



# MINIMISING THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – ENSURING FOOD SECURITY

Investment in the Fight Against Hunger and a Rescue Package for the Poorest are urgently needed

The COVID-19 pandemic is hitting the poorest people the hardest, threatening to greatly worsen the problem of global hunger. In light of this situation, the German government must urgently equip the global Humanitarian Response Plan with additional funds and fully finance the Corona Immediate Action programme. However, this cannot come at the expense of long-term and structural development measures, especially in the field of rural development. With food systems already facing great pressure, it is now time to earmark additional budgetary funds for this purpose.

The 2020 edition of the Global Report on Food Crises, published by the World Food Programme in conjunction with other international organisations, estimates that the COVID-19 crisis could – both directly and indirectly – cause the number of people at the brink of starvation<sup>1</sup> to nearly double, to 265 million. In developing countries, many of the most impoverished people live in rural areas, and up to 70 percent of the labour force works in agriculture – with no social safety net.

Any strategy aiming to alleviate this acute hardship and trigger an economic recovery must focus on the agricultural and food sector, as farmers play an essential role in developing countries. To ensure their survival and enable them to continue providing the rural and urban populations with food, family farms need financial support, seeds, functioning markets, and secure land rights. If they are prevented from farming and their products can no longer be brought to the market due to restrictions on travel and mobility, the situation will soon spiral out of control, with local food systems coming under increasing pressure.

To make matters worse, many impoverished people in the Global South depend on remittances from relatives abroad for their livelihoods, and this source of income has already begun to dry up because many are losing their jobs. In numerous countries, manifestations of rage and desperation are multiplying, both in the cities and in the countryside. The coronavirus pandemic is multiplying the negative impacts of existing crises, such as poverty, drought, locusts, unrest, violent conflicts, and fragile healthcare systems.

It is therefore important and right that the German government establishes an immediate action programme helping the poorest countries to overcome the coronavirus crisis. The Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development has budgeted EUR 4 billion for this effort, including EUR 1 billion in funds shifted from other projects (by comparison, the budgetary measures for the coronavirus rescue package for Germany alone amounts to EUR 353.3 billion). Necessary humanitarian aid includes measures for awareness raising, hygiene, water supply and sanitation as well as food aid and cash transfers for people in need. This programme cannot be at the expense of long-term development efforts, but must be equipped with additional funds from the planned supplementary budget.

To ensure that the BMZ Emergency Covid-19 Support Programme does not become a “permanent” emergency programme, it is important to focus on reinforcing long-term and structural development measures at this point in time. The programme should support governments and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to promote economic recovery, thereby helping counteract plummeting remittance figures, the impending collapse of local and global supply chains, and the drastic decline of economic activity overall. Otherwise, poverty could spread faster than the virus itself, with millions more becoming impoverished. Funds are therefore needed – not only now but at least until 2022 – to first overcome the pandemic itself and then sufficiently support recovery efforts for local economies – “building back better”, to quote the UN Secretary General. Our economic system must become more just and sustainable.

Food distribution and social security measures such as cash transfers have been proven to directly prevent food crises. Cash-for-work and food-for-work approaches help ensure that people in rural regions have access to food. The increase in local purchasing power boosts and supports agricultural production, especially of small-scale farmers, rendering the local food system more resilient to external shocks. Measures for local road construction or the protection of forest and climate can also be employed. In addition, improvements in the local water-supply infrastructure, for example through schemes for rainwater retention, can prevent a further food crisis by increasing agricultural production during the next growing season.

During the crisis, the first priority must be to secure the local and regional supply of healthy, nutritious food. Local and intra-regional supply chains strengthen food systems in their area and

allow limited foreign-currency reserves to be saved instead of being spent to import food. The timely provision of seeds, equipment, and other operating supplies in combination with local programmes for purchasing the yields can give farmers the motivation and security to invest in the next harvest. So that impoverished urban families can access to fresh, nutritious food as well, it should be ensured that transportation networks are secure and that the food can continue to be sold at markets, directly delivered through innovative supply systems, or distributed in different city districts through a decentralised system.

