
THE HUNGER VIRUS: HOW COVID-19 IS FUELLING HUNGER IN A HUNGRY WORLD

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SUMMARY

COVID-19 is deepening the hunger crisis in the world's hunger hotspots and creating new epicentres of hunger across the globe. By the end of the year 12,000 people per day could die from COVID-19 linked hunger, potentially more than the disease. The pandemic is the final straw for millions of people already struggling with the impacts of conflict, climate change, inequality and a broken food system that has impoverished millions of food producers and workers. Meanwhile, those at the top are continuing to make a profit: eight of the biggest food and drink companies paid out over \$18 billion to shareholders since January even as the pandemic was spreading across the globe - ten times more than has been requested in the UN Covid-19 appeal to stop people going hungry. While governments must act to contain the spread of this deadly disease, Oxfam is also calling for urgent action to end this hunger crisis and build fairer, more robust, and sustainable food systems.

INTRODUCTION

'COVID-19 is causing us a lot of harm. Giving my children something to eat in the morning has become difficult. We are totally dependent on the sale of milk, and with the closure of market[s] we can't sell the milk anymore. If we don't sell milk, we don't eat.'

Kadidia Diallo, a female milk producer in Burkina Faso.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added fuel to the fire of an already growing hunger crisis. Even before the pandemic struck, hunger was on the rise. In 2019, 821 million people were estimated to be food insecure, of which approximately 149 million suffered crisis level hunger or worse.¹ Now the coronavirus has combined with the impacts of conflict, spiralling inequality and an escalating climate crisis to shake an already broken global food system to its foundations, leaving millions more on the brink of starvation.

The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that the number of people experiencing crisis-level hunger will rise to 270 million before the end of the year as a result of the pandemic, an

82% increase since 2019.² This means between 6,000 and 12,000 people per day could die from hunger linked to the social and economic impacts of the pandemic before the end of the year,³ perhaps more than will die each day from the disease by that point.⁴

This brief explores how the COVID-19 pandemic is fuelling hunger in an already hungry world. It highlights the 10 extreme hunger hotspots where the food crisis is most severe and getting worse as a result of the pandemic: Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Afghanistan, Venezuela, the West African Sahel, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Haiti. Together these countries and regions account for 65% of people facing crisis level hunger globally (see Table 1).

But the story does not end there. New hunger hotspots are also emerging. Middle-income countries such as India, South Africa, and Brazil are experiencing rapidly rising levels of hunger as millions of people that were just about managing have been tipped over the edge by the pandemic. Even the world's richest countries are not immune. Data from the UK government shows that during the first few weeks of the lockdown as many as 7.7 million adults reduced their meal portion sizes or missed meals, and up to 3.7 million adults sought charity food or used a food bank.⁵

This brief also explores why so many people are going hungry and why so many more are so vulnerable to hunger. It shines a light on a food system that has trapped millions of people in hunger on a planet that produces more than enough food for everyone.⁶ A system that has enabled eight of the biggest food and beverage companies in the world to pay out over \$18bn to their shareholders since the start of 2020, even as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded across the globe.⁷ This is over 10 times the amount of food and agriculture assistance funds requested in the UN's COVID-19 humanitarian appeal.⁸

Oxfam recognizes the need for governments to take urgent action to contain the spread of the coronavirus but is also calling on them to act now to end this hunger crisis. To save lives now and in the future, governments must: (1) fully fund the UN's humanitarian appeal, (2) build fairer, more resilient, and more sustainable food systems, beginning with a high-level Global Food Crisis Summit when the Committee on World Food Security meets in October, (3) promote women's participation and leadership in decisions on how to fix the broken food system, (4) cancel debt to allow lower-income countries to put social protection measures in place, (5) support the UN's call for a global ceasefire, and (6) take urgent action to tackle the climate crisis.

Table 1: Ten extreme hunger hotspots

Location	Number of people (in millions) facing crisis level hunger or worse in 2019	Percentage of population facing crisis level hunger or worse in 2019	Global health preparedness ranking (out of 195 countries)	Confirmed COVID-19 cases ⁹
Yemen	15.9	53%	190	941
DRC	15.6	26%	161	5,826
Afghanistan	11.3	37%	130	29,143
Venezuela	9.3	32%	176	3,917

West African Sahel*	9.8	5%	–	33,846
Ethiopia	8.0	27%	84	4,532
South Sudan	7.0	61%	180	1,892
Syria	6.6	36%	188	204
Sudan	5.9	14%	163	8,580
Haiti	3.7	35%	138	5,211

*The West African Sahel region covers Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Senegal, and Nigeria.

This table highlights the top 10 hunger hotspots based on the number of people experiencing crisis level hunger in each country.¹⁰ The percentage of the population affected is also given along with data on confirmed COVID-19 cases as of 22 June 2020. It should be noted, however, that these case figures are likely to significantly underestimate the problem given the limited public health and testing capabilities of these countries.¹¹ The Global Health Preparedness Index ranks countries on their capacity to address health emergencies and provide health services.¹² Poor health systems increase people's vulnerability to hunger as, for example, lack of medical care will mean health problems that prevent or reduce people's capacity to earn a living or produce food go untreated.

