



IN FOCUS

Healing the Planet by Ensuring the Right to Food for All

The global food 'system' is broken and Covid-19 has revealed and strained this system even further. The food crisis has many facets but at its core are structural inequalities that are disproportionately impacting the poor and most vulnerable. Reimagining the global food system requires an integral approach that interlinks economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. It must address both immediate hunger and malnutrition, and longer-term structural issues.

Working Group 2

Situation, Analysis and Action
Ecology | Economics | Health | Security



COVID - 19
Vatican Commission

Situation

Food insecurity is not simply a lack of food. It's about the whole food supply chain not being able to ensure consistent access to enough and healthy *food for all*. Poverty, marginalization, lack of democratic political processes, conflict, environmental destruction and biodiversity loss, and the consequences of climate change all contribute to food insecurity, increase inequalities and worsen the conditions of vulnerable communities worldwide.

The coronavirus crisis is exacerbating this situation through its impact on food supplies, both in international and local markets, and on food security as a whole. The crisis has decreased consumers' purchasing power, reduced small-scale farmers' capacity to produce food, and weakened their food trade livelihoods. The pandemic is expected to worsen the overall prospects for food security and nutrition. A preliminary assessment suggests that it may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world, with the harshest impact of famine falling on those already made vulnerable or displaced by war, conflict, social unrest, and unemployment. This is in addition to multiple threats to agriculture including inconsistent food policies and climate disruptions.

Analysis

Food insecurity and structural inequality

The denial of people's right to food is a major and visible result of social injustice. In Pope Francis' last encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* (n. 189), he says, "We are still far from a globalization of the most basic of human rights. That is why world politics needs to make the effective elimination of hunger one of its foremost and imperative goals. Indeed, 'when financial speculation manipulates the price of food, treating it as just another commodity, millions of people suffer and die from hunger. At the same time, tons of food are thrown away. This constitutes a genuine scandal. Hunger is criminal; food is an inalienable right.'"

Such injustice lies in the concentration of food market power among a handful of operators. For instance, a few dominant industrial empires control approximately 60% of commercial transactions in the trade of seeds and chemical products. Likewise, nearly 70% of profits from global trade in agricultural products are concentrated in the hands of a few firms. This market power translates into insufficient wages for those who work in the food sector and offers an opportunity for financial speculation to dominate prices.

To understand how the system is easily manipulated, one can look to the unregulated use of financial instruments such as *futures* (contracts for assets, especially commodities, bought at agreed prices but delivered and paid for at a later date). Often created to protect from price oscillations of agricultural products, futures result in the physical delivery of the goods only 2% of the time. Countering food insecurity could be as simple as generating systems whereby we sell and buy the food that we need.

Covid-19 has exposed the extremely heavy price that systemic injustice and structural violence is exacting on food security and food sovereignty. In the last decades, it has grown increasingly clear that a multitude of factors have weakened the agricultural system and created the heart-breaking context for lasting famines, including the unjust treatment of migrants and refugees, racism, the manipulation of commodities markets, the concentration of food production in large commercial

farms and value chains dominated by large processors and retailers, the institutional obstacles to the establishment and functioning of producer cooperatives, severe pollution, environmental degradation, and ongoing conflict and arms production.

Food insecurity, war and violent conflict

Even before Covid-19, 135 million people, many of them in conflict-scarred nations, were near the brink of starvation. Food insecurity is both a cause and a consequence of conflict, creating a vicious cycle that is hard to break. A careful reading of the Global Network Against Food Crises' 2021 Global Report on Food Crises, reveals that violent conflict, war, and forced displacement are by far the most frequent causes of food insecurity, making conflict-sensitivity in food and relief initiatives extremely important. Protracted conflict was the main driver of six of the ten worst food crises and the number of people in crisis increased by 22 million from 2019.

As the coronavirus threat became increasingly evident, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Ms. Hilal Elver, urged the international community “to pay particular attention to the situation of civilians trapped in conflict settings, and notably those already experiencing acute violations of their right to food, such as in Yemen, South Sudan, Gaza, Syria and in refugee camps worldwide.” Massive investment in arms and preparations for war by rich countries and poor countries alike; economies that depend on the development, production and sale of weapons; companies and countries that profit from marketing the tools of war have helped to create a “perfect storm,” in which millions of people and societies lack access to the necessities of life—including the right to food.

Actions in response to widespread food insecurity undertaken by the UN, states, and private donors are crucial, but they will have little or no impact if arms production, modernization, and exports continue undeterred, even during the pandemic. In *Fratelli Tutti* (n. 262), Pope Francis renews Paul VI's appeal to establish, with the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures: “a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favour development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory solutions, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life.”

Even in ceasefires, food is too often used as a weapon and distributed to privileged groups. Conflict-sensitive initiatives can build trust and social cohesion and concentrate attention on the sources of hostility in a conflict. For this reason, conflict sensitivity requires examining interreligious tensions and sectarian rivalries as part of analysing the situation. Interreligious dialogue can instead bring stability to peacebuilding efforts, including nutrition and food security (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 281-4).

Food insecurity and climate change

According to the International Monetary Fund, limitations of the food system go beyond failing to feed the world well. Food produced through the overuse of chemicals, in monoculture cropping systems, and intensive animal farming on land and at sea degrades natural resources faster than they can reproduce and causes almost a quarter of all human-made greenhouse gas emissions. The rebuilding of economies after the Covid-19 crisis offers a unique opportunity to transform the global food system and make it resilient to future shocks, ensuring environmentally sustainable and healthy nutrition for all.

