

Food systems, diets and nutrition in the wake of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting mitigation responses have affected the lives and welfare of individuals at an unprecedented magnitude. The already existing global state of malnutrition has been further exacerbated by the disruption caused to the economy and food systems. The pandemic has also widened socioeconomic gaps by disproportionately affecting those most vulnerable in society, such as women of reproductive age, young children, adolescents and the elderly. This paper aims to give an overview of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on our food systems, and how this may impact on diet & nutrition in the future. The paper also makes recommendations on how to combat this.

The pandemic, and resulting economic recession, is projected to severely intensify malnutrition in all its forms. Food insecurity, deteriorations in diet quality, micronutrient deficiencies and other forms of malnutrition also result from complex, interlinking changes in our food systems caused by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a multitude of food systems disruptions, largely affecting small and medium enterprises which largely supply low- and middle-income countries - such as longer lead time (due to social distancing protocols) among distributors, reduced labour capacity, increased inspections and quarantine measures, and rising operating costs. Further to this, the closures and movement restrictions which resulted from the pandemic, combined with an increase in food insecurity, has caused a shift in consumption towards cheap, calorific food – raising concerns surrounding potential increases in overweight/obesity levels. Gaps in essential health services have also been caused through inaccessibility and closures during the pandemic, with potential secondary repercussions on nutrition. For example, disruptions could be observed in: breastfeeding programmes, nutrition counselling, child feeding support, and to importation of nutritional products.

The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities within our food system. This paper makes two specific recommendations, urging us to address these: (i) Food systems must be made more effective, inclusive, resilient, and nutritious, and (ii) the flow of nutritious foods through social protection systems must be increased.

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