COVID-19: FUELLING HUNGER IN A HUNGRY WORLD

Conflict, the climate crisis, inequality and a broken food system mean millions of people are living in, and dying from, hunger every year. Millions more are now joining their ranks as a result of spiralling unemployment and the economic disruption caused by the pandemic.

Mass unemployment

The dramatic slowdown in the global economy, coupled with severe restrictions on movement, has resulted in mass job losses over the last few months. With no income or social support, millions of people cannot afford enough to eat. The International Labour Organization estimates that the equivalent of 305 million full-time jobs have been lost because of the pandemic, with women and young people especially hard hit.¹³ Up to half a billion people could be pushed into poverty as a result.¹⁴

Globally, 61% of people work in the informal economy.¹⁵ Forty percent are women and many are young – in fact three-quarters of young adults earn a living in the informal sector.¹⁶ These workers, including domestic helpers, street vendors, delivery drivers and daily wage labourers on construction sites, have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic as they have no job security and no access to the benefits that come with formal employment, such as unemployment insurance.¹⁷

Many poor households are also grappling with a drop in remittance flows (the money that migrant workers send home to their families) linked to a rise in unemployment. Global remittances totalled \$554bn in 2019¹⁸ and are a lifeline for millions of families that are living in poverty.¹⁹ The World Bank estimates that the pandemic will result in a 20% decline in remittances to low- and middle-income countries – which amounts to more than \$100bn.²⁰

Governments have responded to the unprecedented disruption in economic activity by instituting ad hoc social protection policies that vary considerably in terms of their reach and scale.²¹ Many wealthy nations have introduced multi-billion-dollar economic stimulus packages

to support business and workers, but most lower-income nations lack the financial firepower to follow suit.²²

Box 1: Women, food, and hunger

Women play a crucial role in the global food system as producers, as workers on plantations and in processing plants. Women are also typically responsible for buying and cooking food for the family. Yet on every continent the prevalence of food insecurity is higher for women than for men – with the largest differences found in Latin America.²³

While there is limited gender-disaggregated data available to document how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting women,²⁴ decades of experience tell us that women and children are disproportionately harmed during economic downturns and in times of food insecurity.

Women make up a significant proportion of groups such as informal workers and smallholder producers²⁵ that have been hit the hardest by the economic fallout of the pandemic. Moreover, women are often the most vulnerable within these groups because of systemic barriers such as discrimination in terms of land ownership and pay, or because of the social stigma associated with being a single parent, an unmarried mother or the victim of sexual violence.²⁶ The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by up to 30% – reducing the number of hungry people in the world by up to 17%.²⁷

Added to this is women's unpaid care and domestic workload. Before the pandemic, women did three times more unpaid care work than men globally, and this has risen dramatically in recent months as a result of illness and school closures. A survey conducted in Nairobi's informal settlements, for example, revealed that 42% of women were unable to get paid work because of an increased care and domestic workload caused by the pandemic.²⁸

All this, together with the fact that women are often the first to skip meals or eat smaller portions so the family ration goes further, means women are often the first to go hungry. This has serious consequences for their health and that of their children. For example, anaemia – caused by a lack of iron in the diet – is a leading cause of maternal deaths in low-income countries around the world. A 2014 study conducted in India found anaemia contributed to 50% of maternal fatalities.²⁹

Food producers pushed to the brink

Small-scale producers across the developing world, many of them women, form the backbone of local food systems. They play an important role in producing food and providing employment but are among the most vulnerable to hunger as a result of the pandemic.

Travel restrictions introduced to contain the spread of the coronavirus, as well as illness among workers, mean many farmers have been unable to plant or harvest crops, or access markets to sell their produce or buy seeds and tools.³⁰ Elsewhere, pastoralist communities have been unable to move their animals to seasonal sources of food and water, affecting the health of their livestock and its value at sale.³¹

Although lockdowns are easing in many countries, producers still face other challenges. For example, many small-scale farmers use their land as collateral for loans, so there is a fear that failed or wasted harvests could lead to them losing it. In other instances, land deal consultations have continued despite movement restrictions that hamper proper community consultation, increasing the risk of land grabs.³² In Uganda the government has prohibited evictions during lockdown but land grabs have continued. In one case more than 35,000 people from 20 villages have been left without a home or land on which to grow food after being evicted.³³

There are also worrying signs that some companies are using the pandemic to take advantage of consumers. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index, which tracks the average price supermarkets and other retailers pay for a basket of basic goods, has fallen steadily since January 2020.³⁴ However, consumer prices are going up in many countries as a result of disruption to local production and supply chains, inflation, panic buying and potential price gouging (where goods are sold at a much higher price than is considered reasonable or fair).³⁵ In the USA, for example, consumer prices increased by 2.6% for groceries,³⁶ on average, but farm income fell.³⁷

Box 2: Farming under lockdown

An Oxfam survey³⁸ of small-scale farmers in Uganda, Hong Kong, Nepal, Guatemala, and Zambia has revealed how measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus have impacted on their livelihoods.

