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COVID-19 and World Order

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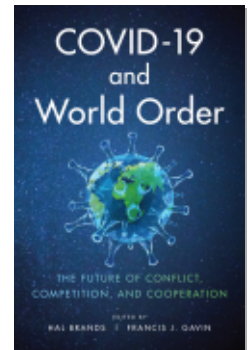
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No Food Security, No World Order

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While food insecurity and malnutrition remain significant challenges, over the last two decades, the global hunger rate decreased 25%.¹ Much of that decline is attributed to decreases in poverty. In the last 30 years, populations living in extreme poverty (defined as those living on less than \$1.90 per day) decreased from 2 billion in 1990 to 700 million in 2015. These gains have in large part been attributed to stronger social protection programs, increased basic service coverage, and income and private sector growth.

However, in the last four years, the number of people who go to bed hungry has risen from 796 million to 821 million.² Immediate or acute hunger increased by 70% over the same period, from 80 million to 135 million, with the majority of those populations living in Africa or conflict-affected countries.³ Why has hunger increased, undermining years of progress? Most of the rise is due to climate change and conflict.⁴ Sixty percent of people facing hunger live in war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen.⁵ Climate change, too, has played a significant role; climate-related natural disasters have significantly tested the efficiency and functioning of global food systems.⁶

The failure to address near-term food insecurity and hunger will block progress in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic—not only in the present moment but as the

pandemic spreads around the world over the next one to three years. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that the number of people facing acute food insecurity will rise to 265 million by the end of 2020, up by 130 million from 135 million in 2019, as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19.⁷ The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research estimates that 85 million people will fall into the “extreme poverty” category because of the pandemic, putting more people at risk for food insecurity and malnutrition. The World Bank estimates that 40 million to 60 million people will fall into extreme poverty in 2020, due to potential economic shocks resulting from the pandemic.⁸

There is deep concern about sub-Saharan Africa in particular. While some countries have made significant progress in alleviating poverty, civil wars and armed conflict continue to destabilize the region, disrupting agriculture and food production, destroying food supply chains and trade, and leading to internal displacement and migration. Almost 80 million people have been forced to move.⁹ Floods and droughts plague the continent, and now East Africa is dealing with severe locust swarms that are decimating food crops.¹⁰

This essay focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting global food security and the repercussions for future world order if we do not address food insecurity in the short and long term. There will be no world order at all without food security.

Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity

In the short term, hunger and food insecurity destabilize individuals, households, communities, and nations; over the long term, they give rise to social unrest, disenfranchisement, and political instability. While food insecurity can contribute to or exacerbate nutrition deficits, it is also linked to chronic diseases and conditions for people of all ages.¹¹ Food insecurity is especially detrimental to the health, development, and well-being of children.¹²

Food-insecure populations are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and obesity due to additional risk factors associated with inadequate household resources.¹³ Many of the same people who struggle with hunger also struggle with obesity. This may sound like an paradox, but both are often rooted in poverty. Food-insecure adults in the United States are 32% more likely than others to be obese—especially if they are women, black, non-Hispanic or Hispanic.¹⁴ Children living in food-insecure households also have a greater-than-average chance of being overweight or obese, and they have poor diets and eating habits.¹⁵ Food-insecure children also

tend to display behavioral problems, disrupted social interactions, poor cognitive development, and marginal school performance. These challenges, in turn, increase children's risk of becoming obese adults.¹⁶ There is also a significant body of epidemiological and mechanistic evidence which suggests that hunger *in utero* and in early life can put individuals at higher risk for being overweight in adult life.¹⁷

Obesity and other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are worsening around the world and are considered significant risk factors for COVID-19 hospitalizations and complications in both young and older patients.¹⁸ Diets are one of the significant risk factors for obesity and NCDs, and the ability to access food and healthy diets is being directly targeted by the COVID-19 pandemic because of an inefficient global food system.¹⁹ Much of that has to do with the design and reorientation of agriculture following the Second World War.

