

Poverty, Food Security, Open Data and COVID-19

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World is an annual flagship report intended to inform on progress towards ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition worldwide. The flagship report, jointly prepared by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), provides in-depth analysis of key challenges for achieving zero hunger in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

New evidence, published in the 2019 edition of the report, confirms a rise in numbers of those suffering world hunger. The number has been growing over the past three years, returning to similar levels witnessed almost a decade ago. Hunger is on the rise in almost all African subregions, making Africa the region with the highest prevalence of undernourishment, with a growing number suffering from malnourishment. Hunger is also slowly rising in Latin America and the Caribbean, while Western Asia shows a continuous increase since 2010, counting more than 12 percent of its population undernourished today. The 2019 edition continues to show that significant challenges remain in the fight against food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms. The most recent evidence signals that the number of hungry people in the world is on an upward trajectory, having reached 821 million in 2017, or one in every nine people ^[1].

The Coronavirus crisis compounds an issue that is already of great concern, threatening to impact further the livelihoods of the world's poorest, of whom a majority depend on agriculture. The indigent population lack social security nets, putting its members at a greater risk of severe food insecurity. In times of crisis, the world's poorest are likely to run out of food, thereby experiencing hunger and - at the extreme - going for days without eating, putting health and wellbeing at risk.

The majority of people living with the threat of food insecurity are children, women and the elderly, many of whom rely on agriculture for survival. Of the 2.5 billion people in poor countries living directly from the food and agriculture sector, 1.5 billion come from smallholder households. Many of those households are extremely poor, since the highest incidence of working families below the poverty

line rely on agriculture for employment. Women make up between 43–50 percent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries in Eastern and Southeastern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Smallholders provide up to 80 percent of the food supply in Asian and sub-Saharan Africa ^[2]. COVID-19 represents a very high risk for African Food Security and Nutrition. Open Data is critical to gaining a greater understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect African Food Systems, especially in light of the current economic shutdown already taking place.

What will be the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food security for the world's poorest?

Is accurate data available to measure this?

What steps are governments taking to provide food security to the world's poorest whose livelihoods are affected by the crisis?

COVID-19 is a crisis of the genre that we've not experienced before. It is an unprecedented situation of global scale and is changing rapidly, with many unknown consequences and results.

Similar to all large-scale crises, this pandemic will have a domino effect. Aside from the more obvious impacts on health and finances, repercussions are expected to extend to food security and stability. It is predicted that COVID-19 will have both direct and indirect impacts on food systems, the nature and severity of which will be determined by how national governments and local populations react to the crisis, and how well prepared they are for such an event.

Decision making relies on accurate and reliable data to effectively support the planning and implementation of actions in a timely and responsive manner, particularly in crisis situations, as has been precipitated by COVID-19. With little available information to advise the value chain, the preparation necessary for maintaining sufficient stocks of foods – especially in countries and industries where production takes place on a daily basis – has been interrupted, and we have already seen the impact on supply chains.

Governments, especially in the developing world, always struggle to access data for decision making, which is even more hampered by crisis situations – such as that presented by the current pandemic. The lack of useful data and tools to provide timely assistance to the poor complicates the food situation, especially where governments

lack the processes and resources to advise food system management, as data for decision making is unavailable.

Supporting global efforts to make agricultural and nutritionally relevant data available, accessible, and usable for unrestricted use worldwide, the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) initiative focuses on the building of high-level policy as well as public and private institutional support for open data. GODAN encourages cooperation among existing agriculture, and data-aligned activities, businesses and organisations to help make data open. By bringing stakeholders together, GODAN works to help better inform the agri-food supply chain: increasing the data available to decision makers, and solving long-standing global problems like hunger and malnutrition.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) is currently undertaking studies on the global poverty increase likely to arise from COVID-19. The preliminary results from the study show that overall, the world economic growth rate has already fallen 1%, compared to a similar period in the previous year. This would translate to an increase in the extreme poverty rate of between 1.6% and 3% globally, depending on whether the slowdown is through productivity or trade disruption. The study indicates that the partial paralysis of business activity caused by COVID-19 containment measures would increase the number of people living in extreme poverty by a simulated 14 million (a 1.9% increase in the total factor productivity scenario). Moreover, this number would increase to 22 million (3.0% increase) if trade channels are further disrupted ^[3] ^[4]. Resources related to the risk, response and impact of COVID-19 on food systems and nutrition, relevant to the wider agriculture community are available at NutritionConnect ^[5].

This present crisis only serves to highlight the existing challenges in modern food systems. The crisis will be dealt differently between developed and developing countries, with the most affected being the poorest and most vulnerable. Poorer populations have fewer resources to cope with the loss of jobs and incomes, the increases in food prices and fluctuations in food availability, leaving them less able to adapt to the crisis.

Currently, East African countries are already dealing with other pressing issues, including recent desert locust swarms, destruction of crops and the resulting increase in food insecurity for affected populations. COVID-19 is likely to also affect food systems directly through impacts on food supply and demand, and indirectly through

decrease in purchasing power and in the capacity to produce and distribute food, which will have varying degrees of impact, and will disproportionately affect the poor and vulnerable (mostly women, children and elderly).

Farmers and producers – mainly in developing countries, although on a global level – are struggling to cope with this crisis as their income has been reduced due to the restrictions of food circulation, access to markets and social distancing. One of the most important components of maintaining the global food supply chain is the creation, access to and use of reliable, up-to-date data for all stakeholders involved. Governments should collect and share data, as well as support research, on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food systems. More than ever, governments and organisations need to urgently adopt open access policies.

Income losses are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries. With an estimated 55 percent of the global population having no access to social protection, these losses will reverberate across societies, impacting education, human rights and, in the most severe cases, basic food security and nutrition ^[6]. Social protection mechanisms for the poorest and most vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis need to be employed that incorporate provisions on the Right to Food. These mechanisms should provide essential assistance in the short term and support livelihoods in the long term ^[7].

The provision of a food security safety net, for the world's poorest, is very important if the economic slowdowns and downturns are to be safeguarded against, which calls for an open data perspective, as an enabler, in helping address this.

A greater availability of open data across Africa and Asia would be of great use to communities in the recovery from the pandemic, providing timely information to policy makers and helping monitor, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19 and any similar future crises. This would, however, call for investment in democratising data processes, reducing the digital divide and increasing access to information for the poor, especially women. Governments across the world need to commit to fully supporting the provision of open data policies in agriculture and nutrition to create enabling steps for ensuring food security for the world's poorest as a top priority in the fight against COVID-19.

GODAN: <https://www.godan.info/news/poverty-food-security-open-data-and-covid-19>