Small-scale farmers in Zambia said they were unable to sell their produce because local markets were shut or because they were worried about contracting the virus. Those farmers who did get to market said they were paid less than normal for their produce.

In Nepal, the middlemen who collect vegetables from farms and take them to market have been unable to visit, depriving many farmers of a vital source of income.

In Uganda, lockdown coincided with the planting season and the closure of community markets left many farmers unable to buy seeds. Areo Joyce, a small-scale farmer, told Oxfam: 'Working as a full group is not allowed. Thirty people cannot work at the same time on the same garden. This has delayed planting.'

Oxfam's 'Sowing Diversity = Harvesting Security' programme works with small-scale farmers to improve food security and nutrition. www.sdhsprogram.org

Dwindling humanitarian aid

The delivery of humanitarian assistance has become more difficult because of the pandemic. Restrictions on the movement of people and goods, and the extra precautions required to protect people's health during aid distribution, is slowing efforts to reach people with food assistance. In some countries such as Chad and Mauritania in West Africa, aid agencies have had to scale back or suspend humanitarian activities.³⁹

To date, 24% of the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) – which requires \$7.3bn – has been funded.⁴⁰ Within this, just 9% of the funding required to tackle rising food insecurity has been pledged.⁴¹ In Yemen, the WFP halved the rations for 8.5 million people in the north of the country,⁴² and Afghanistan has received just 6% of the total \$60m needed to fund its food security programmes in response to COVID-19.⁴³

These cuts are already affecting the ability of agencies such as Oxfam to respond at a time when the pandemic has heightened humanitarian need. Institutional donor funds have also been slow to move through the system, and local humanitarian organizations on the front line of the COVID-19 response have had very little access to funding.

Moreover, mandatory government restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the virus have made it challenging for humanitarian workers to reach the most vulnerable people. To overcome these problems, Oxfam and our local partners are developing innovative approaches to reach people, including providing electronic cash transfers, clean water, accessible ATMs where people are able to access water stations through credit prepaid by Oxfam, and the use of cryptocurrency in countries where hyperinflation makes cash distribution more complex.

Since the pandemic started, Oxfam has reached 4.5 million of the world's most vulnerable people with food and clean water, working together with over 344 partners across 62 countries.

We aim to reach a total of 14 million people by raising a further €100m to support our programmes.⁴⁴

A broken food system

Even before the pandemic, our industrial model of agriculture production, heavily reliant on chemical inputs to grow vast monocrops for export, was failing to provide food security and alleviate poverty for millions of people.

Huge inequalities mean that the small-scale farmers who produce more than 70 percent of the food consumed by people living in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa,⁴⁵ and the more than 1.7 billion people working on farms, plantations, fishing boats and in processing factories,⁴⁶ are unable to produce enough food, or earn enough income, to escape hunger and poverty.

For decades, governments in lower-income countries have failed to invest in agriculture and the rural economy, leaving small-scale producers without the infrastructure, information, or technology they need to access markets, improve productivity, and adapt to an increasingly hostile climate. For example, between 2014 and 2018 only eight African countries consistently spent 10% or more of their government budget on agriculture.⁴⁷

Small-scale producers in lower income countries are also often forced to compete in global markets against farmers from wealthy nations who enjoy substantial subsidies from their governments.

In addition, the powerful agricultural traders, food and beverage corporations, and supermarkets that dominate the food sector are able to dictate the price and terms of food trade. Their focus on reducing costs and maximizing profits means producers and workers are being paid poverty wages yet shoulder most of the risk associated with food production. A 2019 Oxfam survey of tea plantation workers in Assam, India, for example, revealed that more than half of workers were not able to live on their wages alone. Meanwhile, Indian domestic tea brands captured 58% of the price paid by consumers.⁴⁸

As a result, millions of smallholder producers and food workers are struggling to survive – with significant consequences for the food security of communities and countries.

The climate crisis

The climate crisis is increasing food insecurity in all the hunger hotspots. Higher average annual temperatures, more extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, and less predictable weather patterns spell disaster for food production. Projections indicate that climate change will negatively impact crop yields in many parts of the world and increase food prices. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) also estimates that up to 183 million additional people could face hunger by 2050 due to climate change.⁴⁹

Climate change intensifies the existing challenges that producers face. In the Middle East, Central and East Africa, and parts of Asia, farmers have been battling some of the largest locust invasions in decades after exceptionally wet conditions in their breeding grounds – which have been linked to the climate crisis – led to a surge in their numbers. More than six million people in locust-affected areas are suffering from crisis levels of hunger.⁵⁰ In Ethiopia alone, an estimated 356,000 metric tons of cereal crops and 1.3 million hectares of pastureland have been lost to locusts to date, with more destruction expected. As a result, approximately one million Ethiopians require food assistance⁵¹. Meanwhile, movement restrictions as a result of the pandemic are slowing the roll out of measures to control the swarms and prevent them from destroying fields.⁵²

Inequality

We live in a time of extreme inequality. While nearly half of humanity scrape by on less than \$5.50 a day, the world's 2,200 billionaires have more wealth than 4.6 billion people combined.⁵³ The pandemic is exploiting and exacerbating these inequalities, as the poorest people are most impacted by loss of jobs and income.⁵⁴

These inequalities trap millions in poverty and in hunger. In Malawi, for example, well-off families consume three times more calories than the poorest families.⁵⁵ When food prices increase, wealthy families may not notice. Even if their income declines, food costs represent a relatively small fraction of their household expenditure. But for the poorest families, whose spending on food totals as much as half of their income,⁵⁶ even the smallest increase in food prices, or drop in income, can cause them to skip meals or to eat less nutritious food.

