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COVID-19: THE CURRENT HEALTH CRISIS COULD TRIGGER A FOOD CRISIS

In addition to essential short-term crisis responses, it is crucial to uphold long-term development measures and transform food systems

The COVID-19 pandemic is hitting the world's poorest people hardest. In many countries, the health system is inadequate and social security is virtually non-existent. Another issue is that the governments of the poorest countries have no means with which to provide bail-out packages for its citizens. The 820 million people suffering from hunger are especially at risk. If freedom of movement, trade and transport are restricted or halted altogether, it will not be possible for these people to grow enough food or earn the money they need to buy it. As a result, both their health and their food supply is at greater risk than for people in more affluent countries. In addition, the threat of recession is set to plunge more people into hunger and poverty. The international system of humanitarian aid has already been placed under great pressure by numerous crises prior to this, and is now facing an additional challenge in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this crisis could open the door to strengthening international solidarity and making the world a fairer, more sustainable place.

The COVID-19 pandemic is being most keenly felt by those countries and peoples who are already dealing with poverty, hunger, conflicts, the influx or outflux of refugees, and the effects of climate change. The pandemic is also causing crises such as the worsening locust infestations in East Africa and the war engulfing Idlib to fade into the background.

The pandemic is set to have devastating consequences on food security – and not only in the countries of the Global South. It is expected that there will be major disruptions to the world's complex system of food supply chains both in terms of supply and demand.¹ The closure of borders, quarantine measures, and interruptions to the market, delivery and trading may restrict peoples' access to sufficient, nutritious food, especially in those countries that have been hit hardest by the virus or that experience widespread food insecurity under usual circumstances.

In times of crisis in particular, livelihoods and employment are by no means secure. It is expected that millions of people will suffer from losses in income and have either no or only limited access to the resources they require for their day-to-day well-being. This will trigger further predicaments whose consequences simply cannot be overlooked.

Addressing this public health emergency is the top priority for authorities. However, this poses a major

challenge in many countries. For one thing, it is virtually impossible to minimise or ban contact between people living in refugee camps of the kind found in Dadaab, Kenya, or Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, as the spaces are simply too confined for this to be realistic.

In **rural areas** and poorer quarters of **major urban centres**, there is often not enough clean water for people to wash their hands regularly. Disinfectants are not available at all. One third of people worldwide do not have access to **clean drinking water** or **sanitation** at all, while three quarters of people residing in the world's poorest countries are not readily able to wash their hands.²

Food security is under threat in the immediate, medium and long term. On a global scale, **food prices** fell in March due to a decline in demand resulting from the poor economic outlook.³ Even so, food prices can still skyrocket at local level due to hoarding or the closure of open markets, or because restrictions to freedom of movement can inhibit the delivery of food supplies from surrounding areas. Such situations have been reported by Welthungerhilfe's partner organisations in countries including Ethiopia, Kenya and Gambia.

Whatever the circumstances, the fact is that people in poor countries have to spend the majority of their income on food. Now, however, they are being forced to further reduce the amount of food they can buy. The supply of **fresh fruit and vegetables** is especially at risk. While highly processed convenience foods may generally be rich in calories, they are poor in nutrients. In conjunction with this, a poorer diet leads to a higher **risk of infection**. In Africa and South Asia, one in three children are chronically malnourished⁴, and it is nine times more likely that a child suffering from severe malnutrition will die from an infection than a healthy one.⁵

Small farmers often produce food for their personal consumption. However, they often lack the **resources** to safeguard the supply of this food. If these farmers are no longer able to cultivate their fields due to illness or sell their products on the market, or if they are forced to purchase increasingly smaller quantities of food due to higher prices, this could greatly threaten their way of life.