The first international commitment to ending hunger was made in 1943 at the UN Conference on Food and Agriculture at Hot Springs, Virginia. That conference set the goal of "freedom from want of food, suitable and adequate for the health and strength of all peoples" that should be achieved "in all lands within the shortest possible time."²⁰ After the war, the immediate focus was on reviving agriculture in Europe and East Asia. This rebirth of agriculture focused on positioning the food supply to produce basic food staples, consisting of energy-dense cereals, in order to feed a growing population. With an escalating Cold War and Malthusian fears that food shortages would stoke Communism, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Rockefeller Foundation, and the United States War against Hunger called the 1960s the "fighting hunger decade."²¹ Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, this "green revolution" spread to Asia and enabled cereal production to stay ahead of population growth.²²

Although the green revolution made major contributions to reducing undernutrition, other forms of malnutrition, such as obesity, began to rise.²³ Policies favoring the production of major cereals during the green revolution persisted during the decades following, undermining incentives to supply more diversified diets that contribute to better nutrition and health.²⁴ What we are left with in 2020 is a "syndemic" in which 1 billion people still suffer from hunger, 2 billion have some form of micronutrient deficiency due to low diet diversity, and 2.1 billion are overweight or obese.²⁵

Food Security and International Security

Food security is highly correlated with international security. Lasting food insecurity has been shown to lead to social unrest, food riots, radicalization, insta-

bility, and conflict.²⁶ Most countries currently experiencing conflict are classified by the FAO as “low-income food deficit,” and they have high burdens of undernourishment. Nearly 75% of children under five who experience chronic undernutrition live in countries affected by conflict that can last for generations after war is over.²⁷ It is therefore crucial for all countries to ensure that food security is a central priority in ensuring their own national security as well as international security and cooperation.

Many conflicts that lead to food insecurity and famine are human-made, stemming from natural resource competition, poverty, or health system shocks, such as epidemics like HIV/AIDS, malaria, or Ebola. Conflict generates food insecurity by affecting food availability, access, and use. Food systems that are repeatedly put under stress by conflict tend to move from predictable food-value chains to instability and volatility.²⁸ Violent armed conflict can lead to the destruction of crops, livestock, land, and water systems, as well as disruptions in infrastructure such as roads and other transportation modalities, markets, and the human capacity required for food production, processing, distribution, and safe consumption.²⁹ Sometimes hunger is not only an indirect result of conflict but is itself used as a weapon of war.³⁰ Many geopolitical conflicts cross the borders of different food systems. Fragile and failed nation-states influence, and are in turn influenced by, global market forces, and food security is often one of the first factors to be affected.

While most conflicts result from human action, the trigger for conflict or crisis may be natural, such as a prolonged drought, or economic, such as the change in the price of a country’s major staple or cash crop. Price volatility can spark disorder and social unrest among urban communities unable to afford basic staples.³¹ On the other hand, hunger may also be viewed as a cause of conflicts, a perspective that has been far less studied.³²

COVID-19 Began as a Food System Risk

Like H1N1 influenza, SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease) infected people through a zoonotic spillover event, probably from a bat, although another animal may have been involved. At first, case trace-back from the December outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan, China, implicated a “wet food market” in which wildlife and other live animals are bought and sold for consumption. These food markets are risky places from a pandemic preparedness perspective since stressed wild animals from many different areas are brought together—circumstances that encourage a pathogen to jump species. As China

reopened in early June 2020, COVID-19 cases surged again in Beijing. The government tracked seventy-nine new infections and again traced cases back to a bustling food market in the south of the city where live animals are sold.

Regardless of SARS-CoV-2's precise trajectory, experts agree that COVID-19 is a zoonosis, a disease that jumped from animals to humans. Sixty percent of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, and of that 60%, 72% originate in wildlife.³³ Humanity has experienced a long history of zoonotic diseases including rabies, Lyme, anthrax, SARS, Ebola, West Nile, Zika, Rift Valley fever, AIDS, and the bubonic plague that killed a third of the world's population in the 1300s.