As outlined above, these profound inequalities extend to the food system, where unequal access to food rather than insufficient global production is leaving people hungry.⁵⁷ Financial investments in large-scale agribusiness are often prioritized, while investments in small-scale producers are woefully neglected.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, supermarkets and food and drink companies continue to keep the lion's share of the price consumers pay for their products.

Conflict

Conflict is both one of the main causes and consequences of food shortages, so it is not surprising that 8 of the 10 extreme hunger hotspots identified by Oxfam are affected by high levels of violence and insecurity. In illustration of this, 60% of the world's 821 million people who are food insecure, and nearly 80% of stunted children,⁵⁹ live in countries affected by conflict.⁶⁰

People who are forced to flee violence, often with little more than the clothes on their back, are particularly vulnerable. However, food is often in short supply even for those who stay put. Farming can become dangerous, as farmers may be attacked, farms may be looted, and travelling to and from market may become too dangerous to travel. Production shortfalls can lead to rising food prices, but at the same time war destroys economies, leaving people without money to buy what little food there is.

Hunger can also be a weapon of war. Warring parties can destroy markets and warehouses, suspend food imports, and cut transportation links to gain power. Prior to the war, Yemen imported 90% of its food and almost all of its fuel, so the sea, land and air restrictions imposed as a result of the conflict had a significant impact on the price and availability of food.

These issues are exacerbated by depleted funding and humanitarian aid as a result of the pandemic.

Box 3: War-fuelled hunger in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) is green and verdant but has been battered by conflict and insecurity since 2004. The country ranks last out of 117 nations in the Global Hunger Index,⁶¹ with one-in-two people being food insecure and nearly one million estimated to be on the brink of famine.⁶²

The scarcity of food both fuels and is fuelled by conflict. Thousands of farmers have been forced to abandon their farms⁶³ or watch their crops and livestock burn, and UN peacekeepers have to keep watch as people collect firewood and water.

The COVID-19 pandemic is further exacerbating this crisis. The reduction in transport, and the partial closure of borders with Cameroon and the DRC, has led to a surge in the price of imported food – the cost of rice and beans, for example, has increased 80% since last

year. By April 2020, locally produced goods, such as maize, cassava and sorghum, had also risen in price by nearly 50% compared with the same point the previous year.⁶⁴

Oxfam has scaled up its operations in CAR to respond to the pandemic, helping over 54,000 people with food and seeds, as well as providing soap and cloth masks.

EXTREME HUNGER HOTSPOTS

Yemen

A single mother of four children and owner of a hair salon in Sana'a says: 'I barely get a customer to visit my salon since the past few months, I am falling short to pay expenses and rent for over two months, and buying food on credit. I don't know what to do. Even those people who used to help me with cash in the past have stopped since news of this coronavirus was heard in Sana'a.'

Ravaged by more than five years of war, Yemen is experiencing the worst humanitarian and food security crisis in the world. Two-thirds of the population – 20 million people – are hungry, and nearly 1.5 million families currently rely on food aid to survive.⁶⁵ Within this bleak picture, women and children are the worst affected, with 1.4 million pregnant or breastfeeding women and over two million children suffering from moderate or severe malnutrition.^{66, 67}

The ongoing conflict has decimated the country's infrastructure, restricted food imports, and led to mass unemployment. Health workers have not been paid since the start of the war.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, locust swarms that have gone unchecked because of the war are adding to the problems and fuelling hunger in the country.

As of late June, Yemen had reported over 900 coronavirus infections and over 250 deaths.⁶⁹ However, with only half of the health system functioning⁷⁰ and limited capacity to test for the virus, these figures are likely to be grave underestimates.

The impact of the pandemic on food security in Yemen is clearer. The slump in economic activity in wealthy Gulf states, brought on by lockdowns and low oil prices, led to an 80% drop in remittances in the first four months of 2020.⁷¹ This has had a significant impact on poverty and food security. Last year remittances brought \$3.8bn into Yemen, equivalent to 13% of its gross domestic product (GDP).

