

Monday, 08 June 2020

OPINION PIECE

‘COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call for Africa to prioritise food security’ – UP academic

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While it will take time to fully understand the scope of COVID-19’s impact on food and agriculture, we can look at the current state of food systems in Africa and what countries are doing to ensure that the food security of tens of millions of people does not succumb to the worst consequences of the coronavirus.

The number of chronically undernourished people in the world currently stands at 821 million, with one in nine facing hunger – COVID-19 is expected to add to this number. A report by the World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 265 million people are likely to face acute food insecurity by the end of 2020, with the concern being strongest for those in Africa and the Middle East.

The impact of the pandemic in Africa comes at a time when the prevalence of hunger has been worsened by conflicts, climate extremes and economic slowdowns, or a combination of these. Ongoing flooding is only exacerbating the situation as is the invasion of locusts in some east African countries.

In the time of COVID-19, there are concerns about the price of nutritious foods, which could become more expensive for people who are spending a large percentage of their money on food as it is. Price hikes will cause a serious disruption to the continued supply of safe, nutritious food for the millions who are experiencing hunger.

Disruption in the availability of service sector employees in the value chain has led to severe income and job losses, especially among those who are self-employed, those who are not paid a salary, workers who are paid hourly wages, and those who are not able to keep working from home during lockdown.

From farm to fork

Social distancing and lockdown restrictions have affected a large sector of service industries that are vital in food systems. Many African economies are supported by informal retailers, street vendors and small-scale farmers who deliver labour, raw materials and infrastructure to supply chains. Even though it is difficult to predict exactly what the effects will be, the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on food security and nutrition depends on the state of food security and nutrition in the country pre-COVID-19, and the state of readiness to support food security among socially vulnerable households in times of crises.

It is expected that workers who rely on farming activities for their livelihoods will be hit the hardest by the pandemic. For informal workers, traders and street vendors, lockdown and other social distancing measures will have a major impact on their income and access to food, putting them at a higher risk of food insecurity. A reduction in the ability to travel and carry out business activities has affected people’s capital investments, incomes and food supply, and is likely to have a long-lasting effect on food security for years to come.

Many small and medium-sized enterprises on the continent have been forced to shut operations following lockdown regulations. This has led to disruptions to supply chains, and to the incomes and livelihoods of those dependent on these operations. While some producers have been able to redirect the excess production meant for food service to retail, filling the increase in demand, shifting supply chains to move food usually destined for restaurants and other institutions to retail locations have come with some challenges.

Safety nets

To cushion the poor as well as informal sector workers, some African governments have embarked on recovery efforts to rescue the incomes and livelihoods of those who may be affected by the pandemic. The safety nets range from complementary food distributions in areas where supply chains are severely disrupted to cash transfer programmes, which include a mix of both new and pre-existing programmes of various duration and generosity. Ensuring that these measures reach everyone will be key to avoiding the further spread of poverty and hunger.

Examples of social protection include a programme set up by the South African government to support those in the informal sector affected by lockdown; in Rwanda and Uganda, the government set up food relief programmes; in Kenya and Malawi, an emergency cash transfer programme for small businesses and the needy were established; Namibia is offering a once-off emergency income grant to informal workers who will lose their jobs because of the pandemic; and the Central Bank of West African States did away with several transaction fees.

Large-scale farmers, supermarkets, food manufacturers and others in the large-scale formal sector need to see this as an opportunity to offer assistance to preserve the livelihoods and employment of the most economically vulnerable communities. Governments also need to ensure that smaller producers, farmers, informal traders and street vendors continue to produce, transport and trade with safety measures in place.

Trade and trade-related measures

The global economic crisis in 2008, which resulted in huge spikes in global food prices, had a huge impact on African economies. In 2020, the over-reliance on imports, estimated at \$65 billion (R1,12 trillion) per year, places much of Africa at significant risk of exposure to global economic shock from COVID-19.

In an effort to limit the impact of the pandemic on the global food system, agriculture ministers from the African Union (AU) countries have agreed to keep global food markets open and refrain from imposing new trade barriers. Maintaining international food trade is essential to nutrient access and to ensure a continuous supply of nourishment for the millions of people from poor countries that depend on imports for survival.

This is especially important, as many local food systems are unable to meet the needs of their own populations sufficiently and have to rely on imports. As concerns about the state of food security mount with disruption in prices and the production of key staples, the focus must turn to making sure that products are transported from areas of surplus to areas of shortage, avoiding the drastic shortages and food insecurity associated with reliance on only local production.

African governments need to protect agriculture and its food-related logistic essential services to ensure that food value chains function well and promote the production and availability of diversified, safe and nutritious food for all. Countries need to consider global trade in terms of nutrient flows, not just the quantity of production. If supply chains are disrupted, many fear a global recession, with food supplies running short and disruptions in agricultural production.

Instead of countries focusing on export bans, which are likely to threaten food access and availability, efforts must be directed towards policies that will help maintain access to food, monitor logistics and protect income loss, especially for the poor. It is important to ensure that policies, such as short-term measures to restrict trade, do not distort global markets.

Humanitarian action

The pandemic is likely to have significant repercussions on the delivery of humanitarian and recovery assistance. Maintaining ongoing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable groups and adapting to potential COVID-19 impacts is critical. Humanitarian efforts have a significant role to play in those countries already suffering.

The pandemic will reveal the need for Africa to deal with its structural challenges so that it is prepared for another potential pandemic. It is a wake-up call for the continent to prioritise food security, and direct enough resources at regional and national level to resources aimed at improving food security.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation has suggested a two-pronged approach to support COVID-19 efforts: maintaining and securing existing critical humanitarian operations; and anticipatory actions to safeguard livelihoods and protect the critical food supply chain to mitigate the secondary effects of the pandemic.

The aim is to protect the most vulnerable people, particularly those affected by food crises; this calls for humanitarian organisations to coordinate data collection during the pandemic, and build upon systems that are already in place to deliver assistance where it is needed.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to

maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za