Civil society plays a key role in this regard, especially where governmental structures are weak. Non-governmental organisations need significantly better and more-flexible financial means to deal with humanitarian emergencies and to ensure that the direct social and economic effects of the coronavirus crisis do not end up becoming worse than the health effects of the virus itself.

Welthungerhilfe has developed a global COVID-19 programme to support five million most vulnerable in 36 countries during the next two years. The programme encompasses emergency aid such as food distribution, cash transfers, hygiene measures, and educational efforts to inform people about infection risks and preventive measures. Following the principle of building back better, the programme will also help people to become more resilient and better prepared to meet future crises. This includes investing in agriculture, water supply and sanitation, as well as supporting local markets and value chains.

The capacities of local civil society organisations to fight socio-political causes of hunger must be strengthened. This means, for example, entering into political dialogue with governments in order to influence their strategies and legislation or to promote the implementation of existing rights.

Partner countries need extra support to provide for themselves right now so that they can rapidly revitalise their own economies and ensure that the most vulnerable groups of their populations have access to nutritious food in sufficient quantities. All of these measures help to secure the right to food, to stabilise the living conditions of millions of people in the short term, and to improve living conditions in the long term, especially for young people in rural areas. This will help them resist recruitment by violent and radical forces. A good agricultural policy translates to an active peace policy.

## The Humanitarian Emergency in South Sudan Intensifies

Carolin Schmidt, WHH Programme Coordinator for South Sudan, reports:

“We are now distributing double rations to those in need in order to help bring down the number of people gathering in one place. Around 500,000 people in Bentiu, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Panyijar are receiving urgently needed staples such as oil, sorghum, and dried beans. In addition, children under five years and pregnant and lactating women are being provided with a ration of enriched maize-and-soya flour. During distributions, information about the most important ways to prevent COVID-19 infection is disseminated via megaphone.

A coronavirus outbreak in one of the many refugee camps in South Sudan would have devastating effects. Physical distancing is not possible in the overcrowded camps, and water and soap are scarce commodities. In Bentiu alone, more than 110,000 refugees live in close quarters.

Because the crucial cultivation season is fast approaching, our seed distributions and cash-for-work measures must continue so that people can prepare their fields. We are also planning additional emergency aid measures such as radio announcements, the distribution of soap and buckets, and door-to-door educational visits. Cash transfers for the poorest households will allow them to purchase food from the market without having to sell valuable household items. In the past weeks, the need for humanitarian interventions has grown exponentially.”



## India: Progress Could Be Set Back by Decades

The Indian government has imposed the largest lockdown ever. Paralysing the country of 1.3 billion could save countless lives, but the impact on the economy, politics, and social cohesion is already enormous and could end up setting Asia's third-largest economy back by decades. Those who have lost their job and income overnight include hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who earn a living as daily labourers in the cities or on farms. Many of them became stranded on the way back to their home villages and have been left without running water or toilets, with no roof over their heads, and with no money to buy even the most essential food supplies. To some extent, they are now receiving basic supplies through quarantine centres administered by authorities with the support of local non-governmental organisations. Welthungerhilfe's partner organisations are helping as well, for example by distributing food and hygiene items, establishing telephone hotlines, and conducting education campaigns in the rural communities to which the migrant workers are returning.



## Bolivia and Peru: Price Increases and Supply Bottlenecks

In Bolivia and Peru, the lockdowns have limited the supply of fresh food entering cities from the surrounding countryside. Small-scale farming families can no longer bring their produce to be sold in the cities. Family members who supplement their income through daily labour in towns during part of the year can now no longer return to their villages in time for the harvest, meaning that some of their crops will rot in the fields. At the same time, the prices of fresh food are rising in the cities, causing families – particularly the poorer ones – to resort to highly processed food that is generally less healthy. Their diet is also becoming less diverse overall. Welthungerhilfe's partner organisations are now working to ensure that the cities of La Paz in Bolivia and Huánuco in Peru can count on a steady supply of agricultural products from the surrounding countryside. Small-scale farming families receive support to bring their products to market in the cities, and mobile markets have been established to help supply poor neighbourhoods so that the less-wealthy members of the population also have access to fresh produce.