The closure of borders and supply routes in response to the pandemic has further disrupted supply chains in a country that imports 90% of its food.⁷² This has led to food shortages and price increases, especially for wheat flour and sugar.⁷³ Food imports were down 43% in March and 39% in April compared with the same months in 2019.⁷⁴

Continued fighting, despite UN calls for a global ceasefire, has also hampered humanitarian access, with aid reaching only 13.5 million people in early 2020, compared with 15.2 million in 2019. Humanitarian aid, already in decline before the crisis, is severely stretched. The USA cut \$73m of its aid to Yemen in March 2020,⁷⁵ and a donor pledging conference held in June raised only \$1.35bn to support the country's COVID-19 response, well below the target of \$2.4bn.⁷⁶

Oxfam is rehabilitating the water supply to one of the main hospitals in Aden, providing cash assistance to families affected by flooding in the south of the country, and training community health volunteers to provide information about coronavirus and the importance of hygiene and hand washing.

Afghanistan

'Poverty is another disease, it is as dangerous as this virus and if people continue staying home this way, a lot of families could die because of hunger,' Afghani woman.

Over one-third of Afghanistan's population, approximately 11.3 million people, are food insecure; of these, nearly four million people are one step away from famine.⁷⁷ As a consequence, almost 41% of children are stunted as a result of undernutrition.⁷⁸

Four decades of conflict have forced over four million people to flee their homes,⁷⁹ destroyed people's livelihoods and left a quarter of the labour force jobless. Recovery has been hampered by a series of extreme droughts since 2018 and an economic downturn in Iran that was already affecting remittances to Afghanistan before the pandemic hit.

The pandemic has pushed millions of people into hunger and poverty.⁸⁰ The number of people on the brink of famine has risen sharply from 2.5 million in September 2019 to 3.5 million in May 2020.⁸¹

Government efforts to curb the spread of the virus have ravaged Afghanistan's already frail economy, slashing the national revenue by \$800m – a 30% decrease compared with 2019.⁸² By June 2020, an estimated 35 million people – a staggering 93% of households – were in immediate need of an emergency assistance, as 70% of households reported decreased incomes and interrupted remittance flows.⁸³ An Oxfam survey also revealed that 74% of respondents did not have access to food.

Border closures have also taken their toll on the supply routes for food and other essentials, causing abrupt increases in prices. For instance, the average price of cooking oil increased by 37%, the price of wheat flour by 18%, and the price of sugar by 19% between mid-March and the last week of May.⁸⁴

Since January 2020, Oxfam has assisted 200,336 people in Afghanistan with cash, food and agricultural materials such as seeds and fertilizers.

South Sudan

Prior to the pandemic, over 60% of people living in South Sudan faced crisis levels of hunger⁸⁵ and four out of five people were living below the poverty line.⁸⁶

Seven years of protracted conflict and violent extremism has forced millions from their homes and had a devastating impact on domestic food production in a country where 80% of people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.⁸⁷ Revenge killings and cattle raids have hampered farmers' efforts to invest in sustainable livelihoods. The ongoing conflict has also made it more difficult for humanitarian agencies to deliver aid.

The climate crisis further exacerbates the food crisis. The UN has warned that famine threatens the lives of up to 5.5 million people, as periodic droughts and flooding have destroyed crops and livestock.⁸⁸ More recently, swarms of desert locusts have been devouring crops and pasture, with fears that the plague – already in the hundreds of billions – will grow further.

While the extent to which coronavirus has spread within the country is unclear, the economic fallout from the pandemic are all too visible. Plummeting oil prices have had a devastating impact as South Sudan relies on the oil sector for 98% of its GDP. Heavy losses in oil export earnings mean the country's trade deficit of over SSP 2bn (more than \$15m) will only widen, further crippling the economy and fuelling poverty and hunger.⁸⁹

Despite recent relaxation of restrictions, the lockdown has disrupted food supplies. The government's agreement with Uganda and Kenya has allowed the continuous flow of food and

other essential commodities, but the quarantining of cargo drivers has led to delays and helped fuel a nearly 40% spike in food prices.⁹⁰

Declining humanitarian assistance will also have a significant impact in a country where 7.5 million people rely on humanitarian assistance to survive.⁹¹

Oxfam was at the forefront of tackling food insecurity in South Sudan even before the pandemic. In response to the pandemic, Oxfam has scaled up its programmes, providing over 153,500 vulnerable women and men with cash to enable them to buy food and essential commodities such as soap and sanitizers. Oxfam also provides clean water and sanitation to vulnerable communities, aiming to reach 500,000 people.

West African Sahel

For the last 11 years, the Sahel region of West Africa – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal – has had the fastest growing hunger crisis in the world.⁹²

Between March and May 2020, some 13.4 million people were estimated to be in immediate need of food assistance across the region,⁹³ pushed to the brink of famine by conflict, climate change and a failure of governments to support small-scale producers and equally distribute wealth.

Violence has forced 4.3 million people to flee their homes,⁹⁴ and left 24 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, half of whom are children.⁹⁵ Insecurity has also impacted people's ability to grow crops and keep livestock, especially in Chad, Burkina Faso and northern Senegal.

The climate crisis, which has seen temperature increase at 1.5 times faster than the global average, frequent floods, and droughts,⁹⁶ are devastating people's crops and incomes, especially in rural areas. The resulting decline in natural resources, such as water and fodder, has also increased inter-community tensions and conflict in the region, further undermining food security.

