



Responding to food security during COVID-19

As the world faces the daunting task of containing the spread of COVID-19 and meeting medical needs, secondary challenges are also posing devastating repercussions. For the world's poor and vulnerable, a lack of personal savings, the inability to store food beyond a few days, weak and un-organised agricultural and food chains, overstretched public services, and major disruptions to supply and demand are putting food security at risk, especially for women and children. This is compounded by the fact that vulnerable populations already experience the burden of malnutrition and the associated negative health outcomes.

This note provides evidence and lessons from evaluations relevant to food security that can inform responses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence presented here comes from more than 50 evaluations from the members of the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition. These evaluations include responses to previous epidemics such as Ebola and avian influenza. It also draws on lessons from a synthesised body of evaluation evidence on what has worked, and what has not, when addressing food security challenges. Drawing on evaluations of food security provides a set of first principles to consider and build on before designing innovative approaches to an unprecedented context.

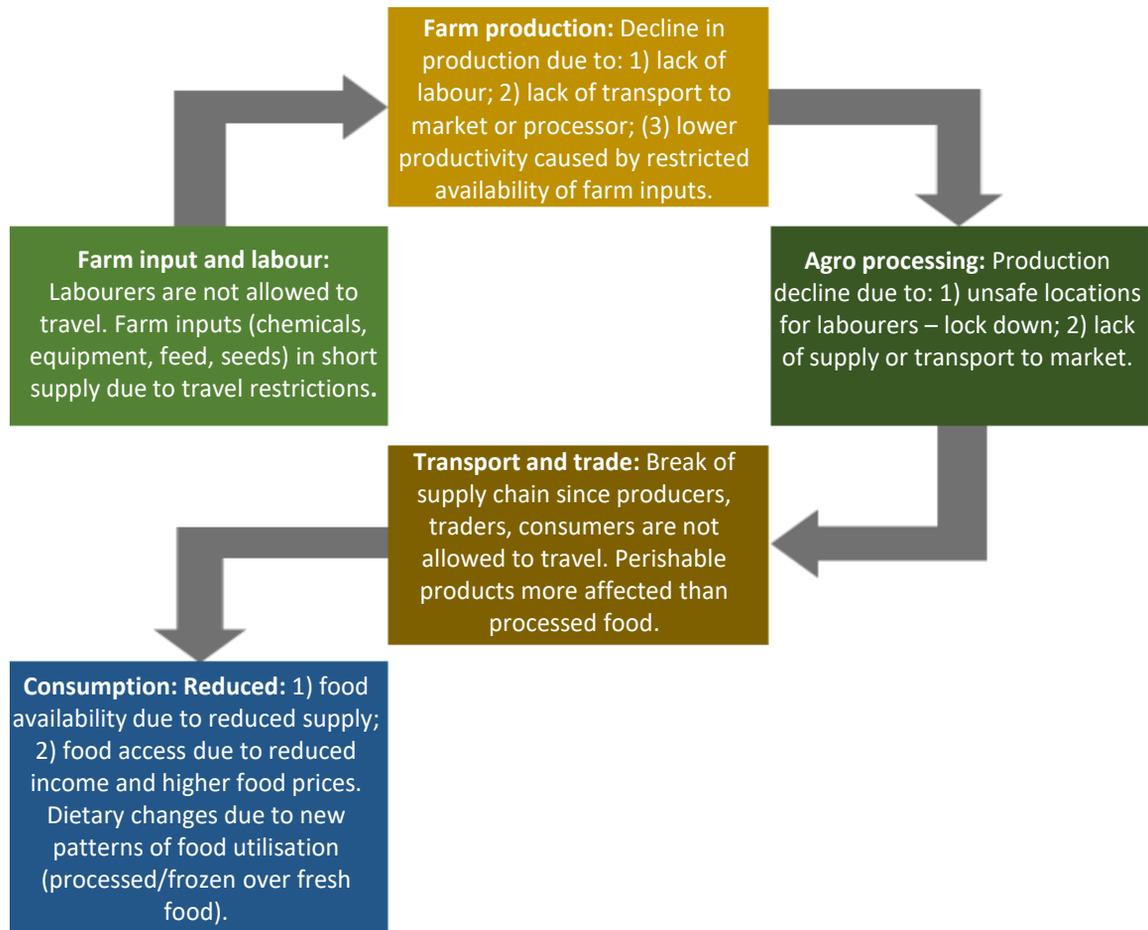
"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" - World Food Summit, 1996

Evaluation evidence is key to learning from the past and a way to leverage known successes.

The **COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition** is a network of the independent evaluation units of countries, United Nations organisations, international NGOs, and multilateral institutions. The purpose of the Coalition is to provide credible evidence to inform international co-operation responding to the COVID-19 pandemic - helping to ensure lessons are learnt and that the global development community delivers on its promises. **The Coalition is about learning with the world.**

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COVID-19's adverse effects on food security: Constraints along the supply chain





Lesson 1: When major supply and demand disruptions occur, focus on preserving or reinventing value chains and supporting diversification.