Previous pandemics such as the **Ebola outbreak** in West Africa (2014-2016) have exacerbated hunger and malnutrition. Initial restrictions during the outbreak resulted in a lack of available labour during the harvesting period; meanwhile, farmers were unable to bring their produce to the markets and earn much needed income. In total, more than 40 percent of agricultural land was left uncultivated.⁶

Another affected group consists of those farmers and agricultural workers who depend on production for the **global market**, producing commodities such as

palm oil, coffee, cocoa and flowers. As an example, transport restrictions have led international businesses to stop ordering flowers from Ethiopia, causing at least 30,000 workers to lose their jobs so far.⁷

Poor urban populations, too, feel the effects when the cost of healthy food – in sufficient quantities – rises. **Women** are more at risk than men, as they are more likely to work in low-paid, insecure and informal jobs.⁸ In cities, people live in extremely confined spaces, which all but guarantees the virus's very rapid spread, while the supply of food from the surrounding area will be endangered if transport and freedom of movement are restricted.

There is a very real danger that the impending **recession** will further worsen the situation in which these people find themselves. **Model calculations** have shown that with even one percent lower economic growth, the number of poor and starving people could increase by two percent.⁹ Those people reliant on insecure forms of employment – day labourers and workers, and those working in the service, catering and retail/trade sectors – are set to be most affected by the recession.

Non-governmental organisations are also being hit by the pandemic, with their staff being subject to restrictions on freedom of travel and movement. This is also hampering relief supplies and the provision of food. The safety of international aid workers could also be threatened, as foreigners are blamed for the introduction of the virus due to their travel. The pandemic has restricted ongoing programme activities, and may ultimately result in them being stopped altogether due to an inability to guarantee compliance with precautionary measures, e.g. at large gatherings or training sessions. There is also a risk in some countries that the curtailment of **civil rights** under the pretext of protection of public health will lead to further restrictions in terms of civil society's ability to take action.

How Welthungerhilfe is helping to contain the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite the restrictions, Welthungerhilfe is able to contribute to the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures – in particular **educational campaigns** and **awareness creation** on protecting against infection – are being incorporated into ongoing projects.

WASH measures are being expanded, e.g. by providing clean water, sanitary facilities and hygiene measures such as hand washing stations, by organising water supplies in public places such as markets and schools, and by distributing soap and hygiene kits.

It is also important to provide accurate **information** about the pandemic, as many false reports are currently circulating which are spreading panic or else eliciting improper responses. It is imperative that

this information reaches poor sections of the population, which is why posters, radio campaigns, loudspeaker announcements and social media content in local languages are produced and provided to the population. Cooperation is also being sought with state public health care sectors to prevent the virus from spreading further.

Welthungerhilfe is also active in helping people in need, e.g. by delivering food and household items to households in quarantine. Welthungerhilfe distributes food vouchers in those areas where markets are still open, while in other situations it arranges direct financial support through cash transfer for food and

health care. In places where social security systems are in place, it is important to ensure that people entitled to benefits will continue to receive them and that those who become eligible can be added to the system.

Welthungerhilfe's partner organisations are similarly active. For example, the Welthungerhilfe supported BhoomiKa project in India has set up a service to deliver fresh food to people in poor urban areas. Meanwhile, residents of villages are benefitting from a large-scale campaign to provide hundreds of families with a warm meal each day.

Welthungerhilfe's demands of the German Federal Government

Welthungerhilfe welcomes the United Nations COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan and supports the strategic priorities of containing the spread of the pandemic while preventing social cohesion from being undermined and human rights from being violated. Under this plan, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children, the elderly, those with pre-existing health conditions, and refugees and migrants are to be given increased support.

The German Federal Government should ensure that:

- all states commit to minimising the impact of COVID-19 in at-risk countries and to contain the virus worldwide by supporting humanitarian contingency plans and already existing humanitarian appeals.
- all humanitarian aid activities focus on the most vulnerable people who are most at risk.
- humanitarian access is guaranteed, e.g. air services (including medical evacuations). Life-saving humanitarian operations must be safeguarded and continue to receive appropriate funding. It is essential to ensure that exemptions are granted to humanitarian actors in any curfew or lockdown scenario, including with regard to closed borders, movement restrictions, visas and other administrative procedures and restrictions.
- it sets a good example in its current budgetary planning and mobilises additional resources to meet increased humanitarian needs.
- humanitarian logistics are organised for the delivery of resources to prevent and treat COVID-19.
- free trade is guaranteed in essential goods and services such as food, agricultural resources, hygiene products and medical supplies.
- civil society actors¹⁰ are given support in their work so that ongoing projects may continue. This calls for project funds and additional resources¹¹ to be used more flexibly¹², as this will enable the humanitarian system and programme work to keep functioning both during and after the pandemic. In particular, this will involve measures aimed at reinforcing aid organisations in the countries themselves.
- in the future, the focus increasingly turns to preventative measures.
- in the interests of international solidarity, the donor community uses structures already in place to support the poorest countries, respond to the current crisis and mitigate the economic consequences. This should also comprise measures to safeguard food security.

