of labour rights in all industries will be crucial in addressing the human dimension of the crisis. Immediate and purposeful action to save lives and livelihoods should include extending social protection towards universal health coverage and income support for those most affected. These include workers in the informal economy and in poorly protected and low-paid jobs, including youth, older workers, and migrants. Particular attention must be paid to the situation of women, who are over-represented in low-paid jobs and care roles. Different forms of support are the key, including cash transfers, child allowances and healthy school meals, shelter and food relief initiatives, support for employment retention and recovery, and financial relief for businesses, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. In designing and implementing such measures it is essential that governments work closely with employers and workers.

Countries dealing with existing humanitarian crises or emergencies are particularly exposed to the effects of

COVID-19. Responding swiftly to the pandemic, while ensuring that humanitarian and recovery assistance reaches those most in need, is critical. While the COVID-19 is a public health disaster, there are concerns about its potential consequences for local and global food systems, including its capacity to ensure access to healthy and affordable food, as well as adequate income for low-income people, especially, smallholder farmers in developing countries. COVID-19 affects six pillars of food security:

Availability:

Quarantine and restrictions on the movement of people affect farmers' access to farms and agricultural activities. If farmers have trouble accessing their farms, this may eventually lead to less production, subsequently affecting food security, not just now, but also in the future.

Access:

COVID-19 conditions in different countries are reducing people's purchasing power. Restrictions on transportation and closure are serious challenges for maintaining secure trade throughout the rural economy in multiple countries.

Utilization:

The loss of purchasing power, especially for the poor, including daily wage workers and small business families, led to changes in people's consumption patterns, and consequently, poorer nutrition. It is also difficult to produce fresh agricultural products in some areas. In many countries, it is difficult to prepare fresh vegetables. In this period, when people think they can build their immunity (also against COVID-19) with proper nutrition, they are unable to buy food due to a lack of funds, and in many cases, even if they have money, food availability is limited.

Stability:

During COVID-19, food storage is a daunting challenge and sometimes difficult to achieve.

Agency:

During COVID-19, disadvantaged individuals and communities, including women, smallholder farmers, and vulnerable workers, were unable to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how they are produced, processed and distributed, as well as their involvement in the policy processes that shape food systems.

Sustainability:

The COVID-19 pandemic is an alarm for thinking about supply chains and resilience of future food systems. During this period, many issues, like nutrition and food sustainability, along with the need to take into account the long-term developments resulting from slow economic recovery, changes in consumer behavior, and disruption to risk management should be reconsidered. Compared to the time before the pandemic, households reduced their intake of specific food sets (vegetables) throughout the pandemic. During this period, the percentage of households facing severe food insecurity decreased from 21% to 17%. Socio-economic causes related to food insecurity in the pandemic period also include household income, personal savings, employment status, and nutritional knowledge of the head of household. Nutritional knowledge is the most important factor in improving food security during a pandemic. During COVID-19, almost all individuals are concerned about shortages and the inability to prepare staple foods.

Wayforward

Now is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies, particularly in the emerging and developing world. Only together can we overcome the intertwined health and social and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a

protracted humanitarian and food security catastrophe, with the potential loss of already achieved development gains.

We must recognize this opportunity to build back better, as noted in the Policy Brief issued by the United Nations Secretary-General. We are committed to pooling our expertise and experience to support countries in their crisis response measures and efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We need to develop long-term sustainable strategies to address the challenges facing the health and agri-food sectors. Priority should be given to addressing underlying food security and malnutrition challenges, tackling rural poverty, in particular through more and better jobs in the rural economy, extending social protection to all, facilitating safe migration pathways and promoting the formalization of the informal economy. Only then can we protect the health, livelihoods, food security and nutrition of all people, and ensure that our 'new normal' is a better one.

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