Measures to contain the pandemic have hit access to markets, food production and food prices. The closure of borders has led to sharp increases in the price of imported food and agricultural products across the region, with Mali seeing prices increase by 10%, on average, and Nigeria seeing increases of 30%.⁹⁷

Lockdown measures imposed in many cities in response to the pandemic have had a significant impact on producers – many of whom are women – with perishable products such as fruit, vegetables and milk going to waste because of market closures.

Restrictions on movement have also prevented millions of herders from driving their livestock to greener pastures in the south for feeding between March and June, threatening the survival of whole herds. In the absence of government steps to help feed livestock through to the winter, further losses are feared. Despite the slow easing of restrictions, it is likely people's ability to prepare for the prolonged lean period will have been impacted.

The pandemic could tip more than 50 million additional people into a food and nutritional crisis⁹⁸ yet just 26% of the \$2.8bn⁹⁹ needed for the humanitarian response in the West African Sahel has been pledged. Millions are already struggling to eat even once a day, and many more are relying on very volatile incomes. Women, who often go without food so they can feed their children, are at particular risk.

Oxfam is helping more than 400,000 vulnerable people cope with the pandemic in the Sahel, including through building 107 water pumps in Burkina Faso for people who have fled the

violence. In Senegal, Oxfam is distributing hygiene kits, food and cash, and raising awareness of prevention measures (e.g. handwashing).

Venezuela

Seven years into a major economic crisis, Venezuela is ill-prepared to face a pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, more than half the people living with hunger in Latin America were living in Venezuela.¹⁰⁰ Last year, 9.3 million people in the country were unable to eat enough food as a result of mass unemployment, falling incomes, poor access for humanitarian aid and hyperinflation, among other factors.¹⁰¹ With a \$4 minimum monthly wage that is barely enough to buy a box of eggs, millions of Venezuelans have left the country in search of work.

Lack of official data means it is impossible to know exactly how the pandemic has affected food security in the country. However, since the government announced a nationwide lockdown on 13 March, there is evidence that an increasing number of people are reducing the quantity and quality of food in their diet – cutting out meat, dairy and vegetables and filling up on cheaper foods such as cereals.¹⁰²

Fuel shortages – which have been exacerbated by the lockdown – are affecting the distribution of humanitarian aid and disrupting the production and transport of food, with some farmers' unions warning that agricultural production will only cover 15% of food needs in the main cities.¹⁰³

The wider economic downturn across Latin America is also having a huge impact on food security. Sixty percent of the 1.6 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia are not registered with the government and work in precarious jobs in the informal sector with no access to services or support.¹⁰⁴ One survey found that 42% of the 385 Venezuelan migrants questioned had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and a quarter did not have enough income to buy food.¹⁰⁵ This is having a knock-on impact in Venezuela, where two million families rely on remittances to survive.¹⁰⁶ The lack of employment and harsh conditions in countries such as Colombia mean 80,000 thousand Venezuelans are migrating back home.¹⁰⁷

Indigenous communities, especially the elderly and young children, are among the worst impacted groups. Many communities live in rural areas with no access to healthcare or other basic services, and lockdown measures – including the closure of public transport – mean they are forced to walk for kilometres or paddle for days to buy or barter for food and other essentials.¹⁰⁸

The government is not doing enough to ensure people living in Venezuela have the healthcare and food assistance they need to see them through the pandemic. As of the 1 April, 46 mobile hospitals were set up, thousands of people tested, and awareness raising campaigns launched to prevent the spread of the virus,¹⁰⁹ however a weak health system¹¹⁰ has undermined the country's ability to cope.

In Venezuela, Oxfam works through local organizations that provide cash transfers to help people buy food and other essentials, promote hand washing and other measures to contain the spread of the virus, and provide legal advice and support to those who have suffered human rights violations. Oxfam has scaled up its work in Venezuela to support the most vulnerable people, including returnee migrants.

EMERGING HOTSPOTS

Brazil

In 2014, Brazil was winning the war against hunger thanks to government investment in small-scale producers and a package of policy measures, including the establishment of a National Council for Nutrition and Food Security (CONSEA), developed in partnership with civil society.¹¹¹

The situation has deteriorated since 2015 due to the economic crisis and four years of austerity. By 2018, the number of people facing hunger in Brazil had increased by 100,000 (to 5.2 million)¹¹² thanks to a sharp rise in poverty¹¹³ and unemployment,¹¹⁴ and sweeping cuts to budgets for agriculture and social protection. This included cuts to the Bolsa-Familia programme (a cash transfer system that had been celebrated globally for its effectiveness in reducing poverty and hunger) and, since 2019, a gradual dismantling of the successful policies and bodies put in place by previous administrations, including CONSEA.

The COVID-19 pandemic has now been added to this already toxic mix, causing a rapid rise in poverty and hunger across the country. Social distancing measures introduced to contain the spread of the coronavirus and prevent the collapse of the public health system have aggravated the economic crisis.

