

# Food and Nutrition under the COVID-19 Crisis:

## Lessons for Protecting the Vulnerable and Facilitating Recovery

Independent Evaluation Group | March 31, 2021

### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) is threatening the food security and nutrition of millions of people globally. The number of people affected by hunger worldwide has been increasing since 2014.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, moderate or severe food insecurity affected approximately one-quarter of the global population. More than half of the population in Africa, almost one-third of Latin America and the Caribbean, and more than one-fifth of Asia were food insecure.<sup>2</sup> In addition, about 144 million children under five were stunted (FAO and others 2020). The COVID-19 crisis worsened the situation. The World Food Programme (WFP) projected that the pandemic would double the number of people facing acute hunger (crisis level or worse),<sup>3</sup> from 135 million in 2019 to 265 million by the end of 2020 (WFP 2020). Unlike the 2008 food crisis, which was triggered by declining global stocks and the resulting disruptions in global markets, the current crisis is driven by disruptions in domestic food supplies, product markets, and loss of jobs and income in both urban and rural areas that reduce access to nutritious food or make it unaffordable (Voegelé 2020; UN 2020). Overall, the crisis is further threatening the ability of many countries to meet their Sustainable Development Goals of ending hunger, malnutrition, and extreme poverty by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

Hunger and malnutrition have increased drastically over the past year, which marked the most severe increase in global food insecurity. Early assessments of the pandemic's impacts on food security warned that the global situation could worsen if the health crisis further limited the pro-

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1 The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) new estimate for 2019 shows that an additional 60 million people have been affected by hunger since 2014 (UN 2020).

2 FAO defines food security as a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Of the 2 billion people who were chronically food insecure in 2019, about 750 million were classified as severely food insecure, which is defined as the level at which people have likely run out of food, experienced hunger, and, at the most extreme, gone for days without eating, putting their health and well-being at grave risk (FAO and others 2020).

3 Based on the World Food Programme's Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system, acute food insecurity is defined as the level of food deprivation that threatens lives or livelihoods, regardless of the causes, context, or duration (IPC Global Partners 2019). The World Food Programme data for acute food insecurity reported here includes Integrated Food Security Phase Classification phase 3 or worse: phase 3 is Crisis, phase 4 is Emergency, and phase 5 is Catastrophe/Famine. These severity categories partly overlap with FAO's definition of severe food insecurity.

4 The World Bank also projected that 88 to 115 million people—more than 85 percent from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—could be pushed into extreme poverty, effectively wiping out progress made since 2017 (Mahler and others 2020; World Bank 2020).

duction and supply of food commodities in ways that reduced global stocks and increased the price of food, especially nutritious food (for example, UN 2020; WFP 2020; Swinnen and McDermott 2020). Given that food accounts for the largest share of expenditures for poor families, high food prices force them to reduce their demand and cut down on both the quantity and quality of food consumption. Global food prices rose by about 20 percent during 2020, and cereals prices are currently about 30 percent higher than in January 2020.<sup>5</sup> Some recent evidence of how the pandemic is affecting food production and supply in Africa (for example, Ayanlade and Radeny 2020) and Asia (for example, Mahajan and Tomar 2020) reinforces the concerns about the pandemic's prolonged impacts on food security and nutrition.<sup>6</sup>

The poorest and most vulnerable people in low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected areas are most at risk. The COVID-19 crisis has dramatically increased food insecurity in the poorest and most vulnerable countries served by the International Development Association (IDA; Townsend and Gautam 2021). Estimates suggest that about 96 million additional people were pushed into acute food insecurity in 2020 across 54 IDA countries,<sup>7</sup> bringing the total to about 233 million people by the end of 2020 in these countries. World Bank projections also suggest that this figure could increase further to about 330 million in 2021 (Townsend and Gautam 2021; Wang and others 2020). Other overlapping shocks (for example, floods, droughts, and desert locusts in Africa) also threaten to induce a critical situation that could severely weaken food and nutrition security in fragile and vulnerable regions. Therefore, policy makers are urgently looking for effective measures to ensure that the health crisis does not trigger a global food crisis.

The World Bank has responded by intensifying its support to contain and mitigate the pandemic's impacts on food security.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing the urgency in addressing the pandemic-induced threats to food security, the World Bank has intensified its multisectoral support, especially for IDA and countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence. It has activated the Contingency Emergency Response Components, which allow reallocating funds included in existing projects to addressing emergency response needs in client countries. It is also repurposing existing projects on a fast-track basis, providing additional finance under existing projects or preparing new emergency operations (including development policy operations). During the six months ending in September 2020, IDA provided \$5.3 billion in new commitments to food security—half of this to meet immediate food security needs and half to address the

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5 This is according to a World Bank COVID update note from February 2021.