Climate science is clear: there are just a few years left with current carbon budget reserves to stay within the 1.5°C limit, the maximum we can afford if we want to leave this world as we know it to the next generations. The scale and depth of change required is such that no sector can be left out, and no possible effort can be spared. Agriculture, which is responsible for a large scale of global GHG

emissions, is no exception. While ensuring food for all is a matter of basic justice, so is to "labour and keep the land" (cf. Gen 2, 18). Producing food by destroying the land is not a reasonable nor sustainable option. Producing food for more than all inhabitants on earth, while having millions dying every year for food-related issues is unfair. However, adaptation and mitigation measures could address, for example, the need to improve food production on existing land to avoid further expansion into forests, reduce production related emissions, shift diets (more plant-based, less meat-based, especially beef, lamb and goat), avoid competition for land from biofuels, and reduce food waste.

If mitigation is a key area to focus on and if we are to care for our common home, any proposed solution needs to be holistic and consider its resilience and adaptation potential to ensure food for all. As the FAO acknowledges, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate global poverty and end hunger without building resilience to climate change in smallholder agriculture, especially through the widespread adoption of sustainable land, water, fisheries and forestry management practices. Such an integral approach is also needed because of the shortcomings of the current system; while climate change is already negatively affecting agriculture and food security, hunger is on the rise. Agriculture is critical as nearly four out of five people live in rural areas and rely on some form of agricultural production for their livelihoods. These are also the people and regions that are the most at risk for severe climate change impacts. A holistic approach, therefore, requires us to put people at the centre of the strategies adopted, starting with women. Women represent close to 50% of the world's 600 small-scale livestock managers globally, and this figure doesn't take into account the often unpaid contribution of women to food production. "There is a great variety of small-scale food production systems which feed the greater part of the world's peoples, using a modest amount of land and producing less waste, be it in small agricultural parcels, in orchards and gardens, hunting and wild harvesting or local fishing" (*Laudato Si'*, 129).

Guiding Principles for Action

A way forward to ensure food justice for all

In order to effectively address the structural injustices perpetuating food insecurity worldwide, no State and no stakeholder can work unilaterally. Multilateralism is the way to prepare a fairer future. To shift the current system, Pope Francis makes a clear call for solidarity and cooperation and stressed throughout the pandemic crisis that "no one is saved alone". More specifically, he encourages the creation of a "world authority regulated by law," whose objective would be at least "to promote more effective world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty and the sure defence of fundamental human rights" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 172). This paradigm shift is underpinned by the understanding that the environmental, economic, social and health crisis are interconnected, both in the identification of the root causes and as guidance for finding alternative solutions. We need to listen to "the cry of the earth *and* the cry of the poor" as one cry, in order to forge actual justice (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 49).

Responding to the crisis of food insecurity requires a three-pronged approach. First, to reimagine an agricultural system that produces food for all while preserving the land, responding to our divine call to till and keep the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2, 15 and *Laudato Si'*, 67). Second, to share and distribute resources that meet the immediate need of millions of people for food. Third, to fashion a comprehensive, long-term, structural solution in the spirit of integral ecology (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 137ss) and aiming at the implementation of the Agenda 2030 (including Sustainable Development Goal #2: Zero Hunger). An immediate challenge is to ensure that measures aimed at controlling the

coronavirus do not worsen the food insecurity of poor and marginalized communities or lead to more violence and injustice.

Taking into account all of the above and additional inputs from the experience of the local church worldwide, as well as from experts and the UN agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Environment Program, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the World Food Program, collectively, the Vatican Covid-19 Commission suggests the following pillars as drivers for the required shifts in the food system to protect our common home while fighting against hunger and malnutrition:

- ***Develop resilient food systems - from production and distribution to consumption and waste management.*** Reinforce the food supply chains, both locally and internationally; create infrastructure to connect small farmers with local and national markets to strengthen local communities; cut greenhouse gas emissions in all phases of the food system cycle (“from farm to fork”); reduce food waste and vulnerability to external shocks (for example, the current COVID-19 pandemic or the financial crisis of 2007–2008).
- ***Ensure preferential option for the poor.*** Put at the center of the debate the needs of the most vulnerable communities in the world. The voices of small-scale farmers – who feed the greater part of the world’s peoples and among them many women- should have a space to bring in their expertise, their knowledge and their bravery of striving every day for the right to food for all.
- ***Transform current food systems toward more sustainable pathways.*** Promote a circular model of production and an efficient use of resources; enhance local knowledge and practices with the aim to ensure a better protection of biodiversity, in accordance with local food systems, and to promote sustainable use of lands and oceans.
- ***Promote healthy diets.*** Improve access to nutritious food and make healthy diets affordable for everyone to eradicate malnutrition; support a shift to a more sustainable consumption model, especially in the wealthier countries, to fight food waste and obesity and other nutrition-related non-communicable diseases and promote a more plant-based diet.
- ***Secure adequate and just financial support*** to back this transformation of the food system, particularly today in the context of the recovery plans and the climate crisis we are living in, and to reduce the concentration of market power and food prices’ speculation.

Conclusion

Solving systemic global hunger is not a technical process. It ultimately hinges on a fundamental structural change, from the “unjust normal” of systemic violence – systems that destroy, dominate, dehumanize, and diminish the earth and its inhabitants – to a culture of solidarity and caring that seeks the fullness of life for all.

As articulated in *Laudato Si’* (cf. n. 220), ecological conversion entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion, while “the process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 50).

The current global debate centered around building a just and sustainable recovery post Covid-19 provides a unique opportunity to put in place policies aimed to deeply transform the global food system. It also presents us with an opportunity to do much more to heal the world. As we contend with the immediate demands of the coronavirus pandemic, we must also have an eye to the cures for larger viruses: social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization, and the lack of protection for the weakest. To cure these viruses, opting for the most vulnerable, is not only a matter of political and economic decisions, but “at the centre of the Gospel” (Catechesis *Healing the World*).

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