

## Preparing for the Food and Nutrition Security Impacts of COVID-19

### CHAIRS SUMMARY

On May 26, 2020, CARE Canada and FAO North America co-hosted a technical webinar, [Preparing for the Food and Nutrition Security Impacts of COVID-19](#).

The purpose of the discussion was to harvest stakeholders' perspectives on priorities, challenges and approaches for protecting people from food and nutrition insecurity in the context of COVID-19, and for building more resilient, representative and inclusive food systems through pandemic recovery efforts.

Almost 350 participants joined the webinar. They harkened from youth and indigenous communities, academia and think tanks, government and multilateral agencies, parliaments and civil society organizations in Canada, the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia.

Although the webinar did not seek to establish consensus on all points of discussion, several key themes emerged from the deliberations:

**COVID-19 will have deep social and economic impacts.** COVID-19 is not just a health crisis, but a social and economic crisis. The International Monetary Fund [predicts](#) that global GDP will shrink by 3 per cent in 2020, before returning to positive growth in 2021. According to the [International Labour Organization](#), the COVID-19 pandemic is causing unprecedented reductions in economic activity and working time. Global working hours declined by an estimated 4.5 per cent (equivalent to approximately 130 million full-time jobs) in the first quarter of 2020. Worse declines are expected in the second quarter. The almost 1.6 billion workers in the informal sector, and those living in lower-middle income countries, will suffer the sharpest declines. Women have been particularly affected, with millions of jobs cut in female-dominated industries, like garment factories and domestic work. Increased pressures caused by COVID-19 in weak and fragile states are already being witnessed through increased rates of social and political unrest. COVID-19 could precipitate the most severe [declines in human development](#) since the Human Development Index was introduced in 1990. Vulnerable populations – including women, indigenous peoples and others in extreme poverty – will be hardest hit.

*The COVID-19 pandemic is as much a socio-economic crisis as a health crisis. Poverty, inequality, purchasing power and access to resources will influence the depth of the pandemic's impacts, and the speed with which communities are able to recover.*

**COVID-19 is affecting people's ability to grow, buy, sell, and prepare food.** COVID-19 has exposed and amplified existing weaknesses and inequalities in food systems. Over 4.4 million people in Canada were already food insecure pre-COVID-19. That number is expected to [double](#) by the end of the calendar year as a result of the pandemic. Marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples, and women and girls will be disproportionately affected. Political leaders in several low- and middle-income countries have characterized the COVID-19 response as a choice between containing the virus and forcing millions to go without food and incomes. Mobility restrictions and loss of income are making it hard for vulnerable people to buy sufficient,

nutritious food. A drastic drop in demand has led to significant production surpluses and declining producer incomes, just as COVID-19 is disrupting access to markets, transportation, critical agricultural inputs and information. Although there is evidence of [some resilience](#) in global food systems, where supply has been disrupted but not collapsed, in the medium- and long-term COVID-19 will compromise harvests, incomes, food availability and prices. This could cause a prolonged economic and food and nutrition security crisis. According to the World Food Program, [265 million people](#) could face starvation by the end of 2020.

*Strategies are needed for addressing the food and nutrition security impacts of COVID-19. In the immediate term, an urgent scaling up of safety net programs is necessary to ensure access to healthy food, cash and water and sanitation for both rural and urban populations. In the medium-term, responses must protect vulnerable people's livelihoods and agricultural productivity. This should include measures to facilitate access to agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers, as well as information, storage, and market linkages. Longer-term economic recovery efforts should involve actors at all levels – from local saving groups, informal entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises, to microfinance and national, regional and international financial institutions - with a view to strengthening economic resilience and functioning value chains.*

*The unique context of a given community means that specific responses may need to start earlier or continue longer there than in other places. Adaptive response capacity will allow public and private actors involved in COVID-19 response to ensure that sufficient nutritious food is available to vulnerable community members when and where they need it, and that they have access to adequate resources for acquiring or producing food.*

