State of the

RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

Report

2021

GLOBAL NETWORK FOR THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

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| Coordinator

Laura Michéle (FIAN International)

| Authors

Isa Álvarez Vispo (URGENCI), Laura Michéle, Annie Ruth Sabangan (FIAN International)

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| Copy-editing

Katie Anne Whiddon

| Art Concept & Design

btta.creativa

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ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
AGRA	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBOs	community-based organizations
CFS	UN Committee on World Food Security
CONSEA	National Council for Food Security and Nutrition
CSA	community supported agriculture
CSM	Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism
CSOs	civil society organizations
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN
FAW	fall armyworms
GMOs	genetically modified organisms
GNRtFN	Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition
ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NCDs	non-communicable diseases
RtFN	human right to adequate food and nutrition
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOFI	State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
TNC	transnational corporations
UN	United Nations
UNSCN	UN Standing Committee on Nutrition
USA	United States
USDA	US Department of Agriculture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the first cases of COVID-19 made headlines a year and a half ago, few would have imagined the magnitude the pandemic would reach and the disastrous outcomes that would follow. What started as a health crisis, quickly turned into a livelihood and food crisis. Millions of people have lost their jobs and sources of income, especially those in the informal sector. With no, or inadequate, social protection schemes in place, the number of those suffering from hunger has increased by up to 161 million in just over a year.

This year's *State of the Right to Food and Nutrition Report* places the spotlight on the right to food and nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks at the measures that governments have taken to contain the spread of the virus, and the impacts these have had on different population groups. It equally provides insights to the ways in which communities and civil society groups across the globe have self-organized to confront the crisis and support those in need.

The report shows strikingly similar patterns across regions. Yet, it also highlights that the impacts are far from the same for everyone. Across societies, the pandemic and the measures to contain it hit marginalized and disadvantaged groups the hardest. In many instances, no precautions were taken or relevant exceptions made to protect the rights of these groups, and to shield them against the effects of restrictive measures. In most countries, social protection schemes have proved incapable of protecting those most in need, and of supporting them to get back on their feet.

The pandemic laid bare the structural discrimination, inequalities and exclusions that underpin our societies and make people vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. It has placed a spotlight on the precarious and unsafe working conditions that food and agricultural workers, and especially migrant workers, find themselves in, and the limited access to basic services and social protection they enjoy. It has, moreover, highlighted the plight of Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities, who deprived of their territories and access to natural resources, have been left with little resilience to confront the pandemic and related food crisis.

Across regions, the colossal increase in care work largely landed on the shoulders of women, who in turn have been more likely to lose their jobs. Women have equally had to endure higher levels of stress, as they are often responsible for putting food on the table. On top of everything, they have faced an escalation in domestic violence. Children living in poverty have suffered from missing out on school meals, or from a reduction in the quality of meals. In some instances, children have been pressed into hazardous jobs to help their families make ends meet.

The report also highlights how governments have used the pandemic to (further) militarize societies, and forcefully push through harmful laws, policies, and projects. In this sense, the pandemic has served as a perfect pretext to silence social protests, violently target communities, and criminalize human rights defenders.

The report points to, on the one hand, the multi-layered vulnerability produced by the global industrial food system and, on the other hand, the resilience of local food systems and small-scale food producers in times of crisis.

The industrial food system is not only associated with the rise of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19, it also enhances the risk of severe infection, for example, through the promotion of ultra-processed food products and exposure of people to agro-toxics. It's reliance on long supply chains and commercial farming inputs, moreover, has rendered those who depend on it vulnerable to disruptions in global trade and price fluctuations. On the contrary, local peasant food systems based on agroecology have proved highly resilient amid the crisis and found innovative ways to confront it. Across regions there has been a surge in interest in agroecology, community-supported agriculture, and urban / community gardens, with new webs created between rural and urban communities.

This is despite the fact that many governments, especially initially, have shown a bias towards the corporate food system and against small-scale food producers in their responses to the pandemic. This included, for example, the closure of informal and farmers' markets while supermarkets were allowed to remain open, the introduction of curfew times that interfered with the work routines of small-scale fishers, restrictions on movement that impeded peasants, especially women, from accessing their land, or the closure of borders that obstructed pastoralists in the search for fodder.

Across regions there has been a huge amount of solidarity and community organization to face the crisis and support those in need. Small-scale food producers across the globe have organized themselves to donate and exchange their produce. Rural women have shared their knowledge on medicinal plants and made these available for populations in need. Communities and civil society groups have organized community pantries and soup kitchens, while community supported agriculture initiatives have sought new solidarity formulas to include those with fewer resources.

Moving forward, it will be critical to learn from the lessons of the pandemic and the responses to it. We must not forget that hunger and malnutrition has been there before, and in fact on the rise for years. The construction of a "new tomorrow" hence needs to move beyond "fixing things" to addressing the structural discrimination, inequalities and exclusions that have created the conditions for the crisis to unfold in such a dramatic and unequal way.

INTRODUCTION

FROM THE HEALTH TO THE FOOD CRISIS

When the first cases of COVID-19 made headlines a year and a half ago, few would have imagined the magnitude the pandemic would reach and the disastrous outcomes that would follow. What started as a health crisis, quickly turned into a livelihood and food crisis for many. The devastating impact of the virus was swiftly met with containment measures that were just as, if not more, devastating. Governments across the globe adopted drastic measures, which were often applied in an indiscriminate way, leading millions of people to lose their jobs and income – especially those in the informal sector and day laborers. With no, or inadequate, social protection schemes in place, these measures pushed a large section of society to the brink of survival. In the wake of the resulting food crisis, the number of those suffering from hunger has increased by up to 161 million – amounting to 811 million people – in just over a year. While nearly one in three people lacked access to adequate food.

While the 'proportionality' of measures is a complex question that needs to be assessed from case to case, it is true to say that in many instances, if not most, governments failed to adequately consider and act upon the differential impacts that measures would have on certain population groups, especially marginalized and disadvantaged groups. A case in point is small-scale fishing communities, who were hit hard by curfew during the hours and months that coincided with their prime fishing time. Another example is women farmers, who were unable to access their fields due to requirements to show land titles, which often only men hold. In many instances, no precautions were taken or relevant exceptions made to protect the rights of these groups, and to shield them against the effects of restrictive measures. In most countries, social protection schemes have proved incapable of protecting those most in need, and of supporting them to get back on their feet.

While patterns are strikingly similar across regions, the impacts are far from the same for everyone. Across societies, the pandemic and the measures to contain it, hit marginalized and disadvantaged groups struggling to meet their daily needs the hardest. The pandemic has laid bare the structural discrimination, inequalities and exclusions that pervade our societies. It has pushed certain population groups to extremes, making them immensely vulnerable to crises of all sorts.

The lack of access to basic social services and common goods such as healthcare, water and sanitation, coupled with the precarious working conditions that many workers find themselves in – especially in the food and agricultural sector – have rendered them highly vulnerable to infection. At the same time, colonial and neo-liberal structures have deprived Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities of their territories and access to natural resources, leaving them with no option but to seek jobs as daily laborers and migrant workers, with little resilience to economic and food crises.

Under the prevailing patriarchal structures, the colossal increase in care work largely landed on the shoulders of women, who in turn have been more likely to lose their jobs. Women have equally had to endure higher levels of stress, as they are often responsible for putting food on the table. On top of everything, they

have faced an escalation in domestic violence. Children living in poverty have suffered from missing out on school meals, or a reduction in the quality of meals. In some instances, children have been pressed into hazardous jobs to help their families make ends meet.

Many countries across several regions face a rise in authoritarianism. Here, governments have used the pandemic to (further) militarize societies, and forcefully push through harmful laws, policies, and projects. In this sense, the pandemic has served as a perfect pretext to silence social protests, violently target communities, and criminalize human rights defenders.

WHAT IS NEXT?

The health and subsequent food crises have placed a spotlight on food systems. The crises reveal, on the one hand, the multi-layered vulnerability that results from an increasing reliance on the global industrial food system and, on the other, the resilience of local food systems and small-scale food producers. In some countries, the pandemic has provided an incentive for home gardening, shifts to ecological farming, and community supported agriculture (CSA). But it has equally accelerated the ongoing digitalization of food systems, especially with regards to e-commerce, thereby alienating people even further from where their food comes from.

