

"In what way or ways has COVID 19 pandemic and its response created or exacerbated the problems of hunger and starvation in your country?"

Aim of the Background Note

Covid-19 and the lockdown measures aimed at slowing its spread have created new zones of hunger and starvation on a planet already profoundly stressed by climate change and neoliberal globalisation. The massive impediments to accessing good quality, nutritious and culturally appropriate food that preceded Covid-19 are currently intensifying. **PHM has been raising this issue for a while and our statement that was released in the context of People's Health Assembly, 2018 in Dhaka can be found [here](#).**

This note seeks to highlight some of the factors that have been identified as driving increased levels of hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity globally in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures being used to manage it. It is a work in progress, and should be reshaped through contributions from PHM Global and particularly Country Circles that may provide overview contributions about their specific local contexts.

Covid-19, Neoliberal Globalisation and the New Contours of Hunger and Starvation

A global pandemic should be a time for governments and citizens to pull together, to share resources equitably to ensure that all people in all communities have their basic physical and psychosocial needs met. Ensuring equitable access to nutritious and safe food is a key component in meeting those needs, particularly for poorer, more vulnerable and marginalized members of the community. It is also an essential tool for managing the spread of disease.¹ However, there are many verifiable indications that, rather than promoting social equity and food justice, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has exposed and exacerbated inequalities, leading to hunger and starvation. The drive to sustain inequitable market-based economic principles governed by neoliberal systems have undermined and placed pressure on public health measures designed to slow the spread of the virus. In relation to food, this affects people's ability to engage in safe food production and impairs their capacity to purchase and consume the food they need. Food cannot be treated in isolation since it provides a powerful indicator of broader social inequalities and social exclusion.

Deepening Inequality, Declining Social Protection

Fear of hunger remains an important risk factor in the spread of COVID19 and those facing hunger and eviction² lack access to critical social protection. While the wealth of many of the world's millionaires has grown scandalously during the crisis,³ low-wage workers and the rapidly increasing numbers of unemployed have suffered disproportionately.⁴ Many are told to turn up for work regardless of stay-at-home recommendations --or they turn up to work anyway due to lack of job security. Necessary measures introduced by governments to manage COVID19 have disproportionately affected poorer workers and have limited access to nutritious and appropriate foods. Through unemployment, wage theft and insecure, irregular work,^{5,6} COVID19 has increased

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/nutritionreviews/advance-article/doi/10.1093/nutrit/nuaa069/5870056>

² https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_evictions.pdf

³ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/08/billionaire-coronavirus-wealth-animation-covid-685-billion/>

⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/unemployment-rates-oecd-update-june-2020.htm>

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-30/international-students-wage-theft-exploitation-coronavirus/12405332>

⁶ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/últimas-not%C3%ADcias/uk-garment-workers-in-boohoo-supply-chain-allegedly-forced-to-work-during-lockdown-subject-to-wage-theft-poor-working-conditions-covid-19-risk/>

financial insecurity, as well as plunging whole communities into poverty.⁷ The ‘retreat to charity’ is itself one hallmark of a neoliberal system and highlights a lack of appropriate governmental support for many of those rendered poor.⁸ The responses to the virus have created these economic insecurities ending in hunger and poverty that progressively spread across communities.

The continued commodification of food as a result of neoliberal globalisation has prepared the ground for this rapid expansion of hunger among social groups that was, until recently, food secure. The industrial food systems have failed to help, and instead have exacerbated the food and nutrition security⁹. Media reports suggest that hunger is worsening among groups that were already food insecure prior to lockdown. This is becoming a feature of life amongst formerly middle class groups in both high and middle income countries like the UK, USA, South Africa, Mexico, Brazil, Chile and India.¹⁰ As a result, the pressures on existing food aid systems - school and community feeding schemes, food banks, etc - has increased sharply as demand surges.