# Welthungerhilfe Is Calling for the German Government to Act:

## In the short term:

- All humanitarian aid interventions must focus on the most vulnerable population groups.
- Protecting civilians must be a priority also during violent conflicts.
- BMZ's Emergency Covid-19 Support Programme must be fully financed, implementation must be done in consultation and cooperation with civil society, international organisations, partner governments, and local non-governmental organisations.
- Funds to extend the measures into 2021 and 2022 must already now be earmarked in the budget.
- Civil society actors<sup>2</sup> must be supported so that ongoing projects can continue. Project funds must be handled more flexibly<sup>3</sup> and additional funds must be provided<sup>4</sup> in order to safeguard ongoing development measures while continuing to properly address humanitarian needs during and after the pandemic. In addition to extra funds, more flexible financial procedures and more flexibility in ministerial budgets are also required to allow rigid funding processes to be adapted to this dynamic situation.
- Generous support must be provided for national and international emergency plans like the 2020 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, which is so far completely underfunded, having received pledges for only 17.6 percent of required funds by the end of May 2020, with Germany contributing the largest share.
- Diplomatic efforts for an immediate ceasefire in all regions affected by armed conflicts must be increased, including with regard to the UN Security Council.
- Consistently advocating for secure and uninterrupted humanitarian access (e.g. air services and the supply of goods such as food, hygiene items, and medical supplies).
- Human and civil rights must be respected and protected, even during the lockdown, and any further restrictions on civil society must be counteracted.

## In the medium and long term:

- Tackling the structural causes of hunger, providing an adequate and healthy diet, and promoting nutrition-sensitive and sustainable agriculture must be the focus of medium- and long-term efforts to manage the multiple crises exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.
- While it holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union, the German government should take advantage of the opportunity to advocate for budgetary increases for these sectors in the partner countries. The EU's new Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) must be programmed to prioritise the fight against hunger and poverty as independent development policy. People must be at the centre, with provisions being made for local and international civil-society organisations to participate in implementation.
- Increased funding must be provided for civil society organisations, especially in countries from which BMZ will withdraw under its new strategy, BMZ 2030.
- The German government and the international donor community should align themselves with existing programmes and strategies in the partner countries in order to help the affected countries properly respond to the current crisis and to mitigate economic and social consequences in the medium term. National solutions and greater autonomy for the partner countries are rightly emphasised in the recently announced BMZ 2030 reform programme. However, it must be guaranteed that civil society is fully included in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and review of the programmes in the respective countries.
- Making food systems more just, more sustainable, and more resilient: To have a sustainable effect, development projects require the right political framework. This involves ensuring that the fulfilment of human rights, including the human right to food, is not hindered or infringed by other areas of policy, including trade policy, climate policy, economic policy, and European agricultural policy. All political strategies must be reviewed for potential negative impact on the human right to food.

## Sources:

- <sup>1</sup>Numbers of acutely food-insecure people in crisis or worse (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above)
- <sup>2</sup>ICVA <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/covid-19-ngos-critical-delivery-principled-and-effective-humanitarian-assistance>
- <sup>3</sup>In conjunction with VENRO, the umbrella organisation of German non-governmental organisations working in development and humanitarian aid, the following needs were identified: extending reporting and application deadlines; electronic signatures; flexible expenditure procedures (e.g. waiving or deferring debit interest); simplified change and replenishment applications; easier changes to project activities and budget lines; assuming additional costs to protect the health of employees and local partners; assuming the costs for project suspensions caused by COVID-19; and reducing or eliminating own-capital requirements for new projects.
- <sup>4</sup>e.g. for COVID-19 preventative measures, for the extension of the list of crisis countries, or for early commitment appropriations for 2020/22.

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Contact person: **Asja Hanano**, Head of Policy and External Relations

Email: [policy@welthungerhilfe.de](mailto:policy@welthungerhilfe.de)