

UN warns that COVID-19 pandemic could trigger global food shortage

By Jean Shaoul
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The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned of the impact of the COVID-19 virus on the global food supply chain in a notice on their website writing: “We risk a looming food crisis unless measures are taken fast to protect the most vulnerable, keep global food supply chains alive and mitigate the pandemic’s impacts across the food system.”

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation’s chief economist Maximo Torero Cullen explained that while the supply of foodstocks is plentiful, the lockdowns, restrictions on all but essential work, shuttering of schools and border closures imposed around the world to limit the spread of the coronavirus are impacting farm workers and disrupting supply chains. This in turn is leading to a slowdown in the shipping industry, as many countries implement tighter controls on cargo vessels, as well as air cargo. These new measures will particularly affect fresh food produce and livestock.

The hardest hit will be the world’s most vulnerable people, including 300 million children who rely on school meals as their one reliable meal of the day. UN-supported school meals programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, benefit 85 million children, with 10 million depending on them for the main source of food. Mass layoffs and lower incomes will make it harder than ever for the most impoverished families to put food on the table.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Torero urged countries not to ban the export of foodstuffs saying, “The worst that can happen is that governments restrict the flow of food.” Protectionist measures and trade barriers would only make matters worse, creating “extreme volatility” in prices. Some countries have already begun to take such measures. March 20, for example, Russia called a halt to the export of buckwheat and other grains for 10 days, while Kazakhstan introduced restrictions on shipments of wheat flour, buckwheat, sugar, several types of vegetables and sunflower oil.

Torero insisted that global food trade had to be kept going, warning against the beggar-thy-neighbor policies of the

global food price crisis of 2008 when some countries imposed higher export taxes or export bans that provoked tit-for-tat reactions.

Food flows are international in character. Some 20 percent of the calories people eat—such as rice, soya, grains and wheat, cross at least one international border, up by more than 50 percent since 1980, with one third the world’s food coming from low and middle-income countries.

Countries dependent on imported food are particularly vulnerable to slowing trade volumes, especially if their currencies decline relative to the US dollar. With retailers upping their prices everywhere, food costs are accounting for an ever-larger share of a shrinking household budget.

One indication of the devastation to come can be found in the fresh flower industry. Flight cancellations along with the collapse of the Dutch auctions have left many farmers in Kenya, the world’s flower garden with annual exports of tonnes of freshly cut flowers to all corners of the world, with no option but to dispose of flowers worth millions and close down virtually the entire sector.

Domestic food supply chains are no less imperiled, involving a complex web of farmers and farm labourers, as well as fertilizers, seeds and veterinary medicines, processing plants, freight distributors, retailers, etc.

Smallholder farmers in the “developing” countries are some of the worst affected by food insecurity, due to their low incomes. During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, lockdowns prevented farmers’ access to markets to buy inputs and sell products as well as impacting the availability of labour at peak seasonal times, leading to unsold food and a loss of income. The string of events led to a huge increase in hunger and malnutrition throughout the region.

Food insecurity is particularly acute in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, where 80 percent of the population works on the land and is now facing the destruction by desert locust swarms.

Some countries are already experiencing a shortage of workers to harvest fresh produce due in part to border closures and domestic lockdowns, and the lack of protective

measures to ensure the health and safety of food-system and delivery workers, including on-site health measures, protective clothing, sick-leave and physical distancing.

The pandemic has exposed the degree to which farming is dependent upon migrant workers, with more than a 25 percent of the world's farm work done by migrant workers.

In Europe, commercial farm work is dependent on the annual migration of hundreds of thousands of people from poorer countries to harvest food crops. Travel bans have reduced seasonal migration to a trickle, just as farmers are preparing for the harvest amid stockpiling and the most precipitous economic downturn in post-war memory.

Farmers in France, Spain, and Italy are warning that ripening fruit and vegetables will be left to rot, leading to severe shortages in April and May. Strawberry and asparagus growers have been unable to pick their crops, with other fruit, vegetables and salad greens next in line. France alone needs 200,000 workers, while Germany requires 300,000. Britain, where the problem is further exacerbated by Brexit, faces a shortage of 90,000 workers.

Some two-thirds of these 800,000 difficult and backbreaking jobs, characterized by low pay and long hours, are filled in the harvest season by workers from central and eastern Europe and north Africa. But the Schengen area, comprising 26 European states, has banned external visitors for 30 days and many borders are closed. Even where travel is allowed, transport is limited, and workers fear they may be barred from returning home if they fall ill.

In Britain, the Country Land and Business Association has called for a "land army" to work the fields, while Germany has appealed to the unemployed. France's employment agency has announced that people can still receive benefits or earn money if they are furloughed while doing farm work, with the UK declaring farm labourers "key workers."

In the US, farmers are hampered by the reduction in visas issued to workers from Mexico.

Ali Capper, chairperson of the UK's National Farmers Union's horticultural board, told the *Financial Times*, "Every first world economy is used to workers coming from other economies to pick their fruit and vegetables.... What you are talking about is a major societal shift."

In India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationwide 21-day curfew on the country's 1.4 billion people, introduced last week without prior warning or preparation for maintaining food supplies, has severely disrupted supply chains amid widespread confusion over which businesses are allowed to operate.

The police have stopped goods trucks from moving across state lines, while giant ecommerce companies, including Amazon, Walmart-owned Flipkart, SoftBank-backed Grofers and Big Basket, have reported severe difficulties,

with police closing warehouses and harassing couriers delivering online orders to middle class homes in the cities.

This has already affected some of India's most vulnerable people, including urban migrant workers who have lost their jobs and businesses due to social distancing and are now making the long journey home on foot, under conditions where they may be unable to pay for or get food on the way. While the government has said it will provide aid to the poorest for the next three months, this will only be available to villages, meaning that workers must return home.

Reetika Khera, economics professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, told the *Financial Times*, "We are very worried about starvation deaths... People on the march like this, they are not very nourished in the first place. They can die of exhaustion."

According to FAO statistics, a massive 820 million people around the world (12 percent) are currently experiencing chronic hunger and lack the caloric energy to lead normal lives. An additional 113 million are so hungry that their lives and their livelihoods are in danger, reliant on external assistance for their existence.

As COVID-19 proliferates in the 44 countries that already need external food assistance or in the 53 countries that are home to 113 million people experiencing acute hunger as a result of poverty, wars, conflicts, landlordism, extortionate debt charges and climate change, the consequences will be catastrophic.

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