6 There is evidence that African agribusinesses, especially in landlocked countries, are unable to produce, import, or distribute certified seeds and fertilizers (CORAF/WECARD 2020; Gakpo 2020). In India, research indicates that the availability of fruits, vegetables, and edible oils is estimated to have fallen by 8–14 percent because of supply chain disruptions (Mahajan and Tomar 2020).

7 <http://ida.worldbank.org/about/borrowing-countries>

8 The International Finance Corporation has also responded in different ways, including increased financing to agribusiness firms or loans to domestic banks to help expand lending to small and medium enterprises so that they can adapt and continue operating. The increase will also help to reduce supply chain disruptions and sustain jobs as part of the ongoing effort to mitigate impacts and support recovery and resilience. However, this note focuses primarily on the World Bank's responses.

longer-term drivers of food insecurity (World Bank 2020a). Responses to meet immediate food needs, initially targeted to selected food security hot spots,<sup>9</sup> include financing for increasing safety nets, correcting supply chain disruptions, enhancing access to food, protecting jobs and livelihoods in the agri-food sectors, supporting producers to safeguard food production, and controlling the spread of locusts. These responses are supported by investments to address the underlying drivers of food insecurity, increase productivity, and increase long-term resilience to climate change.

This note summarizes lessons from the World Bank's food crisis response experience and aims to inform the current response and its effectiveness to improve food security and nutrition. The lessons are in two categories: (i) ensuring access to food and nutrition for the vulnerable and (ii) building back better to increase food production and resilience. The note is based primarily on a review of relevant Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) microevaluative evidence (based on evaluations of World Bank Group projects) and IEG thematic evaluations covering issues of food security and nutrition that can be relevant to the World Bank's current crisis response efforts. It also includes evaluation evidence based on studies gathered from various external sources.<sup>10</sup>

## Ensuring Access to Food and Nutrition for the Vulnerable

**The World Bank has supported client countries in the past in improving access to food and nutrition for their vulnerable populations,** responding to a wide range of food emergency crises, especially those linked to the aftermath of the 2008–09 financial and economic crises. A review of this experience finds seven key lessons that are relevant for enhancing the ongoing response to improve food security and nutrition.

**Integrating nutrition education, fortification, and micronutrient supplementation as part of a crisis response helps to reduce the risk of malnutrition over time.** The World Bank showed that a focus on nutrition is possible when providing emergency support as part of its food crises response program, launched soon after the 2007–08 global food crises. For example, in Nicaragua, the Price Vulnerability (Food Crisis) Project (2009) effectively helped mitigate the negative health and nutritional effects that the crises was having on preprimary and primary-school-age children at home by providing nutrition education and an increased number of nutritional lunches at school.<sup>11</sup> In South Sudan, the Emergency Food Crisis Response Project (2008) supported training of farmer-based organizations in fortification and

9 The food security hot spots identified by the Famine Action Mechanism (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/famine-early-action-mechanism>) partners in June 2020 include the following: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, the Republic of Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

10 This includes systematic reviews conducted by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, and other early assessments and academic studies on the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute, FAO, and others.

11 The number of preschoolers receiving lunches in targeted areas increased from 38,022 to 50,777 (33 percent). The number of schoolchildren receiving lunches increased from 225,099 to 558,365 (148 percent). The number of days that children received lunches increased from 65 days per year to 172 days.

nutrition-sensitive farming—an effort that improved food availability and dietary diversity among farming communities.<sup>12</sup> In Senegal, the Rapid Response Child-Focused Social Cash Transfer and Nutrition Security Project (2009) increased the enrollment of vulnerable children under five years of age in nutrition programs (from 22 percent to 65 percent) and almost doubled the number of women in targeted communities providing exclusive breastfeeding (from 34 percent to 62 percent).<sup>13</sup> The early results showed that food insecurity in target areas dropped slightly, but it increased in nonintervention areas.<sup>14</sup> The project focused strongly on health and nutrition monitoring of the targeted communities.

**Projects that support local food production and vegetable gardens improve nutrition and enhance resilience.** The Tajikistan Emergency Food Security and Seed Imports Project (2008) used community production groups and private agricultural input dealers to augment the supply of seed and fertilizer to boost cereal production, mitigating the negative impact of high and volatile food prices that arose during the crisis. China's Food Basket Program also provides lessons—it supports the production and supply of nutritious, safe, and affordable foods in urban areas (for example, Xiangyang City in the Hubei province and in Beijing), and that has helped cushion urban consumers from disruption of food supply chains during the current crisis (Fei and Ni 2020).