Millions of the poorest workers, who have little in the way of savings or benefits to fall back on, have lost their jobs or incomes.¹¹⁵ Yet by late June the federal government has only distributed 10% of the financial aid promised to workers and companies, via the Emergency Employment Support Program (PESE), with large companies obtaining more benefits from the government than workers or micro and small companies. Similarly, just 47.9 % of the funds allocated for emergency assistance for vulnerable people had been distributed by the beginning of July ¹¹⁶

The federal government is so far failing to support Brazil's most vulnerable people through this pandemic. The implementation of the Emergency Basic Income programme faces a lot of challenges. Problems include long delays in responding to requests for aid, refusal to provide aid without valid justification, and the need to have a mobile phone, internet connection and an email address in order to qualify for assistance.¹¹⁷ Just three months after the country's coronavirus outbreak began, and at a time when the outbreak is still largely out of control, the government is also threatening to reduce benefit payments.¹¹⁸

Oxfam Brazil has launched a campaign to support 1,000 vulnerable families in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and the Federal District through cash transfers of \$60 per month for four months – enough to ensure families can buy food and other essential goods. The fundraising goal for this programme is \$240,000.

India

'I was a nursing assistant, but after the lockdown I lost my job. For a month, I managed with the limited savings I had. Now both of us are surviving on one meal a day. I fear that if the situation does not improve, I might not have anything to eat in a few days. I have not been able to pay for rent and electricity and I fear my property owner will evict me.'

Gudiya Devi, who lives in Patna, the capital of Bihar, with her 12-year-old son.

India has been struggling with hunger for a long time. In 2019, 195 million people – 14.5% of the population – were malnourished¹¹⁹ as a result of extreme inequality, a lack of investment in rural communities (which are home to 70% of the population),¹²⁰ a failure to protect workers living in

poverty, corrupt and inefficient systems for distributing food aid and social support, and an increasingly erratic and extreme climate.

Then, at 8pm on 23 March, the Indian government announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown to control the spread of the coronavirus, with just four hours' notice. Millions of people who were already living precarious existences on the brink of hunger – rural communities, lower castes, minority groups, women and children – were suddenly tipped over the edge.

An estimated 40 million people, predominantly lower-caste migrant workers who make a living as domestic workers, street vendors or daily wage labourers on construction sites, were made jobless overnight.¹²¹ Facing starvation and disease in the overcrowded slums they call home, and with public transport shut down, hundreds of thousands of people began walking sometimes hundreds of kilometres back to their villages.¹²²

Strict restrictions on travel have also left farmers without a migrant labour force at the peak of the harvest season, forcing many to leave crops in the field to rot. This is having a huge impact on farmers' incomes and the food security of rural communities. For example, tribal groups and forest dwellers earn the majority of their annual income from the sale of forest products such as tamarind and karanj seeds. However, travel restrictions have prevented traders from reaching them during the peak harvest season, depriving them of this income.¹²³

Five weeks into lockdown, a survey of 5,000 rural households across 12 states revealed that half were having to cut back on the number of meals they ate, while almost a quarter had been forced to ask others for food since the lockdown began. It also showed that a significant proportion of households are getting into debt or selling assets to get by, with 22% of households reporting having to sell livestock and 16% saying they had recently borrowed from money lenders.¹²⁴

The Indian government has announced a \$22.5bn stimulus package to support businesses and families through the crisis.¹²⁵ However, corruption and poor planning means millions of India's most vulnerable people have been unable to access assistance, including more than 95 million children from poor communities who no longer have access to a hot midday meal because of the sudden closure of *Aanganwadi* (early childcare) centres.¹²⁶

Oxfam India is working with partners to support vulnerable communities in 14 states through the provision of food rations, cooked meals and water to vulnerable groups, including migrant labourers, construction workers and people who are homeless.

South Africa

Even before the pandemic hit, 13.7 million people living in South Africa did not have access to enough food as a result of high levels of unemployment, lack of access to assets such as land or fishing permits, and the high and rising price of food and other essentials.¹²⁷ Inequality and discrimination mean that some groups such as women – who earn 27% less, on average, than their male counterparts – are more likely to experience hunger.¹²⁸

Weekly polling conducted since the start of lockdown has revealed that unemployment and loss of income is having a direct impact on food security. One-in-three adults surveyed said they were going to bed hungry, and a fifth had lost weight during the lockdown because of a lack of food.¹²⁹

The problem is particularly acute in urban areas. Millions of informal workers have suddenly found themselves out of work and without access to sick pay or unemployment benefit. Meanwhile, the prices of food and other essentials have spiked because of stockpiling and price gouging by supermarkets and other suppliers.¹³⁰ The closure of street food vendors, which support an estimated 500,000 livelihoods and provide food for 70% of township households, is

having a dramatic impact on both the farmers that supply them and on what people can buy and eat – with many people consuming fewer fresh fruits and vegetables.¹³¹

South Africa's ZAR 500bn (over \$28bn) stimulus package covers provision of COVID-19 social relief grants to unemployed South Africans, registered migrants, and refugees, but the country's four million undocumented migrants are not eligible for help. Local government-run food distribution programmes have also been beset with problems, including delays caused by the huge numbers of people registering for help, as well as corruption and theft.¹³²

Oxfam South Africa is working with partners to provide food for homeless people in Johannesburg and the Western Cape as part of a broader COVID-19 pandemic response. Oxfam is also working with others to campaign for the establishment of civil society partnerships to ensure the effective delivery of food aid to those who need it and to secure support for small-scale farmers, including land reforms.