The question remains as to why viruses jump from animals to humans and become insidious diseases. Food plays a large part in the transmission. Zoonotic disease spread and spillover events usually occur when animals are put in close proximity to humans, either because their natural habitat has shrunk or been destroyed or because they are removed from their habitats.³⁴ As a result of the reconfiguration of the planet's landscape—through urbanization, deforestation, intensive agriculture, and mining—many wild animals are forced to venture into the built environments of human populations. The excessive hunting and trade of wildlife for consumption, fiber and fur, or medicinal uses significantly increase the likelihood of cross-species mingling and infection. Modern transportation, by trains, planes, and automobiles, can accelerate the spread of pathogens around the world. According to a *New York Times* article, "other animals' diseases have not so much leapt onto us as flowed into us through channels we supplied."³⁵

Human activity is the biggest instigator of change, much of it related to agriculture. No other species has so profoundly changed the planet and the ecosystems that support species diversity in such a short span of time.³⁶ Given that nearly all of earth's systems show signs of human impact, many scientists suggest that we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, which is characterized by the influence of humans on the planet.³⁷ A preponderance of global evidence shows that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric, and other planetary system processes are now altered by humans.³⁸ Of the human behaviors driving the Anthropocene, agriculture and food production contribute significantly to climate change and other environmental stressors.

Just two centuries ago, only about 5% of the world's arable land was devoted to agriculture. That changed dramatically due to the reconstruction of agricultural systems in the wake of the Second World War. To feed the 8 billion people currently living on the planet, of whom 55% to 85% reside in urban areas, we now use 40% of the earth's landmass for agriculture.³⁹ This growth is driven by popu-

lation pressure and the demand for animal-source foods.⁴⁰ In turn, much of the increase in the animal and livestock sector to feed that demand promotes the spread of viruses between humans, livestock, and wildlife.⁴¹ This growth has resulted in a very efficient global agriculture system that is producing enough food to feed the world in aggregate, but it has also resulted in extreme human, environmental, and social equity costs.⁴²

Along with deforestation, the biodiversity loss of animal and plant species is accelerating at 100 to 1,000 times the pre-human extinction rate.⁴³ This lost biodiversity has been replaced with a homogenous food system dominated by a handful of food crops, including maize, rice, wheat, soy, chickens, and cattle.⁴⁴ This profound loss of diversity exposes the planet to a multiplicity of risks, including climate, nutrition, and zoonotic risks.

COVID-19: A Food System Shock

Food systems encompass the activities of producing, processing, distributing, preparing, and consuming food as well as the people who influence those activities.⁴⁵ Food systems are highly interconnected—any policy intervention that addresses one part of the system will affect other parts. These interconnections have implications for health, politics, society, the economy, and the environment. While food systems come in all shapes and sizes, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how extraordinarily interconnected they are. The pandemic has also shown that food supply chains have become far more resilient and adaptive than they would have been fifty or even twenty years ago due to globalization, trade, and technology.⁴⁶ Early data suggest that global markets of staple grains remain steady and robust for now, due mainly to abundant harvests in 2019.⁴⁷ This means that stocks of most staple food products are stable.

While stocks are adequate, the downstream effects along the food supply chain are showing vulnerabilities and disruptions; some are calling to move away from long globalized food supply chains to short local supply chains.⁴⁸ When a shock, such as a pandemic, affects food systems, the consequences are immediate, with potential long-term implications.⁴⁹ The pandemic implicates actors in all parts of the food system. The deep global economic shocks caused by COVID-19 will continue to affect the movement of cash and small and medium-size agribusinesses' access to financial institutions. There is early evidence that COVID-19 is also decreasing production capacity, slowing or limiting market access, limiting remittances as safety nets, lowering employment opportunities, and triggering unexpected medical costs.

Farming is a particularly vulnerable livelihood given the older age profile of farmers and their risk of higher morbidity and mortality with COVID-19 incidence. It is also a livelihood that is heavily reliant on mobile workforces. Border restrictions and lockdowns are slowing harvests in some parts of the world, leaving seasonal workers unable to get to farms to support their livelihoods. These restrictions also affect the ability of farmers to obtain the tools and technology they need, including pesticides, seeds, and equipment to plant and harvest crops.