Short-term and long-term measures are required to ensure food security

The crisis shows that the poorest people and countries are the most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. The least developed countries need more support now to handle the current crisis and to implement measures in the long term. Examples of short-term measures include guaranteeing school meal programmes and providing financial support or food aid in acute emergency situations. Social security systems become increasingly important during times of crisis, and must be safeguarded while being extended to other groups in society.

It is also essential to support small-scale farmers affected by restrictions imposed due to the pandemic. As part of its “Cura Italia” programme, for example, the Italian government made EUR 100 million in funds available to businesses in the agricultural, fishing and aquaculture sectors. The Chinese government’s “vegetable basket” programme ensured that the populations of several provinces received grains, oil, vegetables, meat, eggs, milk and fish from local farmers and businesses.¹³ Programmes such as these would also be beneficial in developing countries.

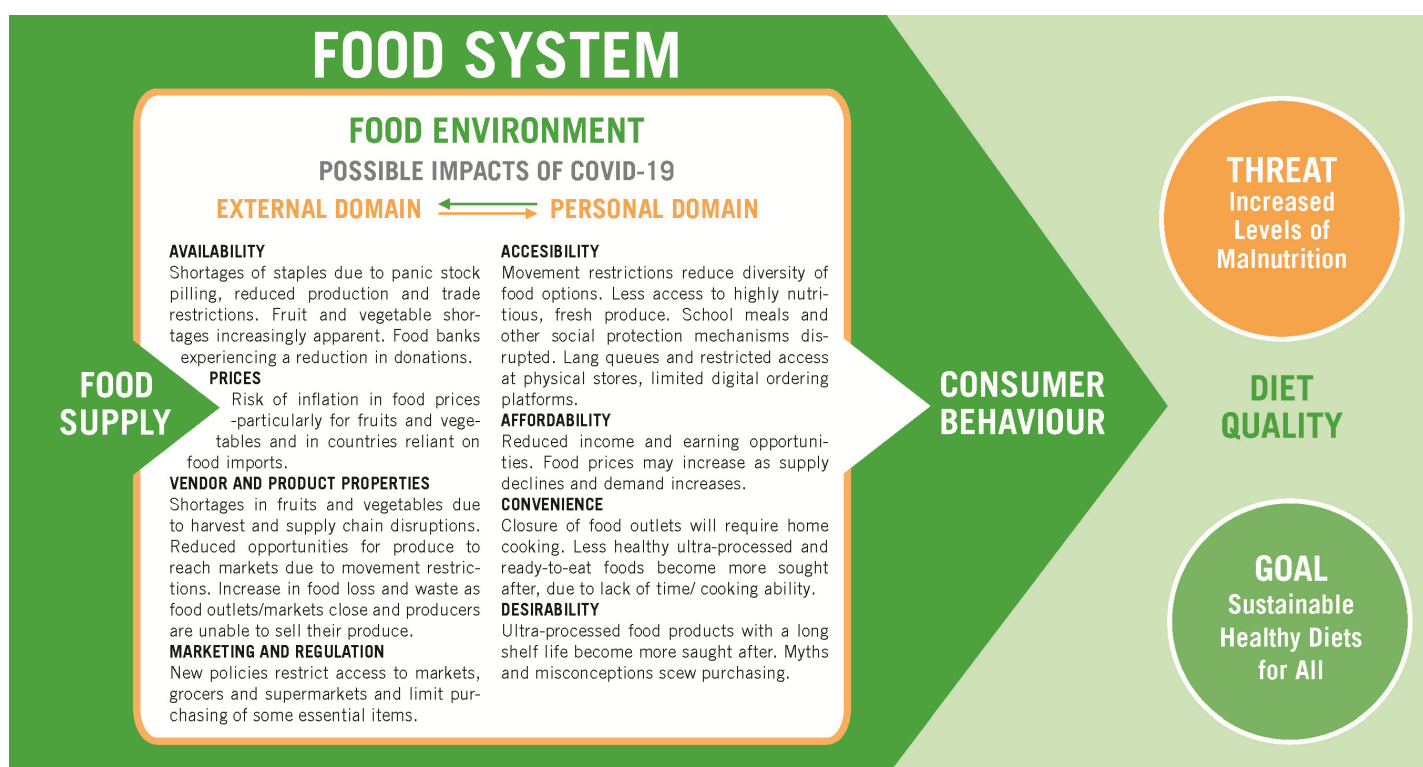
In the long term, too, it is important to expand health care and social security systems along with food security programmes. Development cooperation must