Moving forward, it will be critical to learn from the lessons of the pandemic and work towards a different tomorrow. As quoted in the **Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) Women's Group publication:** "We won't go back to normality, because normality was the problem". Already prior to the crisis, the number of hungry, malnourished, and food insecure people was rising. Climate change, eco-destruction, and natural resource grabbing were already rampant, undermining the rights of small-scale food producers and rural communities across the globe. **Biodiversity** has been in rapid decline as of late, diets have become progressively homogenized, and consumption is gradually shifting to ultra-processed food products. A radical shift in direction is more critical than ever: we need to move **away from 'agri-business-as-usual'** and further digitalization of our food systems, and towards the creation and strengthening of healthy, sustainable and just food systems.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The State of the Right to Food and Nutrition report is a joint endeavor of the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition (hereinafter Global Network or GNRtFN), supported by its secretariat, FIAN International. First published in 2019, it attempts to provide a yearly snapshot of developments at country and international level concerning the right to food and nutrition. It thereby complements the United Nations (UN) Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO)

State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report from a human rights perspective that looks beyond the numbers and sheds light on the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition (see SOFI 2021 critique). This year's report, which covers the period from July 2020 to June 2021, places the spotlight on the right to food and nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The publication is part of the GNRtFN's broader monitoring initiative: The Peoples' Monitoring Tool for the Right to Food and Nutrition. The tool serves as a guide for peoples, communities, movements, civil society, academics, and even civil servants to monitor the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RtFN), based on a holistic understanding of the right to food, and underpinned by a counter-hegemonic food systems perspective. It mainly aims at supporting national level monitoring efforts by providing a framework, and relevant tools, to carefully analyze whether and how states are complying with their obligations relative to the RtFN. The tool is the result of a collective exercise by members of the Global Network, and should be considered a living document that 'grows' with the evolving understanding of the RtFN, as well as with lessons learned from using it on the ground.

The content of this publication is based on inputs from members of the GNRtFN, complemented with information provided by other networks, as well as relevant surveys and reports, including those of the CSM. The publication does not pretend to cover all countries nor situations, but is focused on the countries and issues that Global Network members work on.

01 INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In recent years, the much-needed transformation of food systems to make them healthier, sustainable and just has made it onto the international agenda, and is much debated in spaces of global governance. The spread of COVID-19 and the massive food crisis that swept across continents has clearly demonstrated the urgency of reform. The destruction of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity associated with the industrial food system and its mode of production have functioned as **perfect breeding grounds for zoonotic diseases**, such as COVID-19. Simultaneously, the pandemic has shed light on the immense inequalities that are inherent to the industrial food system, as well as the dependence and multiple vulnerabilities it generates. This includes increased **vulnerability to severe infection from the virus due to obesity and non-communicable diseases** (NCDs), associated with the consumption of ultra-processed foods, as well as due to respiratory diseases caused by exposure to agro-chemicals.

The most important international space for policy debate on how to transform food systems has been the **United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS)**. After four years of policy deliberation, on the 10th of February 2021 CFS adopted the **Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN)**. Civil society and social movements participating in the CFS **Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM)** have actively engaged in the process since its very beginning, trying to ensure that the Guidelines reflect the experiences and solutions put forward by those most affected by hunger and malnutrition, who at the same time feed the majority of the world's population: small-scale food producers, including Indigenous Peoples, workers, and women. It therefore comes with immense disappointment that the Guidelines fall far short of providing any substantial basis for the transformation of the dominant industrial food system. They fail to present an analysis of where the industrial food system is lacking, and a clear vision on how to overcome these problems. The negotiation process was marked by a strong power game led by the main agro-exporting countries defending the interests of 'their' transnational corporations. It was further complicated by the online format and methodology that the Working Group's Chair applied to the negotiations. The CSM has **decided to not support the dissemination and implementation of the Guidelines**, and only engage in critically monitoring their implementation and effects on the ground. Instead, the CSM will focus on promoting its **own collective vision for food systems transformation** that it developed in the course of the Guidelines process.

Closely related to the VGFSyN process and of central relevance to social movements and CSOs participating in the CSM have been the CFS negotiations on Agroecology. On June 4, 2021 they concluded with the adoption of the **CFS Policy Recommendations on Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches**. While the process has been much more inclusive than the VGFSyN negotiations, time pressure has been a major challenge. The outcome is far from satisfactory and contains **several problematic recommendations** (e.g., use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers). The CSM is yet to decide on whether or not to endorse the Policy Recommendations.

The CSM also prepared a report on **Monitoring the use and application of the CFS Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises**

(CFS-FFA), and presented it at the Global Thematic Event during the CFS 47th Plenary Session, exceptionally held in February 2021. By providing reflections from affected communities and related organizations on the implementation and alignment of the CFS-FFA with policy decisions (or lack thereof), along with key barriers to its use and implementation, amongst other things, the report aims to complement the CFS assessment of the implementation of the CFS-FFA.

In September 2021, the UN Food Systems Summit will be held in New York, while a Pre-Summit is scheduled for July 26 to 28 in Rome. According to the organizers, the Summit aims to "launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems". The Summit faced harsh criticism from civil society, social movements, academia and UN human rights experts since the beginning of preparations, starting with the appointment by the UN Secretary General of Agnes Kalibata, the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), as Special Envoy to lead the Summit's preparations. Other issues raised were the lack of transparency surrounding the Summit, the dominance of corporate interests, the absence of human rights framing, and the emphasis on technological approaches over people's approaches, such as agroecology.

The CFS, despite its role as the principle and most inclusive intergovernmental body to discuss food, agriculture and nutrition, continues to be marginalized in the preparations for the Summit. Meanwhile, civil society organizations (CSOs) are being cherry-picked rather than engaged through established platforms, such as the CSM, which already channel the voices of small-scale food producers and others affected by hunger and malnutrition. Consequently, CSOs and peoples' organizations involved in CSM have decided to organize their own process to challenge the Summit. A first global meeting was held in December 2020 with over 100 participants, and a three-day counter-event to the Pre-Summit will be held from July 25 to 27. The convergence process aims to advance human rights and food sovereignty, dismantle corporate power, and democratize public institutions and multilateralism in the framework of building and strengthening truly sustainable, healthy and just food systems. Key CSM demands on the conditions for its participation in the Summit, presented in a letter signed by over 200 organizations to the CFS Chair in March 2021 were not met, despite meetings between the CSM and the Summit Leadership. In fact, the course of the Summit is not changing direction.

Another public outcry in relation to the corporate capture of UN institutions followed the announced partnership between FAO and Crop Life International, a trade association that represents the interests of pesticides companies. The partnership introduces major institutional conflicts of interest within FAO, the mission of which is to serve the rural population and protect the environment and, more broadly, as UN agency, to promote human rights. A broad alliance of CSOs has urged FAO to stop the partnership.

Corporate influence over the UN equally tightened its grip, albeit in a more subtle move, through the recent establishment of a new UN body, UN Nutrition. With the stated aim of enhancing inter-agency coordination and collaboration for

nutrition at global and country levels, UN Nutrition, which virtually opened its doors in January 2021, was born out of a merger between the former UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) and the UN Network for Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN). Through this merger, the UN institutionalizes SUN, a 'multi-stakeholder' body that promotes market-based solutions and private sector partnerships in the struggle against malnutrition. Food and agribusiness members of SUN are thereby indirectly upgraded as preferred UN partners in the struggle against malnutrition, while neglecting the inherent conflicts of interest this inflicts upon involved UN agencies and member states.

From October 26 to 30, 2020, the sixth session of the open-ended intergovernmental working group on **transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights** (OEIGWG) took place to negotiate the 2nd draft of the TNC Treaty. The negotiations, which are the outcome of decades of civil society campaign, will be critical for filling a major gap in international human rights protection vis-à-vis the actions of corporations. While only few civil society participants could join in person due to COVID-19 restrictions, there was a vivid pre-session and daily face-to-face online exchanges among the various global treaty movements involved in the process (Treaty Alliance, Global Campaign, Feminists for a Binding Treaty, etc.).