ACTION NEEDED

While governments must take action to control the spread of the coronavirus, urgent action is also required to stop the growing hunger crisis and build more resilient and sustainable food systems that work for all people and the planet:

Provide emergency assistance to save lives now: Donor governments must fully fund the UN's COVID-19 humanitarian appeal in order to provide aid for the most vulnerable communities and groups, including women, migrant workers, and displaced communities. Governments must also ensure that food producers can get safely back to work, facilitate the movement of farmers and agricultural workers, open food markets, and provide access to agricultural inputs. Additional support is needed to help small-scale farmers and pastoralists restock and prepare for the next planting season.

Build fairer, more resilient and more sustainable food systems: Governments must commit to a high-level meeting at the Committee on World Food Security in Rome in October to coordinate measures to put fairer, gender just, resilient and sustainable food systems at the heart of the post-pandemic recovery. Governments and the private sector must also scale-up investments in small-scale and agro-ecological food production, ensure producers earn a living income by establishing minimum producer prices and other support mechanisms, and ensure workers earn a living wage.

Promote women's participation and leadership: Women must have the opportunity to participate and lead the decisions on how to address our broken food system. To understand the full scope of the challenges faced by women as a result of the pandemic, gender-disaggregated data must be collected and used to inform decisions on how to respond. Action is also needed to address discrimination faced by women food producers on issues such as access to land, information, credit, and technology.

Cancel debts to allow developing countries to scale-up social protection: The international community should expand debt cancellation to cover all private, bilateral and multilateral debts owed by low- and middle-income countries, and private creditors. This would release \$1 trillion in revenues to help developing countries pay for economic rescue packages for small business and social protection measures such as the provision of cash grants to help people survive.

Support the UN's call for a global ceasefire: Oxfam urges all countries and parties involved in conflict to respond to the UN Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire. They must immediately stop fighting and selling arms, to allow for humanitarian aid to reach people and peace efforts to be progressed.¹³³

Take urgent action to tackle the climate crisis: Urgent action is needed to deliver dramatic cuts in emissions, keep global temperatures from rising above 1.5 degrees and help smallholder producers adapt. This includes addressing emissions from agriculture, which is responsible for a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions and driven primarily by deforestation, livestock production and the use of fertilizers.¹³⁴

NOTES

- ¹ In April 2020, the Food Security Information Network estimated that 135m people were in crisis level hunger in 2019, based on data from 55 countries, see: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000114546/download/?_ga=2.192541098.16518084.1593024973-194571371.1591298594. In July 2020 the WFP revised that estimate to approximately 149m based on data from 79 countries. Crisis level hunger is where households have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality or are able to mitigate food consumption gaps by employing emergency strategies such as the selling off of assets. (see: Table 9, http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/manual/IPC_Technical_Manual_3_Final.pdf)
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- ³ The WFP estimates that the number of people in crisis level hunger – defined as IPC level 3 or above – will increase by approximately 121 million this year as a result of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. The estimated daily mortality rate for IPC level 3 and above is 0.5–1 per 10,000 people, equating to 6,050–12,100 deaths per day due to hunger as a result of the pandemic before the end of 2020.
- ⁴ The global observed daily mortality rate for COVID-19 reached its highest recorded point April 2020 at just over 10,000 deaths per day and has ranged from approximately 5,000 to 7,000 deaths per day in the months since then (based on data from John Hopkins University – <https://www.covidtracker.com>). While there can be no certainty about future projections, if there is no significant departure from these observed trends during the rest of the year, and if the WFP estimates for increasing numbers of people experiencing crisis level hunger hold, then it is likely that daily deaths from hunger as a result of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic will be higher than those from the disease before the end of 2020. It is important to note that there is some overlap between these numbers given that some deaths due to COVID-19 could be linked to malnutrition. For comparative context see also: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/how-many-people-die-each-day-covid-19-coronavirus/>.
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- ⁷ Oxfam gathered information on dividend payments of 8 the world's biggest food and beverage companies up to the beginning of July 2020, using a mixture of company, NASDAQ, and Bloomberg websites. There are no results for Mars as it is a private company or Associated British Foods as it has not declared interim dividends. Numbers are rounded to the nearest million: Coca-Cola (\$3,522m), Danone (\$1,348m), General Mills (\$594m), Kellogg (\$391m), Mondelez (\$408m), Nestlé (\$8,248m for entire year), PepsiCo (\$2,749m) and Unilever (estimated \$1,180m). Many of these companies are pursuing efforts to address COVID-19 and/or global hunger.
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- ⁹ Confirmed cases as of 22 June 2020. Source: John Hopkins University. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
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- ¹¹ COVID-19 Dashboard <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- ¹² <https://www.ghsindex.org/>
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