be persistent, including with regard to the development of rural areas, whether through support for small-scale farmers (e.g. by minimising post-harvest losses), by assisting small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises, or by funding programmes to promote healthy eating.

Food systems must be made fairer, more sustainable and more resilient

The crisis is exposing the glaring imbalances within the world’s food systems. While Germany is facing some shortages, food security is generally assured for all of its citizens. In contrast, people in poor countries as well as people belonging to poorer classes in industrialised and emerging countries are seeing their nutrition and therefore their health being put at risk. This is why it is essential to make the manner in which we produce, trade and consume food fairer, more sustainable and more resistant to crises. This includes determining the framework conditions and incentive systems required to make healthy, affordable food available to all.

To be less reliant on international supply chains, the German Federal Government should strengthen the regional food systems in Germany, in Europe and in partner countries: producers, distributors and retailers should do more to reinforce regional supplies, whether through staple foodstuffs such as grains and



oil (which meet calorie requirements), or in the form of pulses, vegetables and fruit, which are rich in micronutrients and are therefore essential for human health. As the "backbone" of food security, it is essential to reinforce rural agriculture.

It is important to ensure that supply chains comply with environmental and social standards and human rights: with Germany and the EU increasingly meeting their demand for agricultural raw materials from abroad, it is imperative that they do not violate the human right to food in other countries, which is to say that they must not have a negative impact on their food security.

Putting people at the centre: sustainable food policies must be developed for and in cooperation with people. In particular, input should be sought from those who have been affected by the inequalities and power asymmetries in our food system up to now and whose voices are therefore not heard.

At the publication of the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan in New York on 25 March 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres had the following to say: "We must come to the aid of the ultra-vulnerable – millions upon millions of people who are least able to protect themselves. This is a matter of basic human solidarity." This must be achieved both in the short and long term in keeping with the most important principle of Agenda 2030: "Leave no one behind".

Sources:

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- ⁴UNICEF, WHO, World Bank Group. Levels and trends in child malnutrition. 2020, <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/jme-2020-edition>, last access 02 April 2020.
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- ⁶UN Humanitarian Response Plan, 2020
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- ⁹IFPRI, 2019 at www.ifpri.org/blog/how-much-will-global-poverty-increase-because-covid-19
- ¹⁰ICVA <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/covid-19-ngos-critical-delivery-principled-and-effective-humanitarian-assistance>
- ¹¹For example for preventive COVID-19 measures, expansion of crisis countries, including early commitment appropriations for 2020/22
- ¹²Jointly with VENRO, the umbrella organization for development and humanitarian aid non-governmental organisations in Germany, the following needs were identified: extension of reporting and application deadlines, electronic signatures, flexible spending (waiver of debit interest, carryover to the following year), simplified change and increase requests, facilitation of changes in project activities and budget lines, assumption of additional costs for health protection of employees and local partners, assumption of costs for ongoing project costs from suspension due to COVID19; reduction of own contribution for new projects or suspension of own contribution for new projects.
- ¹³<http://www.fao.org/3/ca8308en/ca8308en.pdf>
- ¹⁴ UNSCN, 3rd April 2020 Food Environments in the COVID-19 Pandemic, <https://www.unscn.org/en/news-events/recent-news?idnews=2040>

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