The **International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)** continued its work to provide guidance to states regarding the implementation of peasants' and indigenous peoples' rights to seeds ("farmers' rights"). The dedicated ad-hoc technical expert group (AHTEG) developed an inventory with existing measures in support of these rights and will present a set of recommendations to the ITPGRFA's governing body meeting in late 2021. Representatives of peasant and Indigenous Peoples' organizations in the AHTEG have emphasized the need for legal measures supporting peasant seed systems and protecting their rights against intellectual property rights and emerging technologies.

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) states are currently negotiating a new **Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)** to halt the rapid biodiversity loss. The GBF is intended to guide the implementation of the Convention, including in the context of food and agriculture, and small-scale food producers' organizations and other CSOs are pushing for the inclusion of agroecology as a key strategy in this regard. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, negotiations have taken place in a virtual format, raising serious concerns of inequity regarding the participation of rights holders as well as of governments of the Global South.

In July 2020, the **African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights** publically launched the Guidelines on the Right to Water, which it had adopted a

year earlier during its 26th Extra-Ordinary Session in Banjul, The Gambia. The Guidelines aim to assist State Parties in complying with their obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in relation to the right to water. They call on States to develop integrated strategies to pursue the full realization of the right to water and related human rights, such as the rights to food, health, and livelihoods. The Guidelines highlight the obligation to regulate companies to prevent negative impacts on people's right to water and ensure effective remedies in case of violations. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of community involvement in management of water sources and place a special focus on measures to address discrimination and ensure water rights of marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

On May 1, 2020 the **new Special Rapporteur on the right to food**, Michael Fakhri, assumed his functions. His **first thematic report** to the General Assembly in July 2020, focuses on the right to food in the context of international trade law and policy. In the **second report**, presented to the Human Rights Council at its 46th session (February to March 2021), he outlines the direction, vision and priorities for his mandate: the COVID-19 pandemic and hunger crisis, food systems and global governance, seeds and farmers rights, and the right to food in armed conflict and protracted crises.

The work of the **UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** on a General Comment on Land has been delayed due to limited capacities amid COVID-19. The draft is expected to be published later this year (2021).

02 REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Hunger and malnutrition have been constant struggles across Asian countries long before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, with an overwhelming 418 million people undernourished. Ironically, countries such as India feature among the top food producing countries of the world, while at the same time struggling with some of the highest rates of malnutrition. Deep-rooted inequalities and poverty, linked to widespread unemployment, landlessness, and poor wages, have been exacerbated under the pandemic, with the gap between the poor and rich widening significantly in countries such as Bangladesh. Moreover, many parts of the region continue to experience a rise of authoritarianism, coupled with a shrinking space for civil society and oppression of human rights defenders.

Indonesia slipped into its first economic recession in 22 years, pushing unemployment and poverty rates to record levels. The official number of poor people in **Bangladesh** shot up by nearly 50% to 49.43 million in 2020, almost sending the country back to the 2010 poverty level.

> *"The rise of extreme poverty and the loss of income and employment meant that people had no money to buy food and they could not survive. Basically, most people were suffering from starvation and those who somehow managed to have food, lacked nutrition because of low quality of food... (Most of them) only had rice and starch and potatoes, so it led to malnutrition."*
> UBINIG/ PHM, Bangladesh
>
> → Watch UBINIG video

Lockdown measures, often applied in an authoritarian manner (e.g., **India** and **Philippines**), have worsened the already dire situation of people, causing a sharp decline in economic activities and incomes. The situation has particularly impacted workers from the informal and low-paying sectors of the economy, who spend a high percentage (up to 70%) of their income on food. Combined with a rise in prices of food staples in several countries, the result has been an exponential rise in hunger, malnutrition, and deaths among the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society.

Small-scale food producers have been badly affected by the lockdown. In **Bangladesh**, for example, 66 days of continuous lockdown disrupted the entire food system. Production and sale of dairy, meat, poultry, vegetables and fruits experienced a sharp decline. In **Nepal**, the imposed lockdown as well as official prohibitions have caused severe setbacks on the lives of highly impacted groups such as small-scale food producers, especially women, migrant returnees, daily wage laborers, women-headed families, disabled people, and Dalits (especially Dalit women). The rate of food and nutrition insecurity increased by 8% in one month of the lockdown alone. Due to lack of mobility exacerbated by transportation constraints, the routines of harvesting, planting and marketing of crops were disturbed. Farmers who grow highly perishable products were hit the hardest. Almost all agriculture workers lost their jobs and wages.

In a report released in December 2020, the GNRtFN noted that the March 2020 lockdown in **India**, which was imposed without any public consultation, resulted in "chaos and hardships to many sections of society, endangering lives and leading to huge losses, including an exponential rise in hunger and deaths of the most vulnerable people." In a survey carried out by the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) and the Centre for Equity Studies from September to October 2020, 62% of the nearly 4,000 respondents reported that incomes were lower than during pre-pandemic times. The same survey revealed that 45% needed to borrow money to purchase food; 71% said the nutritional quality of the food they were consuming had worsened; and 27% sometimes went to bed without eating.

In Asia, as in other regions, those who had already been most marginalized and oppressed were also the ones hit hardest by the crisis, while often falling through the cracks of social protection measures. Women as key food system actors were particularly affected by restrictions in movement, had to assume the bulk of additional care work due to assigned gender roles, were frequently discriminated against in social protection measures (see below), and faced an increase in domestic violence. In Nepal, for example, women small-scale vegetable farmers who sell vegetables door-to-door have lost their main source of income. As most migrant male workers returned home due to COVID-19, the household and care work traditionally relegated to women has increased. Gender-based violence equally increased.

Another case of extreme hardship was that of migrant workers. In a survey of 11,000 migrant workers across **India** during the first 21 days of the lockdown, the Stranded Workers Action Network noted that 96% had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food, while 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown. According to media reports at least 989 deaths were directly attributable to the lockdown.

The plight of Indigenous Peoples during the pandemic was exacerbated by the structural discrimination and resulting socio-economic conditions that they have been placed under since the colonial period. In **Bangladesh**, the government's failure to recognize the status of ancestral lands and the sequestration of lands has meant that the traditional Jhum (shifting) cultivation no longer is viable. The loss of land and related livelihoods has left Indigenous Peoples with no choice but to work as daily laborers, and yet now, in the midst of the pandemic, many have lost their jobs and incomes.

In several countries, including **Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh,** and the **Philippines**, the food crisis that emerged amid government responses to curb the pandemic was compounded by natural disasters triggered by climate change and eco-destruction, such as locust outbreaks, untimely rains, flooding, snowfall, drought, and typhoons.

While marginalized and disadvantaged population groups have been pushed to the brink of survival, there have also been those who took advantage and benefited from the pandemic. In **Indonesia**, for example, state-imposed social distancing measures that restricted movement and prohibited public activities such as protests **have been used as a leverage to intensify land grabbing and exploit nature**. Pulpwood, palm oil, logging, sugar, and tobacco companies aggressively expanded their operations by encroaching into customary territories and forest zones that were home to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, resulting in the increase of land-related disputes, and further marginalization of already disenfranchised groups. According to a **report** by Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA), a total of 138 land conflicts occurred between April and September 2020. At least 11 people were killed, 19 hurt, and 134 others handed criminal charges in connection to land-grabbing incidents. Those affected were mostly Indigenous Peoples, peasants, and activists.

In the **Philippines**, the pandemic has been used as a cover for further militarization of rural areas and **increased state violence and killings of human rights and land rights activists**. Protesters are considered "quarantine violators" and met with harsh measures, while many progressive organizations have been labeled as communist-linked.

The measures taken by governments to address the food crisis have been marked by serious shortcomings. Significant parts of the population entitled to benefits have been excluded with reasons ranging **from outdated population statistics and formality issues** (**India** and **Philippines**), to discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and caste (**Bangladesh, Pakistan**, and **India**).