Food purchasing and consumption patterns have also been affected, with rising prices, panic buying, and hoarding of food.¹¹ It is also worth noting that there are higher risks for people suffering from obesity – itself a product of neoliberal food systems - since it has been widely recognised as a risk factor for COVID-19 complications.¹² This has occurred regardless of whether countries are considered as high, middle or low-income.

Moreover, disruptions to the employment of migrant workers has impeded foreign currency remittances to countries of origin, with potentially devastating effects on the families and lives of the poorest. Foreign students in many countries have lost jobs in service and related industries and, in the complete absence of government support, people now rely on charitable organisations for basic needs, including food and shelter. In places where small scale farming is still possible - rural and communal areas - food insecurity is also increasing. Anecdotal reports suggest that return migration by newly unemployed workers who are deserting the cities is placing huge pressures on rural food systems.

Before Covid: Data from the 2020 *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report*[1]

Globally, chronic hunger has been rising consistently since 2014 or before. According to the OECD, Before the Covid-19 outbreak more than 800 million people globally were undernourished.[2] The 2020 *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report notes that “almost 690 million” people went hungry in 2019, and that the Covid pandemic has the potential to cause at least 130 million more people to experience chronic hunger by the end of this year.

Even before Covid-19, 57% of the population of Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa could not afford a healthy diet – the least expensive of which costs five times more than the cost of a diet

⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/projected-poverty-impacts-of-COVID-19>

⁸ https://www.wcmt.org.uk/sites/default/files/report-documents/Spring%20C%20Report%202016%20Final_0.pdf

⁹ <https://www.fian.org/en/press-release/article/a-recipe-for-disaster-covid-response-based-on-the-industrial-food-system-2510>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/26/millions-went-hungry-during-first-months-of-uk-lockdown-figures-show-coronavirus>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/02/us-food-banks-coronavirus-demand-unemployment>; <https://theconversation.com/south-africa-faces-mass-hunger-if-efforts-to-offset-impact-of-covid-19-are-eased-143143>; <https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072>

¹¹ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-au/soaring-food-prices-people-say-theyre-paying-more-amid-covid-heres-why>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/oby.22818>

dominated by starch and junk food. Regional data shows that the highest proportion of undernourished people live in Africa (19.1% of people on the continent), followed by Asia (8.3%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (7.4%).

Children are hard hit by hunger: in 2019 between 25% and 33% of all children under five experienced stunting or wasting, and another 38 million children in this age group were overweight.

Food Work as Women's Work

“Food work” refers to “all activities/labour around food: from producing, preparing, and cooking, to buying/sharing, and disposing of food.”[3] Food work is typically seen as “women’s work”, and is unpaid but highly valued. The gender dimensions of food systems at societal and household levels have been substantially documented with women serving as food producers, preparers, allocators and servers¹³.

Women have been hard hit by job losses as a result of Covid-19. The biggest employment losses are likely to be suffered by women who are working class, racial and ethnic minorities, migrant women, and those who work in the informal sector.[4] Most of these women are located in the Global South, and were in an economically precarious position even before Covid-19. Significantly, women from the aforementioned groups are most at risk of having limited access to food during “normal times”, even in the Global North. [5]

Women bear the primary responsibility for purchasing and preparing food. Therefore, the losses they have suffered in the labour market due to Covid-19 are likely to increase household food insecurity in general. This will be happening during a period where access to subsidised or food distributed through school feeding and other programmes – have been disrupted by lockdown measures.[6] In poor households, the demand for food – particularly from growing children is thus likely to increase during lockdown.

Within the household women’s food insecurity will be compounded given that they are more likely than others to go hungry so that men and children can eat. For women, opportunities to gain re-entry into paid work (and thus wages in order to buy food) is complicated during periods of lockdown, which are characterised by a lack of access to childcare services and extended family networks who could provide such services for free.[7]

Insufficient Global Political Support for Emergency Food Aid

The World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that Covid is likely to amplify food insecurity by (i) limiting the amount of spending available to subsidise food in LMIs and MICs (both by governments in these countries and by external funders); (ii) limiting access to populations in need of food as a result of lockdown regulations; (iii) undermining the health of farmworkers; and (iv) disrupting food supply chains. These dynamics exacerbate existing food insecurity as currently driven by conflict and environmental disasters that put at least 265 million people at risk of starvation in the coming months.[8] At national level, there have been reports of emergency food aid measures being abusively politicised,[9] of attempts to weaken existing legal measures aimed at decommodifying food,[10] and of social assistance measures being inadequate (in terms of their duration and monetary value) to

¹³ <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000019670/download/>

secure access to sufficient and nutritious food[11] particularly in the wake of prolonged austerity measures in both the Global North[12] and Global South.

