



Christian Conference of Asia

## Will COVID-19 Worsen Food Insecurity in Asia?

### Concept Note

The World Food Programme (WFP) indicated that globally, about 135 million were experiencing life-threatening famine in January 2020. WFP foresees that by December 2020, about 265 million people will face extreme food security due to the novel COVID-19 pandemic. At worst, over 30 countries could experience a famine.

While food supplies are currently abundant and food prices are more or less stable now, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has a major, but still unclear, effect on food security in the medium-term and long-term. The outbreak of the pandemic could disrupt the food supply chain and affect food security. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, local and national governments need to engage in adaptation strategies to respond to the interrupted flow of water and food resources during the pandemic and after the pandemic: including the distribution and use of water, food trade, post-harvest process of agricultural produce, fluctuation in the price of food, as well as food safety. Related issues include sustainable agriculture as well as resilience to price and supply fluctuation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an apprehension about an impending escalation in food insecurity. The COVID-19 crisis negatively affects food security as it causes a chain of adverse events to take place, starting with the loss of employment and constraints on mobility, which affect the production, distribution, and sale of food, stoppage of remittances, and the inability to purchase food. As unemployment increases due to closures of establishments, more and more people will be food-insecure.

While COVID-19 is an 'equalising' disease which infects everyone, the chances of getting the infection depends upon one's economic income, which relates to one's means of livelihood as well as place of residence. Over 820 million people were already food-insecure prior to the pandemic are worst hit. The poor have no place to go for 'social distancing', as they are either homeless or live in tightly-packed rundown dwellings with several occupants in slum areas. Even though most governments around the world declared mandatory quarantine and lockdowns for weeks or months, those with adequate financial resources have not been too affected. Quarantine is a luxury that the poor cannot afford.

Although many migrant workers, some of whom were already infected, left their places of work in a hurry to rush home to the villages or their home countries, several were not able to return home and were stuck in their places of work, but found themselves jobless, as businesses ground to a halt due to the lockdowns. Stranded migrant workers became invisible and did not qualify for any governmental benefits, and had to stand in serpentine queues and crowds for food aid. Joblessness equates to food insecurity and hence the risk of infection and casualty for the low-income folks is greater than for the middle class and the economic elite who have the means and can afford to dole out cash for

hospitalisation and intensive care, while millions upon millions of people in some countries have to fend for themselves.

It is still too early for an accurate assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. However, it is certain that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world, with a heavy toll on human lives, economic activities, and food security. What is sure at least at this stage is that an economic downturn will affect the world. Such a situation is likely to trickle down to most developing economies, and a global economic slowdown will exacerbate food insecurity.

Surely, lockdowns have led to the flattening of the COVID-19 curve along with flattening the world economy as well, affecting the vast majority of the people, especially the poor. Does the flattening of the COVID-19 curve likewise lead to the flattening of the food curve, which will certainly cause untold suffering to the jobless? Due to the lockdowns, most labour has ceased, including food production distribution, and sale, resulting in a dwindling food supply. Farmers have had to dump fresh agricultural produce in many parts of the world as they could not go across demarcated areas, which authorities have cordoned off and quarantined. With restrictions on movements, there are concomitant disruptions in the food supply chains. Social distancing and the resulting reduced number of workers has affected producers, sellers, buyers, as well as trucking and logistics companies that are in the food supply chains.

The current pandemic aggravates the pre-existing food crisis, causing food insecurity. In this context, the proposed webinar focusing on food insecurity amidst the COVID-19 crisis will explore how the pandemic threatens to affect millions of people already made vulnerable by food insecurity, malnutrition, and the possible threats of food insecurity in future. It is also an opportunity to ask how deeply globalisation has affected agriculture and the production of staple food, and how this may change in the post-COVID-19 period.

The webinar shall discuss to what extent the pandemic is already affecting the entire food production and distribution system, the manner in which the lockdowns and restrictions on movement within and across countries has hindered food-related logistic services, disrupted entire food supply chains and the availability of food, and has impacted agricultural labour and production, especially in context of those people who live in the world's poorest countries. As the natural consequence of unemployment is hunger, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will definitely affect millions of people and so the big question is, is the worst of the tragedy yet to come; will the world experience more hunger and starvation in the coming months?

## Objectives

The objectives of the proposed webinar are:

- to offer the opportunity to share the food security situation during and after the pandemic in different contexts;
  - to seek ways in which the impending food security crisis could be averted;
  - to sensitize faith-based organizations about the potential food crisis that will affect millions of people; and,
  - to explore the ways in which churches, governments, and non-governmental organisations can respond to counter food insecurity now and after the pandemic ceases.
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