Physical distancing, curfews, and lockdowns affect the costs of moving food around, within countries and across borders, leading to food loss and empty markets. Some boats full of food sit at ports waiting for clearance, leaving food vulnerable to rot.⁵⁰ Where farmers can grow crops, lockdown restrictions are regularly preventing them from transporting produce and livestock to markets. These supply chain disruptions have resulted in farmers burying perishable produce or dumping milk.⁵¹ Meat processing plants and food markets are being forced to close in many locations due to COVID-19 outbreaks among workers; in the United States, meat processing plants are seeing incidences of COVID-19 cases at twice the national average.⁵² As a result, many people struggle to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, meat, and fish. Even staple grains can be hard to come by; rice imports to sub-Saharan Africa that were intended to compensate for the shortfall have been disrupted or stopped, driving up prices of this staple.⁵³

Government-imposed shelter-in-place orders further restrict individuals' ability to earn wages; as a result, the purchasing power of many families that were already struggling with poverty has been compromised. One study projected that up to 20 million jobs could be lost in sub-Saharan Africa due to the COVID-19 crisis.⁵⁴ A Michigan State University survey of five South Asian countries—Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—found that about 37% of households reported that at least one person in the household had either lost a job or experienced a significant reduction in work hours during the past month.⁵⁵ As a rough approximation, data suggest that 75% of unemployment in March and April 2020 can be linked directly or indirectly to the COVID-19 pandemic.

High levels of unemployment, loss of income, and rising food costs are also making access to food difficult for many. The prices of basic foods have begun to rise in some countries at a time when people have less money in their pockets.⁵⁶ Food price volatility also generates uncertainty. More food staples and unhealthier, highly processed foods that are cheaper and have longer shelf lives will be consumed as a result of price hikes and shortages. More nutritious foods are expensive, hard to come by, and perishable.⁵⁷ The trend toward suboptimal dietary

patterns affects the quality of diets and their contributing risk to longer-term chronic disease, with significant health, economic, and societal costs.⁵⁸

In the long term, the COVID-19 health crisis may exploit the food system to worsen the global impact of the disease. Disruptions to health care and the ability to deliver essential services will significantly affect maternal and child health. Estimates suggest that in 118 low-income and middle-income countries, even a small reduction in the coverage of maternal and child health services could lead to 42,240 additional child deaths and 2,030 additional maternal deaths per month, with worst-case scenario disruptions resulting in 1,157,000 child deaths and 56,700 maternal deaths over six months.⁵⁹ The editors of the *Lancet Global Health* observed that “these indirect effects will reach far beyond the disease itself, with long-term social and economic consequences for individuals and society.”⁶⁰

Also in the long term, unresolved agendas will have consequences. Climate change is one such consequence. The syndemic that preceded COVID-19—continued conflicts, climate change, more violent and less predictable natural disasters, and the massive burden of malnutrition—has been undermining food security in many contexts.⁶¹ Agriculture and associated changes in land use account for nearly one-quarter of greenhouse gas emissions, making the sector the second-largest industrial emitter of greenhouse gases after the energy sector.⁶² If we stay on a business-as-usual course, extreme weather, food and water shortages, and increased prevalence of disease and other climate-related maladies are projected to cause an additional 529,000 deaths per year.⁶³

The bi-directional relationship between agriculture and climate change has implications for healthy diets and adequate food supplies. Agriculture is a driver of climate change, but it is also significantly affected by the changing climate. Although the precise impacts of climate change on agriculture are uncertain, projections suggest that the current practices and intensity of food production will be unsustainable under climate change.⁶⁴ The environmental challenges posed by climate change may require the production of even more food. Climate-induced stressors on the agricultural system will likely contribute to a reduction in crop yields and nutritional quality, especially in equatorial regions. These projections vary substantially, however, between regions and crops.⁶⁵ Climate change is adding a double layer of challenges for food access and distribution, affordability, and safety.⁶⁶

Early Lessons of COVID-19 for Food Systems

Some early food system lessons have begun to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons have limited evidence and data, but they are attended

with much speculation and sensationalism. There is great uncertainty about how food systems will continue to react and function depending on how long the pandemic lasts and whether, in the absence of a vaccine or herd immunity, countries retreat into lockdowns in the near future.

Food systems do not operate independently; they are linked to complex societal systems. The functionality of health systems can greatly impact food systems and vice versa. COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, such as Ebola, have demonstrated that a shock to the health system can have severe ramifications on the functioning of food systems, sometimes completely dismantling them.⁶⁷ These shocks can have effects within a system, but they also cut across other systems. For example, the health system has taken a heavy toll as it deals with COVID-19. While attention has been diverted, other diseases have been left unaddressed, and a rise in cases of measles and dengue has been documented.⁶⁸ The question is how to make systems more reactive, adaptive, and resilient in order to address multiple large challenges at once.