In **Pakistan**, for example, the fact that many women do not hold national identity cards, nor mobile phones, both of which has been required to register for social protection benefits, has resulted in the exclusion of up to one third of eligible women. One reason why women lack identity cards is **restrictions in women's mobility**, already present before the lockdowns, which **prevent them from obtaining the document in respective government offices**. The need for mobile phones and national identity cards has also resulted in the ***de-facto* exclusion of Indigenous Peoples** in **Bangladesh** from the opportunity to receive government cash transfers. There are also reports that the military and Bengali settlers have prevented the distribution of non-state food relief packages to Indigenous Peoples' areas.

Emergency support moreover often came too late (**Philippines**) and was **based on a budget that was too limited** to cover all in need (**Bangladesh**). There was also reported corruption, wrong targeting, and mismanagement.

Importantly, measures have largely consisted in food and cash transfers, allowing only for a temporary relief, while failing to present opportunities for actual recovery of livelihoods, and for addressing the deep-rooted inequalities that created vulnerabilities in the first place. Some of the solutions to the food crisis have also been met with harsh criticism, as they further compound the root causes of the crisis. One example is the establishment of food estates in **Indonesia**, and the connected clearing of forested areas on nearly two million hectares of land in Central Kalimantan, Papua, and North Sumatra, that may lead to another ecological disaster similar to the failed mega rice plantation project during the Suharto regime. The **Philippines** has further lowered its rice tariffs to address inflation, thereby worsening the situation of peasants who were already struggling with cheap rice imports before the pandemic.

Some governments also used the pandemic as a cover for introducing new laws that pose significant threats to the enjoyment of the right to food and nutrition. One example is **India's** hurried enactment, without any public participation, of three farm laws in September 2020 that sparked widespread and extended demonstrations involving thousands of peasants across the country. In April this year, despite the steep rise in COVID-19 cases, protesters vowed to continue their round-the-clock sit-ins. They demand the government to repeal the laws, which they say would dismantle the public procurement system, push down the prices of farm produce, encourage large-scale monocultures, and allow private companies to stock up and speculate on essential pulses and cereals, thus driving up food prices. In **Indonesia**, the House of Representatives adopted the "Omnibus Law", a package of laws aimed at attracting foreign investment. The development of the law was marked by a lack of transparency and public participation, and was met with massive opposition from social movements, workers, CSOs and communities due to grave human rights, labor and environmental concerns.

On a positive note, in January 2021 the **Philippine** House of Representatives approved the *Right to Adequate Food Act* that puts into law the constitutional guarantee of the right to adequate food. At the same time, however, important gains made with regard to the realization of RtFN, through the 1988 agrarian reform program, are currently threatened with reversal. A 2020 Supreme Court ruling threatens peasant communities that benefited from the reform, such as the Sariaya farmers, with dispossessing them of their land and livelihood, by using a bogus local zoning ordinance to exempt their 295-hectare landholding from the reform.

Also worth highlighting is the April 2021 announcement by the president of **Sri Lanka** on the transition of the country to a "Green Socio-economy with Sustainable Solutions for Climate Changes", which includes a ban on all chemical

fertilizers and pesticides in the country to protect people's health and biodiversity. Again, although a historic decision, it needs to be taken with caution. In Sri Lanka, a constitutional amendment from October 2020 dangerously paved the way for concentration of power in the hands of the presidency, reversing important civil society-led reforms dating back to 2015 to curtail authoritarianism. In this context, it will be important to closely follow how the transition will be implemented, and what the impacts for small-scale producers will be.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Across countries, a multitude of people's initiatives have emerged to tackle the food crisis, and move towards healthier and more sustainable food systems.

In April 2021, a group of farmers, local vegetable vendors, and a young entrepreneur took the first initiative to stave off hunger in the **Philippines** by providing free food to people. In Quezon City, the group put up carts filled with rice, vegetables, canned goods, and other basic goods. Signboards in the open-air grocery booths advised people to either take free food supplies based on their need or donate food and other basic necessities based on their capability. The red-tagging of the organizers of the feeding initiative did not deter them from setting up more community pantries. Towards the end of April, at least 80 citizen-established community pantries sprouted in Metro Manila, and over 300 others mushroomed across Philippine streets and alleys.

Through these pantries, peasant communities were able to directly deliver their free produce to famished Filipinos. For instance, farmers of Tarlac province donated heaps of sweet potatoes. Fishers from Rizal province, meanwhile, contributed at least 50 kilograms of fresh tilapia to a pantry in Quezon City. Also, farmers of Sariaya town, belonging to the group Ugnayan-Katarungan, delivered their vegetable produce not just to the residents of the nearby Lucena City, but also to the more distant dwellers of Quezon City.

In **Indonesia**, several solidarity initiatives 'from below' emerged. These include: public kitchens that offer food for informal workers and communities in vulnerable situations, such as sex workers, people with disabilities, and scavengers; communal planting of local food crops; and producer-consumer partnerships.

Peasant communities in **India** have put into practice sustainable solutions to health and hunger problems. For instance, in the state of Manipur, women farmers assisted by the Centre for Social Development have started to engage in organic farming and vermicomposting to produce nutritious food and avoid the use of harmful pesticides and fertilizers.

Civil society groups, such as Maleya Foundation and KHANI in **Bangladesh**, have also actively engaged in monitoring the reach and impact of COVID-19 related measures, and engaged in national and international advocacy to urge actions with regard to addressing the destitute situation of marginalized groups. One concrete result of this advocacy has been the launch of a dedicated train service for alternative transportation of agricultural products and the announcement of several stimulation packages for the agriculture sector.

Photo | Ugnayan-Katarungan

With one in every five people enduring hunger, the primary concern when COVID-19 reached Africa was hunger and not getting sick from the virus. The need for food to survive became all the more dire and intense as containment measures carried out by African states to slow the spread of the pandemic disrupted internal supply chains and catapulted unemployment to crisis levels. Measures included border closures, domestic travel restrictions, curfews, limit of transport services, regulation of street markets, and closures of restaurants, hotels, and bars.

This swift but shortsighted response to the pandemic made hunger worse. It particularly affected the continent's informal sector, which equates to nearly 86% of its working population and includes 33 million small-scale farmers, fishers, and pastoralists, who contribute up to 70% of the food supply in Africa.

With social safety nets that were either inadequate or difficult to avail, or both, and state policies that supported corporate food systems, those already at the bottom of Africa's socio-economic ladder, including small-scale food producers, sank deeper into destitution. The prolonged COVID-19 crisis revealed the extent to which they continue to be victimized by existing inequities, injustices, and impoverishment.

For instance, socio-economic marginalization became more acute in **South Africa** as its unemployment rate peaked 32.5% at the end of 2020 – the highest figure since job surveys were first carried out in 2008. Among those impacted the most by job loss were small-scale fishing communities, who were already continuously "squeezed by low prices for fish". The month during which the government imposed a hard lockdown to curb the crisis coincided with the best time to catch yellowtail, the second most commonly caught fish in the country. The shutdown of restaurants, movement restrictions, and the closure of international borders to food exports shrank the market for fish and thereby raised the relative costs of going to the sea, causing fishers to operate at a loss. Despite the economic hardship, no financial support or subsidies were provided to small-scale fishers, who were not even recognized as essential service providers during the hard lock-down in 2020.

