



Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA). PHOTO: ACTIONAID

# Right to Food, Farmers' Rights & Covid-19:

## Policy priorities and a call to Action

*“Bugs are eating the crops in the field. I grew some vegetables, but we can't take them to the local market. There are very few customers. On top of that the local police close the market around noon. If this continues, we will have to starve after few days.”*

MOSSAMMAT TASLIMA WOMAN FARMER – BORGUNA, BANGLADESH

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### >> Preamble

This ActionAid International policy document has been developed to help identify the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and responses by governments and intergovernmental agencies on different food systems at different level of society. It looks at the most marginalised and at-risk segments of society, especially food providers and smallholder farmers, women, girls, minority groups and indigenous communities. It also provides an insight into policy priorities and potential alternatives in the post COVID-19 world.

Our analysis shows the need for proactive and speedy action to deal with emerging food security concerns in the short, medium and long term. Interventions must ensure the right to food for all and must protect the rights of small-scale food producers, particularly women, and farm and migrant workers, who are so vital to the food production and consumption matrix. It is intended to elicit action from duty bearers and other actors to support livelihoods of smallholder food producers, while safeguarding their ability to produce and access markets.

This analysis builds on ongoing work carried out by ActionAid in collaboration with partner organizations to gather information from several countries on the impact of COVID-19 on small scale food producers and other marginalised people's right to food and nutritional security. ActionAid also plans to track the alternatives that small scale food producers are putting in place to cope with the crisis, along with initiatives undertaken by governments that support or hinder small holder farmers' producers' capacity to cope with the effects of COVID-19. This ongoing monitoring exercise will keep this policy document alive, with updates on the situation as the pandemic evolves, and responses that work to enhance or undermine the human right to food and nutrition security.

The pandemic comes on top of other crises that many smallholder food producers and marginalized communities are already experiencing as a result of climate change impacts and disasters, including the food crisis in Southern Africa, the locust infestation in East Africa, rising sea levels, recurrent droughts and floods and erratic rainfall patterns experienced around the world. Women smallholder farmers and food producers, are already disadvantaged as a result of the unpaid care and domestic work, gender-blind - if not gender-exploitative - policies, including land grabs. Increasingly, governments are backing policies that favour large-scale, input intensive agribusiness which destroy ecosystems, exacerbate climate change and concentrate land and wealth in fewer and fewer hands.

Wherever possible, therefore, ActionAid will advance gender just alternatives that address underlying injustices and marginalization, and ensure that responses to the crisis strengthen Farmers' Rights and the resilience of food systems at all levels to multiple threats.

This briefing provides an initial outline of the risks to global food systems and livelihoods that could lead to pockets of food insecurity, and our recommended policy interventions to address immediate threats and strengthen resilience in the longer term.

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## >> Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken to limit its spread are already affecting people's access to food, and small-scale food producers', farm workers' and informal and migrant workers' livelihoods. This means that the COVID 19 will likely move from a health to a food crisis if we don't act urgently. There are multiple points of vulnerability along food distribution and supply chains and in the global food system that are exposed to COVID-19 and subsequent measures taken to curtail its spread, and we are only starting to build a picture of the full extent of the impact.



Environmental rehabilitation puts food on Jedidah's table.  
PHOTO: JEFFERSON MUNYA/ACTIONAID KENYA, MUSYOKA NGUI

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## >> Farmers' Rights and the Right to Food & Nutrition Security

*"Today, more than 821 million people regularly go to bed hungry, of whom 100-plus million suffer from acute hunger, largely due to man-made conflicts, climate change and economic downturns."*

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP), APRIL 2020

The current COVID-19 containment measures such as movement restrictions and lockdown have already impacted migrant workers and informal workers, resulting in loss of incomes. The impact on farmers and food producers is starting to hit due to lack of buyers, restrictions in physical movements and inability to access local markets. Farmers will also be impacted by low food prices, which undermines their ability to make investments for the next cropping season, in addition to affecting their own food and nutrition security. While at the moment we can be thankful that there is currently no evidence of a global shortage of food, or of a spike in global commodity prices, which led to the global food crisis in 2008, many individuals are already experiencing restricted access to food due to loss of incomes or closure of markets. The pandemic may bring more disruption to the food system over the months or even years to come. Bearing in mind that pre-COVID-19 821 million people were already living with hunger, we must work to advance solutions that also address the underlying injustices and vulnerabilities in the food system.

### Short-term impacts on small scale food producers & local food supply:

- Sickness and lockdowns are preventing farmers and farm workers from accessing farms or harvesting crops. ActionAid Bangladesh researchers spoke to 151 smallholder farmers from 14 districts, and

found that 49% of farmer respondents reported facing difficulty in harvesting due to fear of the virus, shortage of labour, and lack of transportation, meaning that many are leaving crops to rot in the field.