Evaluations highlighted the importance of supporting smallholder farmers, particularly those producing internationally tradable products. In Sierra Leone, a country affected by the Ebola health crisis, adverse effects on food security were particularly felt the most by cash crop farmers who needed to sell their produce but couldn't because of restrictions on movement. The 2007-08 “food price crisis” reiterated the need to safeguard food supply and avoid trade restrictions.



Evaluations noted the importance of risk analysis for projects supporting value chain development, including contingency planning for shock events, recommending that development interventions acknowledge risk and devise alternative economic activities and sources of revenues for small producers.



The most successful value chain development projects were those with an integrated and flexible approach. For example, Safal in Bangladesh worked from inputs to markets, putting farmers at the centre, on different high-value food products – dairy, vegetables and fish – mainly for the local market. Their intensive and flexible project approach enabled them to react to emerging problems and opportunities, and resulted in a significant impact on income and food security, even for households with very little land.



Lesson 2: Food security emergencies require fast action followed by long-term commitments so as to maximise the chance for success and support the sustainability of results (nexus thinking).



Act fast:

COVID-19 is exacerbating underlying issues caused by the impacts of “lock down” on food access. Evaluations noted that responses to shocks often require donor funding and providing timely responses was challenging. The 2015-16 El Niño phenomenon led to severe drought conditions across eastern and southern Africa as well as in parts of Asia-Pacific. Millions of families struggled to meet basic food and nutrition requirements, lives were lost, family assets sold or depleted, while vital development gains of past years were reversed.



For protracted crises, it was crucial to gather rapid, local information that informed governments and donors. An evaluation of the response to the Papua New Guinea drought of 2016 highlighted the value of this data collection. Being able to respond early to food insecurity can avoid costly emergency food responses. Recommendations across evaluations included timely data collection, investing in prevention and resilience building with multi-year and predictable funding for preparedness and response to shocks, and developing national first responder capacity.



Lesson 2 (continued): Food security emergencies require fast action followed by long-term commitments so as to maximise the chance for success and support the sustainability of results (nexus thinking).



Long-term commitment:

An evaluation of the response to the emergency in North East Nigeria showed the importance of capacity to rapidly scale-up the response, as it was credibly associated with improved food security. Effective scale-up was underpinned by the efficient recruitment of a large complement of local staff, an effective supply chain and common services. Another evaluation showed that constraints to developing and sustaining access to needed expertise across emergency contexts and phases of risk response undermined the quality of emergency responses.



The response to Ethiopia's drought and resultant food security challenges found that protection of and accountability to affected populations required sustained attention.



Nexus thinking:

Evaluations increasingly demonstrated the need for improved nexus thinking when addressing food security. This includes co-ordinating humanitarian, development, and peace and stabilisation programming. Such an approach provides fast action with long-term support to addressing systemic obstacles while building the foundations for a sustainable system. Eight country programme evaluations across Africa spoke to the issue of compromised results when life-saving food distribution was not followed by longer term development activities. Evaluations have shown that a robust approach is required to ensure that beneficiaries move to government support or other sustainable livelihood opportunities as soon as possible.



In a food security programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the nexus thinking approach delivered good results. The programme provided short-term answers to urgent food needs while building long-term resilience to recurrent shocks with a focus on women and children. The programme, implemented in conflict- and Ebola-affected provinces in the east, employed a combination of strategies, including capacity building for smallholder farmers, post-harvest management, and processing and marketing of agricultural products. The programme also successfully linked to other existing programmes, including a school feeding programme. Linking local producers to the school feeding programme proved particularly positive in terms of strengthening food security for children, while improving market access for local producers.



Lesson 3: Food access issues can be alleviated when a shock-responsive, social protection system is in place.



The 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa highlighted the importance of addressing the crisis not only as a medical emergency, but as a broad-based humanitarian emergency that considered the intersections with other social protection measures including education, livelihoods and food security. Social protection interventions such as school feeding programmes and school gardens have demonstrated results for children, their schools and communities. Children are among the most affected by lock downs and related travel restrictions, since schools are closed and therefore school feeding programmes are suspended.



Where existing social protection programmes are in place, such as social cash transfer programmes targeted to the most vulnerable populations, the existing systems can be used and strengthened, as was the case during the food security crisis caused by El Niño in 2015/16 in eastern and southern Africa.



Programme evaluations in Guinea and Mexico found that in order for social protection programmes to be effectively implemented, updated beneficiary lists and monitoring tools that allow transparency and accountability of the support or aid provided were required.