Small-scale fishers continued to not only be marginalized but also criminalized during the pandemic. This is because the National Freshwater (Inland) Wild Capture Fisheries Policy Framework that acknowledges and promotes the activities of inland small-scale fishers has not yet been finalized, and thus labels fishing for food and livelihoods in lakes, rivers and dams as "unrecognized". The resulting deprivation of communities of the rights to their traditional fishing grounds worsened during the pandemic. In the words of a South African fisherwoman:

> *"We get life from the lake...but with Covid, things have gotten much worse for those who depend on the lakes for their livelihood. We are not able to fish or collect reeds from the lake to make straw mats. We are simply stuck at home. When we enter the lake, our nets are confiscated and the fishers are beaten."*

In **Senegal**, the curfew imposed last year amid COVID-19 severely limited the small-scale fishers' work routines, decreased their catch and increased the prices of fresh fish in local markets, resulting in widespread hunger. Fish is a major nutrition source among Senegalese people, accounting for more than half of the protein consumed. What made the curfew extremely insensitive to the people's livelihood needs was the decision to shut local markets by 3 p.m., which was the same time that fishers ended their fishing – a routine that usually started at 6 a.m. This meant that fishers would no longer be able to have their fresh catch sold in the markets. With no access to storage facilities, fish often rotted shortly after landing it. The scarcity of fish supplies resulting from the curfew also severely impacted the economic well-being and food security of Senegalese women, who work in post-harvest fish processing such as sorting, dressing, salting, and smoking, as well as in marketing and selling the fish.

In **Uganda**, in November 2020 the government announced the introduction of a fisheries and aquaculture bill (to be adopted in 2021) that seeks to legalize the use of force by the Ugandan army to deter illegal fishing. Ugandan soldiers are already accused of perpetrating human rights violations against what they perceive as illegal fishers – most commonly the small-scale fishing community members who depend on Lake Victoria to feed themselves and their families. Such atrocities would be legalized if the bill were to be adopted.

Africa's small-scale farmers, agricultural workers, and traders from the informal sector were also among the most severely affected by the response of different governments to the pandemic, which entailed very limited social protection schemes. Measures largely focused on hasty lockdowns and other physical distancing methods, and ultimately favored the corporate food systems.

For instance, in **Zimbabwe**, amid a 30-day lockdown in January 2021 that sparked the arrests of people for breaking lockdown rules, the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA) pointed out that informal workers did not intend to defy state orders, but were left with no choice but to go back to their work places "because they live from hand to mouth trading, so they are hunting food for the day."

In **South Africa**, the government was criticized for prioritizing support to corporate food systems while imposing severe restrictions on informal food traders, who buy much of the livestock and vegetables produced by small-scale farmers. Food sourced by supermarkets in the country comes largely from large-scale commercial farmers, as the many small-scale farmers in the country either do not have access to them, or cannot afford to sell at the low prices dictated by them.

→ Watch African Centre for Biodiversity video

While farming was declared an essential service in South Africa, the lockdown heavily impacted the country's informal workers and small-scale farmers, as they were prevented from travelling to their plots of land. Only those who live on their land were allowed to farm. Also, the many farmers who rely on commercial seeds and seedlings had difficulties obtaining these. Those who managed to farm were unable to sell their produce, due to difficulties in accessing transport and required movement permits, while not being allowed to sell at informal marketing points. Meanwhile, extension services and local offices of South Africa's Department of Agriculture were mostly unavailable and closed.

In **Ghana**, small-scale food producers and workers in the informal sector, found it difficult to access social protection benefits provided by the state, such as the GH₵600-million soft loan scheme that was offered to micro, small and medium businesses affected by COVID-19. The requirements, such as belonging to or associating with a trade group, possession of a tax identification number, and ownership of a bank or a mobile money account, made it impossible for many to access the much-needed funds.

Meanwhile, in Kenya and Nigeria, the government's use of digital technology to reach out to populations and sectors severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis, ironically isolated those most in need.

In **Kenya**, the government announced in May 2020 a stimulus package worth US$ 503 million to support sectors hit by the pandemic, which included agriculture. The package could be accessed via an electronic voucher support program implemented by a bank and a mobile network operator. However, in a poll conducted among Kenyan farmers, it was found that many of them did not know how to access the e-voucher program, which should be done via SMS and redeemed at pre-qualified and registered 'agrovets' around the country. Only 40% of farmers have a smartphone, and only 13% use digital agriculture extension services.

Likewise, small-scale farmers, especially women, in **Nigeria** found it difficult to access financial support schemes, as these required beneficiaries to fill out online application forms. Many rural communities in Nigeria do not have access to Internet, let alone electricity; nor do they have formal education. Requirements such as land titles as collateral, moreover, made it de-facto impossible for most small-scale women to access the relief package. Though women are responsible for 70 to 80% of agricultural labor in Nigeria, only 10% of them are landowners due to customary laws on land and property ownership that favor men.

The narrow response by many African states to the COVID-19 crisis also heavily impacted thousands of the already vulnerable children from poor rural households, whose nutrition, health and education were compromised amid the pandemic.

For instance, in **Ghana** and **Uganda**, many children whose parents had lost their livelihoods during the COVID-19 lockdown and had not received any or little assistance, were not able to return to school once these re-opened, because they had to supplement their families' income. Children living in poverty had to work in carpentry, gold and sand mining, fishing, stone carrying, construction work,

and sales. The working conditions were often exploitative and dangerous: They were subjected to highly exhausting physical work, very long working hours, and exposure to toxic substances, dust, and fumes.

In the case of Ugandan children who were able to return to school, many of them attended classes with empty stomachs throughout the entire school day (from 7am to 5pm) as their parents could no longer afford the school meals. Inability to pay school meals also led parents to keep their children at home.

State-backed land-grabbing continued unabated and even intensified amid the crisis, aggravating hunger as people were evicted from their lands. One example is the widespread displacement of **Ugandan** populations of the Acholi district, which was followed by mass deforestation.

In **Angola**, the government was criticized over its failure to protect the San peoples' right to their traditional land in the province of Cuando Cubango. The land was fenced off as part of the 76,000-hectare Agro-Industrial Horizonte 2020 mega project, which includes the establishment of huge livestock farms. The San peoples' displacement from their land has caused them to suffer from hunger and malnutrition and made them more vulnerable to the pandemic, while intimidation and attacks on those defending their rights are increasing.

States have also continued to promote 'false solutions' to hunger and environmental destruction. For instance, they put forward faulty solutions to address fall armyworms (FAW) infestations, which swept across the continent and affected the food security of more than 300 million people in Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Cameroon, and Malawi, and led to a loss in agricultural yields of several billion US$. The armyworms primarily feed on maize, but also attack other crops such as millet, wheat, sorghum, sugarcane, cotton, and vegetables. The responses of African governments to this problem included spraying poisons that are harmful to nature and living beings, and adopting genetically modified seeds. But these 'false solutions' serve the interests of agri-business, and lock small-scale food producers into industrial agriculture.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

In spite of mobility restrictions during the pandemic, the crisis triggered moves within the agroecology movement to widen its reach through stronger advocacy and sharing of practical knowledge.

For instance, although Biowatch South Africa's face-to-face work slowed down amid the lockdown, the organization "embraced the online space and opportunities for training, networking and spreading agroecology." A highlight was the Biowatch-hosted bio-inputs training course.

Still in **South Africa**, an alliance called C-19 People's Coalition consisting of members of CSOs was formed. The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) was strongly involved in setting up the coalition. One of its first activities was to coordinate a grassroots-based food distribution network across the country.

Thanks to the Coalition's joint efforts, they were able to map localized food system networks, envision a new food system that extends these pathways, and submit a critique of the proposed allocation of a supplementary budget during Covid-19. In their statement, civil society denounced that the funding formerly earmarked for land reform, food security, and rural development had been redirected to military and police spending.

In **Uganda**, the Centre for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFROHT) headed calls for the government to address gaps in the laws and policies regulating the use of agrochemicals, and is campaigning for organic agriculture as a viable alternative to pesticide-dependent farming. The organization also brought the Ugandan government to court for failing to ensure access to adequate food during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN

According to recent projections by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the economic contraction across the region due to COVID-19 has been dramatic. The number of people living in poverty rose by 22 million to 209 million, or one third of the population, by the end of 2020. More than 26 million people have lost their jobs, with women, informal sector workers, and migrants particularly affected. Food insecurity has increased most drastically in this region, affecting 41 percent of the population (compared to 32 percent in 2019).

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have been at the epicenter of the pandemic, with countries such as **Brazil** topping the list of cases and deaths. At the time of writing, according to official figures, Brazil accounted for 16.9 million infected people and over 472,000 deaths. There are probably many more people who have not been counted because they do not have access to health services, or simply remain undocumented. Food and nutrition insecurity has been on the rise in recent years as a result of authoritarian decisions by the Bolsonaro regime, including the dismantling of the country's renowned National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONSEA). This situation has been compounded by mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, pushing over half of the population into a situation of food insecurity.

