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## OPINION PIECE

### **We must protect children's access to nutritious food during and beyond the pandemic, writes UP expert**

*By Dr Elizabeth Mkandawire, a postdoctoral fellow who coordinates the United Nations Academic Impact Hub (UNAI) on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 at the University of Pretoria. She holds a PhD in Rural Development Planning.*

COVID-19 is expected to almost double the number of starving people in the world.

This is the prediction of the United Nations World Food Programme, which projects the 135 million people who face crisis levels of hunger will rise to 265 million. This is on top of the 821 million people who now suffer from hunger, 20% of whom live in Africa.

With such an alarming projection, Africa needs to be conscious of the impact the pandemic could have on food security; the health crisis could quickly escalate into a food crisis. Dealing with these simultaneous crises will be extremely challenging.

Food insecurity and malnutrition are not new to the African continent. Millions of lives are lost each year because of hunger. Many of these are children. The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the sluggishness of African governments in addressing food insecurity and has also fuelled the demand to prioritise these challenges.

Over the past 15 years, several African countries – Senegal, Ghana, Rwanda, Angola, Cameroon, Togo and Ethiopia – have reduced malnutrition significantly. Some by as much as 50%, says the International Food Policy Research Institute. However, these gains are not widespread, and COVID-19 threatens to reverse some of this progress.

#### **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security**

The national lockdowns implemented in several African countries have had a significant impact on food security. Movement of labour has been restricted. These restrictions have implications for many Africans who depend on piece jobs, informal work and day-to-day earnings to survive. The lockdown has effectively halted these activities, and the resistance to them in some African countries, like Malawi, has been driven by precisely this fear: how will we eat?

Food supply chains have been disrupted. Restrictions on the movement of labour mean that food production in many sectors has been stalled. Limited movement of smallholder farmers, who frequently rely on markets to sell their products, has also left many without income.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many Africans reliant on government food parcels and grants. In South Africa, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) system has eased the identification of and access to the most needy. This cannot be said for other African countries. The lack of well-managed systems to deliver food or cash to people in need has frustrated efforts to target food aid.

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Children are the most impacted by this crisis. School feeding programmes offered children some form of food security and reduced the incidence of malnutrition. Because of school closures, many children have lost the one opportunity they had to eat. Child malnutrition could result in learning challenges that impact their future potential. For the continent, this loss could be fatal. It is estimated the annual loss to Africa's gross domestic product associated with child undernutrition is between 1.6% to 16.5%. The implications of child malnutrition are irreversible.

### **African leadership on COVID-19 and its impact on food security**

African leaders have been praised for strong leadership in responding to the crisis. The continent's health system has illustrated resilience, with Africa reporting only 1.5% of the world's COVID-19 cases and 0.1% of the world's deaths. Several arguments could be made concerning inadequate testing, false reporting and police brutality. While many of these arguments might ring true, we cannot refute the remarkable leadership that has been shown in countries such as Morocco and South Africa.

At a continental level, the African Union has shown commitment to food security by signing the *Declaration on Food Security and Nutrition During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. They have also established a COVID-19 response fund, part of which is dedicated to mitigating the socio-economic and humanitarian impact of the pandemic in Africa. Presumably, some of these funds will be committed to supporting efforts to alleviate food insecurity across the continent.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement is another initiative that could cushion food security across the continent during this crisis. Africa typically relies on food imports from other continents. Bans on the exportation of food in these countries increase the threat of a continental food crisis. The free trade agreement presents an opportunity for African countries to share food across borders. Through the recent food security declaration, African countries have committed to keeping borders open for food and agricultural commodity trade. However, this option is riddled with weaknesses related to the ease of transporting food.

These are some recommendations to alleviate the crisis:

- Protect children's access to nutritious food. This access is not only a human right but is also enshrined in many African constitutions. The University of Pretoria's Institute for Food, Nutrition and Well-being has recommended how to secure this access, including by distributing electronic food vouchers which target foods needed for children's growth;
- Be transparent in how COVID-19 response funds are managed and disbursed; and
- Think beyond the crisis. This is the responsibility of governments. How will people eat once the health crisis ends? The economic impact of the pandemic will have implications for people's ability to access food.

The 'new unusual' has spurred food security responses from many African countries. In true African spirit, the continent has flocked together in the face of crisis. Flocking is the process of people coming together to share social and economic resources, including information, time, money or food.

While positive efforts have been made to manage the health crisis, it remains to be seen if this leadership will translate to preventing a food crisis. There may be an acceleration in the political and economic connectedness that the African Union has aspired to achieve since its inception.

We can only hope that this unity and flocking results in a prosperous continent that is free from hunger and malnutrition.

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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](http://www.up.ac.za)