Lesson 4: Responding to food security issues requires a multi-sector approach. Evaluations have demonstrated the value of combining food availability, food access and food use with:



Gender equality and intersectional approaches: Social bias remains a major constraint to income sources and adequate food, especially in times of crisis. Evaluations have demonstrated that women play a key role in agriculture, but face major structural barriers. In Senegal, the prevalence of illiteracy, certain harmful socio-cultural practices, and early marriages and pregnancies made it difficult to ensure that food security programmes had an impact on women. However, disasters have also proven to be an opportunity to reinvent women's roles and advance gender equality. Introducing new cassava processing tools for women in the Philippines, fish solar dryers for women in Malawi, and a group marketing strategy for bean farmers in Kenya and Uganda are all innovations that have improved production and supported women's agency. Successful programming was focused on understanding women's roles in value chains based on analysis, and working to address structural inequalities to achieve gender-transformative results. According to evaluations, gender mainstreaming must be preceded by careful analysis aimed at defining realistic and measurable objectives.



Lesson 4 (continued): Responding to food security issues requires a multi-sector approach. Evaluations have demonstrated the value of combining food availability, food access and food use with:

-  **Nutrition programming:** Evaluations noted that nutrition education has played a vital role in linking agricultural development with the social and behavioural change necessary to improve health outcomes.
-  **Hygiene awareness:** In Guinea, an evaluation noted that combining food security with awareness and training interventions was effective in supporting the livelihoods of thousands of farmers while promoting safe practices to minimise the risk of disease outbreaks. Beneficiaries improved their productivity and capacities to prevent the disease.
-  **Animal health services:** Animal products are among the most traded food products. Evaluations noted that addressing animal health is an important element in value chains and food systems, especially for smallholder farming systems. A comprehensive evaluation of responses to the avian influenza outbreaks in 2010 noted that one of the major factors limiting the success of containing the zoonotic disease was inadequate integration between veterinary supports with poultry production, marketing, livelihoods needs, and preparedness and response mechanisms. There was a missed opportunity to better integrate health and private sector approaches. An evaluation of emergency prevention systems also found that community animal health workers played an important role in surveillance and early detection work at the community level.
-  **Environmental and climate adaptation considerations, including disaster risk reduction approaches:** Evaluations of climate action demonstrated improved access and control over healthy food, renewable energy, social housing and clean water for inhabitants of climate change hotspots. Evaluations of agricultural support responses to natural disasters spoke to the need to see disaster risk reduction as an integral part of agricultural development. Farms and agricultural co-operatives were better prepared for future disasters (“build back better”).



Lesson 5: Complex food security challenges require locally driven innovation.

Evaluations spoke to successful innovative solutions to address food security in the areas of innovative partnerships, identifying local solutions, using participatory approaches with community members to identify those solutions, and experimenting with new ideas like unconditional cash transfers using remote means. This lesson is particularly important given the disruptions caused by lock downs and related restrictions on the movement of people and goods.



Lesson 5 (continued): Complex food security challenges require locally driven innovation.



Partnerships with the private sector, academia, governments, banks

A food security research fund found that engaging small-scale private sector actors in testing innovations resulted in high uptake and commercialisation of innovations. It recommended scaling-up innovative agricultural practices that catalyse systemic change, such as combining technology transfer with efforts to affect social and political change. During the Ebola response, better results were achieved through flexibility, diversity and agility in partnering; engaging in new and non-traditional partnerships, particularly with health actors and co-operating partners; and establishing new private partnerships with logistics and communications service providers.

An evaluation in Lebanon also noted that the development of the production chains would be more effective, quick and sustainable if the actions were directed at supporting all actors in the private sector (potential providers of better services and marketing), including, when applicable, consumers, not just direct beneficiaries. An evaluation of programmes designed to reduce rural poverty noted that partnerships with financial institutions were necessary. It was recommended to strengthen linkages between programming and national agriculture investment planning, as well as with the World Bank and regional investment banks. Providing inclusive financial services for small-scale farmers and rural entrepreneurs was also a factor for success in Colombia.



Locally available solutions

Noted innovations were as simple as a local university working with farming co-operatives to identify the right crops to be grown in a typhoon-risk zone. Promoting the consumption and production of locally grown foods was another proven essential activity to achieving food security, resilience and self-sufficiency. Encouraging the production of indigenous vegetables contributed to improved diversity of foods, nutrition, and income gains for small-scale farmers and rural families in West Africa.



Community-driven solutions

Evaluations emphasised the need for community-driven solutions. When promoting sustainable agriculture proved to be challenging at the national level, one evaluation of the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crises recommended the need to go beyond consultation at the community level by involving institutions in local planning and response processes.



Unconditional cash transfers using remote means

Evaluations noted cash transfers as a unique entry point for providing the immediate food needs of the very poorest people and using them to connect people to a phased layering of activities that facilitate graduation from extreme poverty. A humanitarian evaluation noted a positive outcome of partnering with national banking institutions to provide remote technology to Syrian refugees in Jordan. Programming eliminated the need for people to wait in food lines.

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