- Lockdowns are also leading to the closure of local and territorial public market places such as open air and street markets, as has been seen in Kenya and Brazil for example. Smallholder farmers – particularly women smallholder farmers – often rely on local markets to sell their produce. Nigerian farmers are experiencing post-harvest food loss due to their inability to access the market. Many more countries warn that they could be facing this in the future. Restaurant closures are also affecting farmers, particularly those who were channelling their produce through direct sales.
- Many countries now report that food is being wasted. Vegetables and grains are rotting unharvested in fields, livestock are being killed and buried, and milk is being thrown away. In India the countrywide lockdown coincided with the country's peak harvesting time of a variety of crops of the season. Summer vegetables and fruits were ripe and ready to pick, and wheat, paddy and barley crops were ready for harvest. But in many instances the crops were left standing on the fields with no labour to harvest, or markets to sell to due to the sudden lockdown.
- As a result of the difficulties that farmers face in selling their products, they are often forced to drop prices, reducing their earnings. In Bangladesh, 79% respondents to ActionAid Bangladesh's survey reported being forced to sell their produce at much lower prices than normal. In Pakistan, while the government has exempted most rural farming communities from containment measures and lockdown, the transport of goods is greatly reduced, markets are less accessible and small producers have difficulty selling their

products, leading to wasted stocks and falling prices.

- With COVID-19 being a health crisis, and with most governments having deprioritised investment in healthcare systems, women are shouldering the burden of taking care of the sick in their families. In addition, COVID-19 has increased the need for childcare and fetching water, the burden of which is mostly falling on women due to their gender ascribed roles. With incomes reduced as a result of COVID-19 measures, their responsibility to grow food to feed the family is also increased. Women are carrying triple work burdens, leaving them exhausted, in deeper poverty, with little time for self-care, and at greater risk of violence and negative coping strategies.
- Meanwhile in North America, the industrial food system is also compromising workers' rights to health and life. Agribusiness corporations have successfully lobbied the US and Canadian governments to re-open industrial meat packing plants that had been closed due to COVID-19 infection. These workers, mostly African Americans and immigrants, are being forced to choose between their health and livelihoods, as they return to work in close quarters and unsafe conditions.

#### **People's access to food:**

- Meanwhile, people in lockdown are often unable to earn an income in order to buy food. Poorer communities often rely on street markets and informal systems for their food, but many of these have been shut down amid lockdown, and they can no longer access food to buy. Unlike the middle classes, families barely surviving on a daily wage do not have the means to stockpile food to cope with lockdown, and cannot access or afford urban supermarkets.
- Children who rely on their school to provide

their main meal of the day may also be facing hunger at home with families struggling to feed them.

- Governments are largely failing to ensure that everyone has adequate access to food in the right form, quantities and price. Citizens have been left to the mercies of the market or individual initiatives to ensure access to food. Millions are falling by the wayside. Thus, food insecurity is rising rapidly, and may force people to break lockdown conditions, or even lead to food riots and civil unrest. In Kibera, Kenya's largest informal settlement, food aid distribution resulted in a dangerous stampede of people desperate for food.

#### **Longer-term impacts on small scale food producers & food supply:**

- Loss of income and economic uncertainty for small scale food producers means that many may not be willing to lose a second season of investment or are unable to afford the costs of planting for next season, threatening food supply in the longer term and extending the duration of the food crisis.
- All-too-often policy makers focus their attention on meeting the needs of the urban and peri urban consumers and middle class consumers, which means that even as public marketplaces are closed, supermarkets are permitted to continue selling goods. The large-scale commercial farmers and small scale contract farmers that supply them may be able to continue for as long as agribusiness supply chains are protected, and may even be able to capture more of the market as a result. However stockpiling trends exacerbated by just-in-time delivery systems have also led to empty stores and some people may not be able to access food when they need it. Many supermarkets have responded through adjusting their supply chain systems and by implementing measures to limit stockpiling.

- In addition, some economic initiatives depicted as providing support to countries in crisis, may be cynically structured and could further threaten the rights of smallholder farmers in the longer term. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was reported to be providing a loan to the Ukraine to cope with the shock of COVID-19, while pushing for this to be conditional on a law that would lead to privatisation of farmland. Meanwhile, as governments consider providing huge economic “bailouts” to businesses threatened by the crisis, big industrial agribusiness companies may push to the front of the queue. If they succeed, their grip over the food system will penalise smallholder farmers and the climate even further.
- Having learned from previous food crisis, many governments have invested in good levels of buffer stocks to reduce vulnerability to food shortages or price rises. Several countries like India have invested in their

national food stocks (and have recently also registered their spend with the WTO to avoid any retaliatory trade measures). Unfortunately, however, this is only half of the story. The food must reach those most in need.<sup>1</sup> It appears that while there are enough global food supplies for the moment, they are not necessarily accessible to those who need them.

- However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global food system was already struggling to meet the food and nutritional needs of the most marginalised. According to the FAO, 821 million people suffered from hunger in 2018, while more than 672 million people suffered from obesity, largely due to consumption of highly processed food. There is need to ensure current and future responses to address COVID-19 work to strengthen and build a resilient food systems at all levels, to ensure that people’s right to food and nutritional security is protected and that there is stability in the system.