Second, surprisingly, governments can be nimble and act quickly. For years, the international development community has been pushing agendas such as poverty reduction, ending hunger, and mitigating climate change. While some of these agendas have led to global commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, governments are inconsistent as to how much political will and financial resources they are willing devote to these global targets; they are often slow to react and often fall short of what is needed. COVID-19 has shown that governments can act quickly to shut down borders and mandate curfews and lockdowns. While the slowdown in globalization has mitigated the spread of the disease in some places, allowing health systems to catch up, the quick reaction and dramatic alteration of the way the world normally works has had profound consequences for other sectors. The lesson is that when countries and states are faced with a significant threat, such as that of a highly infectious disease with potentially large-scale mortality, governments can take notice, act with speed, and act in their own interest.

Third, food supply workers have always been an undervalued segment of the workforce, but they have been thrust into the spotlight with COVID-19. A policy brief on COVID-19 and food released by the UN secretary-general shows that the highest proportion and greatest number of jobs lost during the pandemic are in the “middle” of the food supply chain (Table 1).⁶⁹ These workers—grocery store clerks, packagers, processors, distributors, and those who deliver food to markets and households—are at the frontlines, and they are at high risk of exposure to

Table 1 Impacts of COVID-19 on Food System Livelihoods (in millions)

	Food Systems		COVID-19			
	Jobs	Livelihoods	At-risk jobs	% of food systems jobs	At-risk livelihoods	% of food systems livelihoods
Primary						
production	716.77	2,023.80	152.35	21	404.76	20
Food processing	200.73	484.54	120.44	60	290.72	60
Food services	168.97	339.44	101.38	60	203.66	60
Distribution						
services	96.34	241.48	57.81	60	144.89	60
Transportation						
services	41.61	101.05	16.64	40	40.42	40
Machinery	6.51	13.18	1.72	26	3.48	26
Inputs	4.89	11.06	1.29	26	2.92	26
R&D	0.13	0.29	0.02	15	0.03	10
Total	1,280.93	3,214.84	451.64	35	1,090.89	34

Source: *United Nations Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition* (New York: United Nations, June 2020), 11, incorporating unpublished Food and Agricultural Organization / IFPRI estimates, based on International Labor Organization 2020—ILO extrapolation scenario. Not annualized. Jobs represent formal employment; livelihoods cover a broad array of self-employed, informal, migrant, and seasonal labor.

the coronavirus. The pandemic has also shed light on the reliance of agriculture on immigrant populations. In the United States alone, 50% of the agricultural workforce is composed of undocumented immigrants, whose livelihoods have been disrupted by the pandemic and who have no social support system or safety net in place.⁷⁰

Finally, safety nets, in the form of cash or food, are critical for the most vulnerable, the poorest, and the smallholder farmers and food workers in all sectors during the pandemic.⁷¹ Studies show that social protection programs improve both the quantity and the quality of food consumed by beneficiaries. The average social protection program increases the value of food consumed relative to expenditure by 13% and caloric acquisition by 8%.⁷² Social protection programs should be more closely linked to promoting the consumption and production of nutritious food, not just preventing food insecurity.⁷³

Achieving Resilient Food Systems for World Order

What would it take to achieve resilient food systems? Seven technical and coordination actions are presented below to address both the short- and the long-term

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food systems and to recommend measures to avoid catastrophic future zoonotic pandemics.

First, the short-term priority is to stabilize food systems and keep trade open and flowing. To do this, it is important to recognize that all workers across food supply chains are critical in keeping the food system moving. There is a need to support these workers, producers, and entrepreneurs and to ensure they are healthy so that they can keep the world fed. They need personal protective equipment including proper face masks, fair living wages, and decent work. While at work, measures need to be put into place to ensure that coronavirus testing is made available, spaces are designed for social distancing, and hand sanitizers and proper infrastructure for washing hands and maintaining hygiene are in place. Low-touch, low-contact equipment must be a priority investment by business. Workers should also be trained on how infectious disease spreads and how they can protect themselves and their customers. Unlike other shocks to food systems, such as climate change, this is a fast-spreading infectious disease that requires a complete new understanding of how pathogens spread through a highly interconnected food system involving many workers.