Inadequate Protections for Food Workers, Small-Scale Producers

Research by FIAN[13] shows that COVID-19 has exacerbated food insecurity by:

- Marginalising the contributions that small-scale and local food producers can make in increasing access to nutritious food;
- Triggering, enabling and allowing speculation on food prices, without regulation or other price controls and access guarantees;
- Destruction of food that cannot be sold due to closure of markets, which has hampered access to food and left small producers without incomes;
- Putting the health and lives of food workers (e.g. workers at meat processing plants, farmworkers, fisherfolk and informal vendors, supermarket workers) at risk, by failing to address their precarious working conditions and industry-specific risks of exposure to COVID-19, as well as by removing alternative sources of employment and income.

This brief overview gives just a glimpse of the tragic reality unfolding. But we need more localized information to act upon and to learn from each other to contribute a PHM input to the struggles of local claim holders. An initial assessment by responding to the five questions in the cover letter will allow us to work --from the global secretariat to the country circles and vice-versa-- to hopefully contribute in mobilizing affected groups to seek a resolution to their food insecurity.

We request you to kindly send the country case studies by 25th October 2020. You may write to <lparemoer@gmail.com> or <deepika@phmovement.org> to express your interest in contribution.

We count on every PHM circle and focal point to participate.

References-

[1] Unless otherwise stated data in this section have been taken from the following source: <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/13-07-2020-as-more-go-hungry-and-malnutrition-persists-achieving-zero-hunger-by-2030-in-doubt-un-report-warns> [11 August 2020]

[2] <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-and-global-food-systems-aeb1434b/> [11 August 2020]

[3] Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah and Morena, M. Alejandra, 2019, “Enraged: Women and Nature” in Right to Food and Nutrition Watch and FIAN, 2019, *Women’s Power in Food Struggles: Issue 11*, pg.7. <https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/we-shall-rebel> [11 August 2020].

[4] UN, 2020, *Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on Women*, 9 April 2020, pg.4 <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf> [11 August 2020]

[5] Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah and Morena, M. Alejandra, 2019, “Enraged: Women and Nature” in Right to Food and Nutrition Watch and FIAN, 2019, *Women’s Power in Food Struggles: Issue 11*, pg.9. <https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/we-shall-rebel> [11 August 2020].

[6] <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>; <https://gcnf.org/covid/> [11 August 2020]

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- [9] <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2516602620936028>;
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-24-food-parcel-discrimination-under-scrutiny-as-western-cape-becomes-covid-19-epicentre/>;
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/southern-africa-governments-must-move-beyond-politics-in-distribution-of-covid19-food-aid/>; <https://www.newframe.com/covid-19-roundup-food-parcels-and-water-shortages/>
- [10] Shiva, Vandana. 2020. Protecting the Regulatory and Legal Infrastructure for Food Sovereign, Food Self Reliant India (Atma nirbhar Bharat). *Briefing Paper on the Dismantling of India's Food Sovereignty and Food Security framework through 3 Ordinances*)
- [11] Example/data needed – I have SA data but perhaps a paper that maps global or regional trends would be better?
- [12] Marmot, Michael, 2020. “Why Did England Have Europe’s Worst Covid Figures? The Answer Starts with Austerity” *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/10/england-worst-covid-figures-austerity-inequality> [11 August 2020]
- [13] https://www.fian.org/files/files/Covid_Monitoring_Report_-_Template_EN.pdf [11 August 2020]