In the context of this crisis, the situation faced by Indigenous Peoples – which constitute nearly one quarter of the continent's rural population – needs underlining. Many Indigenous Peoples live in forest areas and have historically seen their political, economic, social and cultural rights undermined, placing them among the most impoverished segments of the population. These long-standing and systemic barriers inhibit their access to resources and to decent enough living conditions to be able to protect themselves from the pandemic. Access to adequate food and nutrition is of vital importance in this context, as different forms of malnutrition, as well as the chronic diseases caused by malnutrition, affect the body's ability to respond to infections such as COVID-19. Furthermore, extractive companies subject Indigenous Peoples to internal colonization, thereby limiting their agency to establish their own measures, and exposing them to high risks of infection.

It is estimated that over 80% of Indigenous workers are employed in the informal sector, which is known to have been particularly hit by restrictive measures imposed by governments. Some measures banned peasant and Indigenous food producers and fisherwomen/men from accessing markets, which, coupled with overall instability, fomented price speculation. For example, among other countries experiencing similar situations during the pandemic, in **Ecuador** the price of some basic products rose fivefold, making it very difficult for the wider population to access food.

The pandemic has allowed governments in the region to provide themselves with a legal framework to further restrict movement, legalize the loss of labor rights,

privatize public resources and common goods, introduce tax exemptions, and digitalize lives. While informal markets and farmers' markets were closed down, large food corporations were able to remain open, and commodity exports were supported and classified as 'essential'.

In **Honduras**, measures to contain the pandemic have negatively impacted the realization of the RtFN, especially of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk, women and informal laborers. Restrictions on mobility and commercial activities imposed by government decrees have had disastrous consequences on the right to food of urban populations, especially women, who represent the majority of the workforce in the informal sector. The closure of food markets particularly affected these sections of the population, as they depend on these markets to access food at a lower price. In line with the current trend, peasant and small-scale fisher families were also severely affected.

All the while government measures significantly constrained people's access to healthy agricultural produce and fish from local markets, they cleared the path for imports, and in some instances even relaxed phytosanitary and food safety requirements. Moreover, in several countries, such as **Chile, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador** and **Peru**, the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) received renewed attention. Although already an issue of debate beforehand, the pandemic gave rise to arguments backing the introduction of GMOs as a solution for local production in times of crisis. Based on the negative experience of peasant and indigenous populations and on the impacts on biodiversity in GMO producer countries, it is common knowledge that they provide a 'false solution'.

Between March 2020 and May 2021, the **Brazilian** government extended tax exemptions on the commercialization of pesticides and approved 613 new pesticides. A recent study by FIAN International sections and groups in LAC shows that agrochemicals have devastating impacts across food systems, and particularly on the RtFN of people in the region.

In **Ecuador**, the health and economic crises provided the perfect setting in which to implement economic and labor policies that had been proposed in 2019 but then taken back amid widespread protests. The policies prioritize the economic growth of corporations over food sovereignty, the right to food, and gender equality.

In **Honduras**, the Program to Support the Food Producing Sector and Agroindustry to guarantee food security and food sovereignty is another example of government policies that favor national and

transnational agribusiness. The program provides incentives to investors to create agro-industrial parks, yet, although it includes the term "food sovereignty" in its title, it will actually not support the food sovereignty of the people of Honduras. Quite the contrary, given that article 4 of the decree, which stipulates that 'unused' public lands can be earmarked for this program, could potentially legitimize the grabbing of peasants' lands. The definition of 'unused' is not clarified, nor are the procedures for the expropriation and concession of state lands. Hence a likely outcome could be the dispossession of peasants of their lands, thus laying the basis for the expansion of the agricultural frontier, and the destruction of protected areas as well as areas designated for the purpose of accessing water.

The disaster caused by hurricanes ETA and IOTA in Central America in November 2020 led to the displacement of many people, and seriously aggravated an already extremely difficult situation. The hurricanes caused around 63,000 victims in **Nicaragua** and 28 deaths, including 4 children. In the Caribbean and Pacific region of Nicaragua, villages were flooded, houses destroyed, and road infrastructure damaged. Thousands of rural families were cut off from communication, while in the fields, 70% of the harvest – mainly of basic grains – was lost. Due to the subsequent shortage of seeds, sowing in the spring of 2021 was disrupted. As is often the case given the discriminatory unequal sexual division of labor, women are the most affected because they are responsible for feeding their families and for subsistence agriculture. In addition to being victims themselves, they live with the distress of not being able to respond to emergencies in their homes. In **Honduras**, the combined effects of the hurricanes and COVID-related measures have pushed one third of the population into an emergency situation of acute food insecurity.

Some governments have responded to the food crisis by distributing 'food aid' to the most vulnerable sectors. It has been reported that in countries, such as Honduras, most of the food in the 'solidarity bags' are actually ultra-processed food products from large corporations, which means that the nutritional value of the food aid is limited, while the investment made by governments does not favor local small-scale food producers. This goes against Decree 025-2020, according to which the government formally commits to source food aid locally. Additionally, the quantity of the products was said to be insufficient. Lastly, irregularities in the distribution have been denounced, as government agents privileged supporters of the ruling party. In **Guatemala**, which is also prone to clientelism, patterns of discrimination against the most marginalized people in the distribution of food aid have been reported.

Photo | CLOC-LVC Nicaragua

Restrictions on mobility have gone hand in hand with strong militarization in some countries. In **Paraguay**, for example, cases of abusive use of force, fiscal arbitrariness and extortive behavior have been denounced. In **Honduras**, armed forces violently repressed protests by rural peasant and fishing communities to draw attention to their precarious situation following the closure of local markets, as described above. Similarly, the government took advantage of the declared state of emergency and of restrictions on freedom of association and peaceful assembly to **push through large-scale 'development' projects**, violently targeting communities that oppose such projects on their territories.

In spite of this overall dim outlook, there were some positive developments worth sharing. For example, in **Mexico**, in August 2020 the Congress of Oaxaca approved a **law that prohibits the distribution and sale of sugared drinks and junk food to children and adolescents**. In **Paraguay**, a **new law** was adopted to support the 'ollas populares' (community kitchens) that have been organized throughout Paraguay since the beginning of the pandemic. Based on the demands and drafted with contributions of community-based organizations (CBOs), the bill includes important provisions on, for example, nutritional value of food.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Faced with the hunger and food insecurity unleashed by government measures to contain the pandemic, peasant organisations in **Brazil** and **Ecuador** organised diverse solidarity actions to give food to those in need, including unemployed, evicted, and homeless people.[1]

In Brazil, between August and October 2020, more than 300 initiatives, including donations of farm produce, food banks, and community kitchens, led by social movements, popular organisations and collectives, sprouted across the country. The concern for healthy food, which received a strong boost during the crisis, became a strategic angle for constructing new relations between rural and urban populations. These place the appreciation of peasant agroecological production and exchange of knowledge (e.g. on the creation of agroecological community gardens) at their centre. Many of the initiatives are documented in databases, such as this one: **https://agroecologiaemrede.org.br**.

In Ecuador, amid the closure of popular markets and fairs, various peasant, indigenous, and fishing organisations – in collaboration with women's and other social organisations – revived the ancestral practice of "trueques alimentarios" (food bartering) to confront the crisis.

1 Macías et al. (forthcoming, October 2021). An Imperceptible Growth: Healthy Food and Transformative Solidarity.. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch Issue 2021*.

Across the country food was donated, exchanged, and shared between communities, both locally and across regions, showing the immense solidarity and resilience of communities in times of crises. The logistics of collecting and distributing the food were led by youth who collectively mobilized and engaged with local administrations. In addition to the exchange of food, knowledge on culturally adequate recipes were shared, including on medicinal plants that strengthen the immune system, and which rural and indigenous women preserve in their territories. In Guayaquil, peasant pharmacies were set up to provide the population with medicinal plants at a time when access to health centres was severely limited.