Second, there is a case to make for ensuring that our global food supply is safe, nutritious, and equitable. Diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases are risk factors for COVID-19 mortality, and additional attention should be devoted to preventing the former because of the latter.⁷⁴ The major driver of poor metabolic health, which increases the risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19, is a diet that relies heavily on starchy staples, sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats largely in the form of highly processed foods and that is low in unprocessed food, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, seafood, nuts, and seeds.⁷⁵ Poor metabolic health also explains some of the risks of hospitalization and death disproportionately impacting low-income and minority populations. African Americans account for 70% of COVID-19 deaths in the United States.⁷⁶ Multisectoral policies for better diets and nutrition should be a top priority for governments and businesses; these include strengthening health systems, improving school and workplace food environments (particularly in impoverished neighborhoods), implementing transparent and informative food labeling and dietary guidelines, and devising economic incentives for the private sector and consumers to produce and consume healthy foods.⁷⁷

Third, wildlife habitats are threatened and affected by land-use changes and deforestation, often due to agriculture expansion. Trade in wildlife is common, and it is available for purchase in wet markets in many parts of the world. This is

shifting viral reservoirs and contact-rates between virus-carrying animals and humans. Local authorities must formulate and enforce regulations governing the illegal sale of wildlife in global food trade and food markets while balancing respect for cultural food practices with public health prevention measures. Social behavior change strategies that focus on mitigating the risks of secondary infections and the handling of animals should be prioritized and scaled up. Campaigns in Sierra Leone with Lassa fever and in the DRC with Ebola increased awareness of how the disease is transmitted in the handling and exposure of animals as food or through food contamination by animals.

Fourth, social protection programs should be linked to promoting the consumption and production of nutritious food and addressing food insecurity. Supporting developing countries with increased availability and rapid deployment of funds to support their food security policy programs is essential. The secretary-general of the United Nations has called for a debt standstill and debt restructuring for low-income countries. David Beasley, the World Food Programme's executive director, recommends that international lending institutions work with low-income countries to strengthen health, education, and other social safety nets during and after this crisis. The World Food Programme and its partners need support to continue to provide food assistance and other services in what is now a global economic and food crisis.

Fifth, researchers and development practitioners must recognize that the health of people, animals, and our shared environment are tightly interconnected. There is a need for a greater understanding of how our food system relates to climate change and the environment and how changes in ecosystems where animals live are driving the circulation of viral spread in real time.⁷⁸ Public health issues are environmental issues, and taking a "One Health" approach to science is critical to avoid future zoonotic spillovers. Governments should not fall silent and turn inward on their global commitments. Instead, they should double down on fostering opportunities to re-engage and collaborate on issues that will require global cooperation such as climate change, sustainable development, ending hunger, and developing resilient ecosystems and oceans.

Sixth, there is no systematic global effort to monitor pathogens emerging from animals that put human populations at risk. The WHO should lead this effort, but it needs support from its member states. With the United States turning its back on the WHO during what may be one of the most crucial global health issues of the century, multilateral cooperation is imperiled. There is a need for even more surveillance through traceability technologies in the food system to track potential

zoonotic and food-borne illnesses that threaten food systems and the health of our global population. One Health approaches—those at the intersection of human health, animal health, and environmental health—are critical as we respond to COVID-19, recover and learn from its impacts, and prepare for the next zoonotic pandemic.

Finally, financial backing is crucial if we are to ensure that hunger does not become the prevailing pandemic. The United Nations established a COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan that is estimated to cost \$2 billion. These funds would enable agencies such as the WHO, the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme to provide basic services to the most vulnerable populations including food, water and sanitation, vaccinations, and COVID-19 testing materials and medical equipment. Only 46% of the required amount has been received.⁷⁹ Fending off a potential hunger pandemic will require not just public investment in these essential services and social protection but also a greater long-term private sector investment in sectors such as agriculture.⁸⁰

The Necessity of World Order for Food Security

None of these technical recommendations to fix food systems is sustainable in the current fractured and sclerotic global politically enabling environment. For food systems to function effectively, equitably, and sufficiently during the pandemic and long after, the political environment must embrace global cooperation and inclusion, support private sector engagement, and minimize political polarization and geopolitical competition.