Agroecology Knowledge Exchange, Mozambique. PHOTO: ACTIONAID

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## **>> Protecting the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition Security**

ActionAid acknowledges that at present the picture is complex and the world is not yet facing a global food supply issue, or a food price crisis. But the food security of millions is already undermined due to lack of investment, climate change and conflict, and this has been exacerbated by the health crisis and responses to COVID-19. As a matter of urgency food supplies for net food importing countries must be maintained. Food or cash (as appropriate) must be distributed to those most in need through social protection schemes. Governments and farming communities must be supported to rebuild just food systems, food self-sufficiency, and resilience to on-going threats such as climate change.

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## **>> Policy demands**

In the context of COVID-19, ActionAid's ongoing programme and policy work to strengthen investment in women smallholder farmers, women's access to markets, women's rights to land and other productive resources, agriculture's resilience to climate change and the need for a feminist just transition in agriculture, are more relevant than ever.

Agroecological production methods and local markets – which help farmers to enhance control over production and keep a greater share of their income – can be more resilient to disruption from both COVID-19 and climate change, while protecting people's access to fresh and healthy food. But these approaches also require the support of policy makers, to protect farmers' rights and the right to food and nutrition security, now and for the future. Measures must include:

### **In the short term:**

- Governments should ensure that everyone can access food in the right quantities and quality, through measures such as scaling up and strengthening universal food security through income and food support programmes, starting with cash and/or food transfers for those most affected.
- Replacement school meals should be provided for school children missing out on their main meal of the day during lockdown.
- Minimum income support for women and men smallholder farmers and farm workers should be provided, so that they have enough income to cover their and their families' basic needs at this critical moment, and to plant for the next season, preventing the crisis from escalating further.
- Enable sales and avoid wasting of food by supporting innovative means to safely connect women and men smallholder farmers and consumers, for example through direct local sales, door to door sales, allowing alternative local market physical distancing measures, support for independent shops, digital tools etc.
- Street markets may be able to operate under safe conditions, including through permitting flexible layouts that allow for 2 metre physical distancing, providing unlimited wash stations with soap, sanitiser and bleach, and avoiding cash handling through digital tools or coins placed in jars of diluted bleach. (Guidelines developed by Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising – WIEGO – can be found here [\(link\)](#)).
- Provide advice and support on COVID-19 safety measures for workers in production, handling, processing and selling.
- Ensure that food procurement policies – particularly food aid – favour and support local and smallholder farmers, and do not lead to corporate capture.

- Increase national public food stocks and take regulatory measures to ensure price stability to protect from the risk of price fluctuations and/or commodity speculation.
- Promote smallholder farmers' autonomy over the use of their seeds by supporting the exchange of local seeds and facilitating the access of smallholder farmer communities to diverse local and indigenous seed varieties and sustainable farm inputs.
- Promoting women's empowerment and protecting their rights is one of the most effective strategies in the fight against hunger, while strengthening resilience to and recovery from the COVID-19 and climate crises. Supporting women food producers, protecting women's tenure security, addressing violence against women and reducing the unpaid care and domestic work burden are all part of the solution and will be more important than ever, both in the short and long term.
- Oppose bailouts for corporate agribusiness, and policies that threaten workers' rights to health and safety.

#### **In the longer term:**

- Programmes to strengthen resilience and recovery to COVID-19 should, where possible, be combined with climate solutions, including through economic stimulus or aid packages that support a just transition in agriculture to shift from industrial agriculture to agroecological food systems.
- Protect small scale food producers' incomes through social protection measures, and help them develop appropriate skills to cope with the impacts of climate change, longer leaner seasons, and to better facilitate a just transition to more sustainable, equitable and climate-resilient food systems.
- Where possible, link and integrate COVID-19 relief and recovery investment with national climate policy processes - including National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally

Determined Contributions (NDCs) - to ensure that the COVID-19 response also strengthens longer-term resilience to climate disasters, for example by strengthening agroecological food systems.

- Invest in local community seed and grain banks to provide stable access to food and inputs in times of crisis; strengthen food processing and storage facilities closer to farms; strengthen women's access to local markets;
- National governments must ensure land tenure security for small scale food producers by: prioritizing investment in and support for women food producers; facilitating community participation; and enforcing environmental standards and monitoring in any land-based investment emerging during and after COVID-19 as a response to food insecurity.
- The global policy response to protect the right to food and nutrition security in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic must be led by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which should use its convening power to develop a joint, fast, coordinated and inclusive policy response to the crisis.
- The global political response should be supported by international development cooperation through an increasing commitment of official development assistance (ODA), and where possible this should also integrate other critical considerations such as climate change and gender justice. Financial support should be primarily channelled through multilateral initiatives such as the Global Agriculture and Food Security Trust Fund (GAFSP), to provide much-needed assistance to countries and communities battling the food crisis. The GAFSP should be replenished with new and additional funds, following which it must launch a quick and extraordinary call for proposals targeting producer organizations, as well as low-income countries that are highly affected by the crisis.

**ActionAid** is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

<http://actionforglobaljustice.actionaid.org>

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