**There is no health without food, and there is no food without women.** The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are [affecting women differently than men](#). Globally, women do 76 per cent of the unpaid care work, and COVID-19 is increasing their caregiving burdens. Women and girls everywhere are experiencing increased exposure to [gender-based violence](#) as they are confined with their abusers. Women small business owners are having to redirect capital to feed and care for their families. Similar dynamics persist in the areas of food production, consumption and nutrition. Women and girls are most susceptible to food insecurity, often eating least and last when crisis hits. Women around the world also do 85-90 per cent of the cooking, most of the grocery shopping, and invest more in children's nutrition. In developing countries, women make up 43 per cent of the farming workforce, but earn half the wages that men do. Women's lower access to resources means they produce 20-30 per cent less than men do. COVID-19 is stretching women's resources even further, making food-related tasks harder, and jeopardizing women's rights and economic gains. Given their disproportionate representation in food production, consumption and nutrition, women are an essential part of the solution to COVID-19.

*Women must be recognized as rights-holders, farmers, producers and market players.*

*Unleashing women's contributions to COVID-19 response and recovery requires complementary measures to ease women's unpaid care burdens, dependence on informal work, limited access to services and social protection, disrupted mobility and lack voice at household and other levels. Local women's organizations must be recognized, funded and supported as critical allies for reaching the most affected and hardest-to-reach populations.*

**Solutions begin at the local-level.** Value chains disruptions arising as a result of COVID-19 are exposing bottlenecks within food systems. These are affecting producers trying to get their products to market, and consumers trying to access healthy and affordable food. Prominent examples include Canadian producers' difficulties getting [livestock](#) processed, and the rising price of staple food commodities like [rice in Africa](#). This has highlighted the value of building resilient local food systems that can better withstand shocks and market disruptions, and that are better adapted to the unique needs of women. Speakers highlighted a variety of policy tools and levers available, including the introduction of reciprocity in commercial exchanges and trade, adjustments to risk management mechanisms, strengthening local cooperatives to sustainably and actively engage in local, regional and national value chains, support for family and local entrepreneurship, and the need to "digitize" local communities and economies.

*A food and nutrition response to the COVID-19 pandemic can address persistent inequities in food systems by investing in local producers, building resilient local food systems and ensuring people's access to the right kinds of food at the right time.*

**Base policy on evidence and integrate climate considerations throughout.** In many countries, the health and broader socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 are coming on top of locust infestations, protracted conflict, political instability, and significant refugee flows. These will be compounded by monsoon seasons, droughts and other natural disasters. Meanwhile, longer-term climate variability represents a key consideration for any effort to help food systems recover, rebuild and remain resilient to future shocks. COVID-19 and climate change share several other key similarities, including the need for international collaboration and science-based policy, and the need to collect and apply data on the ways in which these global crises impact people differently based on their gender, race, age, and economic status. Current data around COVID-19 and the food crisis is gender blind and/or neutral, putting women at risk not only of being hit harder by the COVID-19 and food crises but also of losing the gains they had made around rights, agriculture, financial inclusion, and decision-making.

*Responding to COVID-19 sustainably and inclusively requires recognizing and addressing challenges linked to climate change in all agricultural, social and economic strategies, as well as the collection and application of gender, age and diversity disaggregated data throughout the response.*

**Canada can play a leading role in helping communities around the world recover better, greener and more inclusively.** The Government of Canada is closely monitoring the potential impacts of COVID-19 on food and nutrition security in the poorest and most vulnerable countries, especially small-island developing states and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This has included initial contributions through humanitarian channels to key multilateral partners, including WFP and FAO as well as via existing programming implemented by non-governmental organizations. Canadian stakeholders in agriculture, academia, civil society and parliament are also seized with the steps that can be taken to mitigate food and nutrition security in the immediate term, and to strengthen food systems' ability to withstand future shocks. Canada can support a cohesive and

coordinated response by all actors responding to the food security needs of communities affected by COVID-19.

*COVID-19 is impacting food systems at both the global and local levels - from the larger Canadian economy, where food insecurity is affecting producers and consumers, to cooperatives and households seeking to feed their families from crops grown in developing countries. Canada can build on its historical leadership on human rights, women's rights, global health and in response to food and nutrition insecurity. This involves engaging actors in support of a cohesive response that leverages and supports women's leadership at all levels, and that sustains efforts over the immediate, medium and longer-term efforts to recover better, greener and more inclusively.*