Climate change, for example, is a wide-reaching, large-scale transnational challenge in which every country is threatened and every country must act with others, in a coordinated fashion, on a short time-scale to mitigate the threat. The same is true for the COVID-19 pandemic. It requires a coordinated effort because of its inherent infectious nature and because of the interconnected globalized world in which the virus can spread. The adage “we are all in this together” requires strong public institutions at national and supranational levels. However, what we currently see is a world splintering geopolitically and ideologically. This trend does not bode well for an internationally coordinated response to the global COVID-19 crisis and the health, food, and economic systems that the pandemic has battered.

To ensure that food systems keep functioning, leadership, cooperation, and capacity are critical. Francis Fukuyama observed that “countries with dysfunc-

tional states, polarized societies, or poor leadership have done badly, leaving their citizens and economies exposed and vulnerable.”⁸¹ It is not surprising that states led by populist, inward-facing leaders such as the United States, Brazil, and Mexico are not sufficiently addressing the pandemic. This has led to dire consequences for the citizens living in these countries, many of whom struggle with food insecurity and high COVID-related morbidity and mortality.

The COVID-19 response has also displayed the weaknesses of the multilateral system and existing institutions.⁸² Within this, the global food architecture is often slow and outdated. For example, there is no overarching international governance structure that deals with food shocks. UN agencies involved in food systems decision making, such as the WHO, the FAO, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme, now more than ever need to coordinate and not worry so much about mission creep. The FAO (formed in 1945) and the WHO (formed in 1948) were created during a time when alliances were indispensable, but these organizations are perhaps now out of date and in need of an overhaul. The CGIAR (formerly the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research), a potentially influential global partnership that unites international organizations engaged in research about food security, is in the middle of yet another reform process. This process must quickly come to closure, with a renewed effort to lead agriculture into the 21st century. The World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), along with the bilateral organizations, need to step up their financial commitments. Currently, nutrition and agriculture receive less than 5% of official development assistance, which is largely inadequate.⁸³

However, cooperation can happen in times of crisis. In 2008, the world food price crisis exposed millions of people to food insecurity and poverty and sparked food-related riots. The international community was ill prepared to respond, due to lethargic coordination of food policy and governance efforts. Yet, rising from the ashes, the G20 governments launched the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), a multilateral fund to support low-income countries and increase investment in agriculture. Since its inception in 2010, GAFSP has invested \$1.6 billion supporting more than 13 million smallholder farmers. Perhaps more efforts to scale GAFSP up and out should be considered to address food insecurity with the current pandemic.

Some are calling for a well-funded public health-oriented treaty organization that organizes a coordinated response during pandemics.⁸⁴ This too is needed within the food governance architecture. The UN Food Summit in 2021 might be

a moment to create a global strategy for food governance that is nimble, modern, and inclusive, backed by a body modeled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that provides evidence and science to support actions.

Conclusion

Governments, communities, and businesses around the world are learning to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The short-term priority is to stabilize food systems to ensure that hunger, poor diets, and failing health do not cause a complete economic collapse. But it is in times of great crisis that fundamental reforms are born. The United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the welfare state were developed following the Second World War as governments came together to move toward a path of global cooperation, stability, and peace. The FAO and the WHO were formed as specialized agencies within the United Nations to address issues with international implications such as global hunger, poverty, and infectious diseases like smallpox and polio, under the assumption that global cooperation was imperative.

The world, however, has changed over the last fifty-plus years, and we face new challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a food, economic, and social crisis, and it has exacerbated disease burdens. There is a need to reshape our food systems for tomorrow—to deal with the COVID-19 crisis as well as with the much larger diet-related health crisis, which has been with us for decades. This is the time to foster greater collaboration between governments, civil society, the multilateral system, and the private sector to reshape a post-crisis narrative about how the global food architecture and governments can better work together to improve access for all to safe, nutritious foods.

NOTES

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