In Oaxaca, **Mexico**, local fishers have been providing 50–60 tons of free seafood to their communities per week. Meanwhile in **Colombia**, youth groups are recovering peasants' knowledge, and learning to value their work in communities.

→ Watch video by youth of Gamero and Evitar (Colombia)

Before the pandemic, 4.4 million people in Canada and over 37 million in the United States (USA) were food insecure. These numbers have increased since the outbreak of COVID-19, with particular incidence among Black, Latino, Indigenous, and single female-headed households.

Today, in the **United States** more than 20% of Black and Latino families report not having enough to eat, double the rate compared to Whites. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) have suffered disproportionately high incidences of hospitalization and death from COVID-19, shedding light on the recurrent issue of lack of public health support, which is all the more pertinent in a pandemic situation.

Canadian Indigenous women have reported racism and neglect in childbirth during the pandemic. Measures implemented in Canadian hospitals have ignored the needs of Indigenous women, aggravating their long-standing situation of inequality across the country. Medical consultations have been moved online; however, only 24% of homes in Indigenous communities have adequate Internet connection, leaving many pregnant indigenous women unable to receive the care they need. In addition, fear of discrimination and mistreatment in hospitals, coupled with the dread of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting it to older persons in multi-generational households, have led indigenous women to avoid public health centers as much as possible. This has resulted in pregnancy problems and even the death of some babies.

In the **USA**, the pandemic drew attention to the dire situation of migrant workers in the industrial food system. Following border closures, many agricultural workers have not been entitled to any kind of benefits. Millions of jobs were lost in restaurants and other catering establishments, equally affecting many undocumented workers who are not entitled to unemployment benefits. Agricultural and other food systems workers have been highly exposed to the virus. In **Canada**, it was reported that companies failed to provide protection, leaving safety at the workplace in the hands of workers themselves. What's more, in many food production and processing sectors, employees are being prevented from organizing collectively to protect their rights.

Serious COVID-19 outbreaks were recorded in food processing and meatpacking plants in the **USA**, where employees are mostly migrants and refugees. According to data gathered by FERN (May 2021), at least 1,443 meatpacking and food processing plants and 407 farms and production facilities confirmed cases of COVID, with a total of at least 90,075 workers affected, nearly two-thirds of them in the meatpacking sector. As for **Canada**, the closure of major meat processing plants due to infections and the death of workers, such as the Cargill plant in Alberta (which processes 36% of all Canadian meat) meant that livestock production lost its main marketing channel.

Many people have been left without jobs and forced to resort to food aid. This situation is compounded by the fact that, in 2019, the Trump administration had cut $4.5 billion in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, commonly known as food stamps. There have been **multiple reports of racial discrimination in food distribution**, and tensions and conflicts have multiplied over the past year.

Measures put in place by Trump's government in March 2020 to support food producers equally discriminated against Black people. Only 0.1% targeted small-scale food production, which is where all of the Black population's production is located. This situation stems from an openly racist institutional framework, which became all the more evident with the **Pigford lawsuit**, in which several farmers filed class action lawsuits accusing the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for discriminating against Black farmers in the distribution of loans, as well as failing to investigate complaints of widespread systemic racial discrimination. A new bailout plan set in motion by the new president, Joe Biden, intends to right this wrong. The plan aims to redress historical discrimination against black farmers by providing financial, legal and technical assistance, along with cooperative development.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

In the face of the crisis suffered over the last year, various civil society actors in the USA have self-organized to help families and supply them with food. In a country where public support is very limited, the population is dependent on volunteerism and multiple charitable spaces.

The organization **Why Hunger** has supplied food to more than one million families and organized an international campaign (Rapid Response Fund) to support the most disadvantaged communities and Indigenous Peoples in eight countries, and to denounce human rights violations. The organization also supports the Black Food Sovereignty movement, which seeks to combat the systemic and institutional racism suffered by the black community.

→ Watch Northwest Harvest video

In Europe, data collected until May 2021 show a total of close to 47 million documented COVID-19 infections and 1.2 million deaths.

In the food sector, the pandemic has been marked by two main dynamics. Firstly, on the production side, Europe's high dependence on migrant labor for its intensive production model became evident. In the first months of the pandemic, there were cases of migrant workers' rights being violated. The closure of borders meant that many were 'trapped' in the countries in which they were working. The high dependence of some countries on agricultural workers also led to the adoption of specific quotas for these workers, while ignoring the preventive measures that had been recommended during the pandemic. On many occasions agricultural workers were not even provided with masks or safety equipment for their work, placing them in a situation of particular vulnerability. **Italy** opted for a temporary regularization of undocumented migrants.

Already before the pandemic, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, had denounced the violation of the rights of women agricultural workers in **Spain**, including their inhuman living conditions. Responding to this, the Spanish government carried out inspections on the farms and ordered more than 12 million euros in fines for labor infractions (until March 2021).

→ Watch Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha video

In addition to the situation of agricultural workers, last year's restrictive measures by governments placed at the center of debate which activities should be considered essential. Despite the understanding of agriculture as an essential activity, it was mainly large-scale agriculture that was included, and not small-scale production or subsistence gardens. This initially resulted in measures such as the closure of farmers' markets arguing that these were unsafe. Similarly, access to urban and subsistence gardens was curtailed, despite the fact that many people – especially retired and low-income people – depend on these to supplement their diets. These measures placed important restrictions on people's access to fresh and seasonal food, while also seriously affecting many small-scale producers.

In this context, it is worth highlighting the situation faced by some women producers. At the time of lockdown, freedom of movement was limited: women farmers who wanted to go to their fields or plots had to show proof of land ownership. The reality, however, is that land ownership lies mostly in the hands of men, so even though women also work in food production, they found themselves with blocked access to their sites of production. The pandemic also shed light on the ageing of the peasant population. Most of those who work in food production are also part of the most at-risk group, further hindering their ability to engage in their usual activities.

The different periods of lockdown also limited children's access to schools and thereby to the food provided in school canteens. Families with fewer resources who were entitled to free school meals were offered food through different

channels. In some places, this was organized through the school itself, while in others, such as in Madrid (Spain), following an agreement with *Telepizza* (a fast-food pizza chain), thousands of children were fed daily for several months on ultra-processed food.

Over the past year, hunger has become more visible than ever in Europe, and the demand for food aid has increased significantly in all countries. In **France**, figures suggest that up to 8 million people may be in need of food aid, while in **Spain** the recorded demand has increased by more than 600,000 people in the last year, although this figure does not account for those who turn to other informal channels. Faced with these situations responses have been varied: many governments have opted for a welfare-based approach through the use of vouchers, as well as other channels that depend on volunteer labor in communities. In some countries, social services have been overwhelmed and have referred people in situations of poverty and food insecurity to charitable entities, or to spaces articulated by social movements. In most of these cases, the priority was to resolve the urgency of filling stomachs, without taking into account the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RtFN) of these people.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Organized civil society and support groups emerged in neighborhoods and towns and developed their own responses to help those who did not have the necessary resources to access food. Within these support groups, women producers and small businesses have formed networks to support their neighbors.

Community kitchen initiatives materialized. Meanwhile existing Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) groups proved resilient, saw increased demand for their produce, and also incorporated new solidarity formulas to reach out to those who do not have the monetary resources to pay for their food.

Photo | Isa Álvarez Vispo

2.6 MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)[2]

In the MENA region, according to official data, around 10.5 million people have been infected with COVID-19, and 200,000 people have died. The pandemic was an additional slap in the face for a region already confronting long-standing crises and conditions in which the RtFN is systematically challenged and violated.

Protracted crises – perpetuated by conflict, occupation, and war – have generated a range of near famine-like conditions. Particularly Yemen, Syria, and Palestine are afflicted by ongoing emergency conditions. **Yemen**, which is now facing year seven of the Saudi-led war and conflict, is considered the world's worse humanitarian crisis: it continues to face severe food blockades and resulting food price increases and widespread famine. Several household staples have more than doubled in price between February 2016 and October 2020. 80% of people rely on food aid, and humanitarian agencies currently face a funding gap of US$ 405 million to ensure operations. Some fear that drops in foreign assistance may persist for years, as wealthier donor countries increasingly focus on supporting their own populations.