**When food is available in local markets, targeted cash transfer programs can be more efficient than food distribution in improving food security.** In humanitarian contexts, cash transfers, vouchers, and food distribution have all improved household food security. But direct cash transfers can be more cost efficient than direct food transfers or vouchers because of lower costs per beneficiary and lower administrative costs (Thissen 2020). When food is available locally, cash transfers can also produce greater multiplier effects, stimulating local economies through indirect market benefits to farmers and workers in food value chains. Where direct cash transfers are not feasible, food vouchers can also be more cost efficient than direct food distribution (Thissen 2020). However, in emergency situations in which local food stocks are depleted and acute hunger and malnutrition are serious issues, direct distribution of nutrient-dense foods to the affected and the most vulnerable households or individuals is essential. To prevent increases in food prices in these situations,

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12 The project did not provide clear measurements on improved consumption of food, but it brought back into production 104,741 hectares of idle land (target was 38,800 hectares). About 6,000 households (target was 1,900) increased their dietary diversity, and 2,781 households (target was 1,650) adopted healthier eating habits.

13 The community nutrition program feeding children under five years of age expanded from a baseline coverage of 22 percent to 65 percent (target was 45 percent). Targeted mothers providing exclusive breastfeeding increased from a baseline of 34 percent to 62 percent (target was 44 percent).

14 According to the Implementation Completion and Results Report, food insecurity in target areas dropped slightly from 31.4 percent to 30.9 percent while it increased in nonintervention areas from 35.4 percent to 42.4 percent (World Bank 2013c, 14).

cash transfers and vouchers can be introduced gradually when local food supplies are restored and markets have stabilized.<sup>15</sup>

**However, cash transfer and food distribution programs require rigorous and transparent targeting to reach the most vulnerable.** World Bank projects that have provided food and nutrition security have used various methods to achieve effective targeting of food insecure areas, households, and individuals. Some, like the Philippines Global Food Crisis Response Project, reached the most vulnerable by using the national database of poor households to identify beneficiaries. The Nepal Social Safety Nets Project (2008), which responded to the 2008 food crises with food and cash-for-work opportunities, identified food insecure districts by using the WFP's vulnerability analysis and mapping tool. Beneath the district level, the project set a work compensation rate lower than the market wage rate (for unskilled labor) to attract poorer individuals to the work program. In these programs and in the 2013 Moldova Emergency Agriculture Support Project (which provided a cash transfer to drought-stricken farmers), verification of beneficiaries and selection transparency was important to preventing elite capture.

**Nontargeted instruments such as tax reductions for food staples may not benefit vulnerable consumers.** To use such instruments to enhance food security, certain conditions need to be in place to ensure that the price benefits will pass through to the most vulnerable groups. Several options could be considered, such as allowing the marketing of tax-exempted food through licensed channels that can reach poor people and the most vulnerable directly (for example, using vouchers for poor people to access food at lower prices in designated outlets). The World Bank experience under the Djibouti Food Crisis Response development policy grant (2008) showed that although the basic foods on which taxes were lifted were key components of the food basket for low-income households, there was significant leakage to better-off groups. The blanket tax exemption approach on basic foods lacked the means to prevent such leakages and failed to lower consumer prices for vulnerable households. Challenges in addressing marketing risks and collusion among food importers limited the tax exemption benefits from being transmitted to vul-

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<sup>15</sup> This evidence is drawn from a systematic review that brings data together from different studies conducted around the world on cash-based social assistance programs in humanitarian contexts. Systematic reviews provide more solid evidence than individual case studies, in which local, context-specific factors can drive outcomes. This systematic review includes five studies of the effectiveness of cash-based approaches and 10 studies of the cost-efficiency of cash-based approaches. The studies on effectiveness were conducted among internally displaced people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, refugees and poor households in Ecuador, refugees in Lebanon, drought-affected communities in Niger, and conflict-affected populations in the Republic of Yemen. Evidence about cost-efficiency comes from those contexts and from Jordan, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. Some of the cash transfer programs used mobile money transfers, and others used physical cash.

nerable consumers. Therefore, lifting taxes on basic food items in Djibouti had little to no impact on food prices and thus failed to reduce acute malnutrition (IEG 2012).<sup>16</sup>

**In fragile and conflict-affected situations, World Bank Group partnerships to identify and reach the food insecure have not always been effective at targeting the most vulnerable.** In the Central African Republic Emergency Food Crises Response and Agriculture Relaunch Project (2014), designed to provide emergency assistance after a coup d'état in 2013, the decision to partner with two United Nations food agencies (WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization) did not effectively allow the identification and targeting of the most vulnerable food insecure groups. In the prevailing conflict situation, neither WFP nor the Food and Agriculture Organization had direct access to displaced populations, mothers, or children. An IEG project evaluation found that the program could have benefited from additional technical support from other specialized agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund or the International Committee of the Red Cross, who were providing critical health and nutrition services to displaced and vulnerable populations (World Bank 2018). In the Senegal Rapid Response Child-Focused Social Cash Transfer and Nutrition Security Project (2009), the World Bank used systems developed by WFP and the United Nations Children's Fund for the government of Senegal to facilitate the effective monitoring and screening of acute malnutrition and micronutrient supplementation, and to provide deworming medication. In Senegal and other examples such as the Guinea-Bissau Emergency Food Security Support Project (2008), careful targeting and the ability to reach the vulnerable (for example, children, pregnant women, and mothers) were important to improving food security for the most vulnerable. A better understanding of the situation in the field, including vulnerable groups and their needs, is crucial to identifying the right partners.

**Digital solutions can provide cash to the food insecure while reducing contact during the pandemic,** but projects and implementing agencies must ensure that these solutions are accessible to poor people. The ongoing Productive Social Safety Net Project (2015) in Côte d'Ivoire worked with mobile money operators to overcome some of their stringent formal identification requirements for cash transfers to reach poor people. In addition to temporary exemptions, the creative adaptations included the introduction of low-cost digital credentials and flexibility for the food insecure and vulnerable beneficiaries to designate a trusted recipient when relevant (Tullis and others 2018). The project extended digital social payments to all its beneficiaries by using mobile channels. Radio rather than community meetings and home visits provided information—a relevant adaptation to the pandemic (World Bank 2020b).

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<sup>16</sup> The Project Performance Assessment Report on the project noted that there was no compelling evidence that the tax exemption on major foods (rice, sugar, cooking oil, wheat flour, pasta, and powdered milk) led to a drop in the price of food staples or prevented it from rising. Although there was a drop in acute malnutrition for children under five, this probably resulted from food distribution to vulnerable groups and school feeding commitments made by other donors before approval of the food crisis grant and not through the policies associated with the grant operation.

## Building Back Better to Increase Food Production and Resilience

A key challenge in responding to the current crisis is how to respond better and differently to prevent recurrences of similar conditions in the future. This section highlights two key lessons to consider for facilitating recovery and building resilience in food security.

**Strengthening risk surveillance and early warning systems is essential for responding quickly and effectively to food crises situations.** Amid the pandemic, a severe locust infestation and floods hit several African countries (for example, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda), further diminishing food production and access to food for many vulnerable people. In response to a previous food and locust crisis in Madagascar, the World Bank supported the Emergency Food Security and Social Protection Project (2014), which developed a national locust control strategy and established the Anti-Locust Invasion Center, which helped build a cost-effective locust early warning and control system. The project was instrumental in establishing a threat detection system, a decision-making system, and a quick intervention system that helped control locusts and reduce the effects on food production. The project also established a disaster recovery contingency fund that could be triggered in a natural disaster. An important lesson is to maintain surveillance operations and avoid complacency when the perceived threats are low (World Bank 2013b). The experiences with various threats to food security (for example, pandemics and desert locusts) reaffirm the importance of preparedness for preemptive risk reduction.

**Building resilience in food security requires investing in food production, food storage, distribution, and marketing systems that enhance resilience to shocks.** Achieving resilience in food security in the long term requires investing in solutions that reduce exposure and vulnerability to shocks affecting food production and supply. For example, the Nicaragua Price Vulnerability (Food Crisis) Project (2009) combined an agro-seed program with an emergency school feeding program to address emergency school feeding needs that occurred because of sharp food price increases while building resilience in agriculture production for the future. The Public Employment for Sustainable Agriculture and Water Management Project in Tajikistan (2010), also launched in response to the food crisis, helped address short-term consumption needs by providing temporary employment in public works activities for the vulnerable while financing soil and water investments to enhance agricultural productivity and food security in the long run. In Madagascar, the Emergency Food Security and Social Protection Project (2014) provided cash-for-work activities to help vulnerable households access food, and it also invested in improved land management practices, rehabilitation of essential irrigation, and market access infrastructure to facilitate a more robust enabling environment for food security in the future. Similarly, the Lao People's Democratic Republic Upland Food Security Improvement Project (2010) helped revitalize agriculture and food security through investments in irrigation and rural infrastructure to increase local food production.

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Bekele A. Shiferaw prepared this note under the guidance of Marialisa Motta (manager, Financial, Private Sector, Infrastructure, and Sustainable Development) and oversight of José Carbajo (director, Financial, Private Sector, and Sustainable Development). Lauren Kelly provided valuable inputs and review comments. Song Tongruksawattana provided research and analytical support for review and synthesis of the existing evidence.

Corresponding author: Bekele A Shiferaw, [bambaye@worldbank.org](mailto:bambaye@worldbank.org).