Syria has been entrenched in conflict for over 10 years now, and an estimated 60% of the population face food insecurity as a consequence. Many people have been and continue to be displaced internally or migrate as refugees primarily to bordering Lebanon and Turkey. Prior to 2011, Syria used to produce sufficient wheat for national consumption. Bread is a critical staple in the country, in particular for low-income groups. However, the conflict continues to disrupt bread production, including through the systematic destruction of bakeries, resulting in plunging availability and soaring prices. Furthermore, the difficulties in procuring wheat as well as the Syrian currency depreciation have significantly contributed to a situation of food insecurity across the country. Compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated additional 4.5 million people have become food insecure in 2020.

Since 2019 **Lebanon** has been in the throes of a financial meltdown, as a result of long-term mismanagement of national finances and public debt by national and international actors. This collapse has been met with calls from the street to reform political structures, which favor the elite and wealthy. The Lebanese pound has been set at 1,500 to the US$ for over two decades. In 2021, the financial crisis reached new peaks as currency continues to collapse, moving to 15,000 to the dollar in spring 2021. On average, food items today cost about five times as much as in 2019. With many people already facing economic hardship, unemployment, as well as the high amount of refugees in the country, including more than 850,000 Syrians, the price of food and market instability will continue to have an enormous impact on food security for many people across the country.

2 Additional information for this chapter was provided by the North African Network for Food Sovereignty and the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC).

COVID-19 related market restrictions, including closure of weekly markets, annual fairs, and food stalls, have made it difficult for farmers across the MENA region to sell and receive adequate prices for their produce.[3] Pastoralists in countries such as **Mauritania** have suffered from movement restrictions and border closures, as these impede them from moving with their animals in search of fodder and water.

Years of dispossession and violent repression together with the 15-year Israel-imposed blockade on the Gaza Strip have long impacted the local economy and food system. The onset of the pandemic has only made matters worse. In the early months of the pandemic many crops in Gaza had to be destroyed, as markets were not functioning normally and farmers had no way of selling their produce. Increased trade restrictions and disruptions throughout **occupied Palestine** impacted their ability to import needed agricultural inputs and to export Palestinian produce. Emergency measures also forced farmers to sell their goods at nominal prices, causing them to lose income or stop farming altogether, creating a shortage of some essential foodstuffs in Gaza. Farmers also faced increased difficulty in accessing their farmland, a combination of pandemic-related movement restrictions and restrictions imposed by occupying Israeli forces around the buffer zone on Gaza's perimeter. Fishers reported that the recent heat wave coupled with lockdown restrictions resulted in limited access to the sea and reduced catches. Those who were still at sea after curfew were impeded to return to the shore until the next morning.

May 2021 witnessed eleven brutal days of rocket fire and airstrike exchanges between Israel and Palestinian armed groups leaving more than 250 dead and thousands injured, the majority of whom live in Gaza. In a statement, the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture stated that the losses of the agriculture sector due to the ongoing Israeli offensive on Gaza reached $17 million as the Israeli strikes directly targeted dozens of agriculture facilities and storehouses for agricultural inputs. Farmers in the Gaza Strip, who have been the backbone of the local food system's survival and resilience, faced grave threats to their lives and livelihood, as they were unable to access their lands and work. Israeli airstrikes targeted civilian buildings and infrastructure and damaged the only coronavirus testing facility in Gaza, after a nearby residential building was struck, severely jeopardizing the already bleak health infrastructure in Gaza, and threatening the lives of many Palestinians who are battling the pandemic.

3 English version of study by North African Network for Food Sovereignty and TNI forthcoming (August 2021).

During protracted crises, and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, people living in these fragile situations consistently report that local agricultural production has been a saving grace. In **occupied Palestine**, both government and local CSOs distributed seeds in addition to food aid as a way to encourage home gardens, which they know facilitate access to healthy food.

During the pandemic, a factor that has significantly aggravated food insecurity has been the high dependency on food imports, especially staple grains. Following the collapse of the global price of oil, this has been **particularly hard on oil exporting countries**. Given their dual dependency on international markets (for revenues and for food imports), oil-exporting countries such as **Algeria** have been particularly vulnerable to market disruptions. Food exporting countries, which are dependent on revenues from these exports, have equally been **vulnerable to disruptions in global supply chains**. The crisis has also laid bare the vulnerabilities caused by dependence on imported commercial seeds. As noted by the **Association of Tunisian Farmers**:

> *"many farming sectors were vastly vulnerable to foreign dependency; most seeds are imported from abroad and are genetically modified, which is no secret, and which exposes us to the risks of losing those seeds in times of crisis, that is, after we had lost our own original seeds we are now incapable of supplying seeds due to the disruption of trade routes."*

As in other regions, the closure of schools **deprived millions of children of their school meals**, which as the main meal of the day, considerably contribute to their nutrition. In this sense, school closures exacerbated the economic burden of poor households. Moreover, the closure of schools and multiple other public services has translated into an increase in care work in the home, **which has fallen on women and on many girls** who have had to help their mothers with household chores. In addition to the above, in countries such as **Morocco**, services to assist women victims of domestic violence have been closed.

Across the region unemployment spiked during lockdown: most people who did not work did not receive an income. Following the general trend, it was a hard blow for the vast informal sector to bear. Women have been particularly affected by job loss, adding to the already higher unemployment rate and lower pay – close to **80% less than men** – of women. Already harsh working conditions of women agricultural workers and traders have **further deteriorated amid COVID-19**, due to mobility restrictions and the shutting down of food stalls amongst other factors.

Another group particularly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and its socio-economic impacts are migrants and refugees. The region is vast, and hosts refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa as well as from countries within the region, primarily Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. Constituting **up to 40% of the work force** in the Arab region, they are at the forefront of ensuring the provision of essential services, including food production, yet they are the **most at risk of both infection and of loss of livelihood opportunities**. Mobility restrictions have left many migrant workers stranded in host countries, where they often lack food and access to essential services, including clean water and health services. They are more likely

to work in the informal sector as daily wage workers or in temporary jobs without social protection, and hence are more vulnerable to job and income loss, and acute hunger and malnutrition as a result. Job loss often also implies loss of residence permit and risk of deportation. Migrant domestic workers – largely women – have suffered much hardship, including house confinement in the homes of their employers, which has increased their exposure to domestic violence and sexual abuse.

In the Arab region, **55.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance** in 2020, 26 million of whom are forcibly displaced. Limited access to water means that 74 million people have not been able to maintain hygiene measures against the virus and are at high risk of infection.

When the first cases of COVID-19 made headlines a year and a half ago, few would have imagined the magnitude of the pandemic and its disastrous outcomes. What started as a health crisis quickly turned into a livelihood and food crisis. Millions of people have lost their jobs and sources of income, while the number of those suffering from hunger increased drastically.

While patterns are strikingly similar across regions, the impacts are far from the same for everyone. The pandemic and the measures to contain it hit marginalized and disadvantaged groups the hardest. In many instances, no safeguards were put in place to protect their rights. In most countries, social protection schemes have proved incapable of shielding those most in need and of supporting them to get back on their feet.

The pandemic laid bare the structural discrimination that underpins our societies and makes people vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. It unveiled the multi-layered vulnerability caused by the global industrial food system, but it also showed that local food systems and small-scale food producers are resilient in times of crisis. We will not go back to normal – what we need is a radical change of direction.

The third edition of the *State of the Right to Food and Nutrition Report* places the spotlight on the right to food and nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks at the measures that governments have taken to contain the spread of the virus, and the impacts these have had on different population groups. It equally provides insights to the ways in which communities and civil society groups across the globe have self-organized to confront the crisis and support those in need.

Published by the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition, with the support of its secretariat FIAN International, the report seeks to complement and create a dialogue with FAO's *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)* report. It sheds light on the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition that are often rendered invisible when the focus is merely on numbers.

Visit the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition website:
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