

# Policy brief: Food security and Covid-19



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# Introduction

**As of 5 August 2020, there are more than 18 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 in 188 countries as the disease continues to spread, and over 700,000 fatalities.<sup>1</sup> For people in fragile situations, the virus can be devastating and the most vulnerable in society are those hit the hardest. One of the greatest threats they face is food insecurity, exacerbated by both the immediate and secondary impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Food insecurity is a feature of chronic vulnerability driven by multiple, interrelated factors, such as: protracted conflict, weak governance, lack of social safety nets, environmental degradation, dependence on climate-related livelihoods, extreme weather events, economic and market instability, and social and cultural norms that serve to perpetuate inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Food insecurity is a critical humanitarian issue already facing many of the communities supported by the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and early warning systems and analysis show concerning projections. According to UN agencies, almost 690 million people went hungry in 2019 around the world. Estimates show that Covid-19 could push at least another 83 million and as many as 132 million into hunger in 2020, although the full impact of lockdowns and containment measures is still difficult to assess.<sup>3</sup> Concerns are particularly high for countries across **Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East**, especially fragile and conflict-affected contexts, such as **South Sudan, Somalia, Northeast Nigeria, Yemen and Syria**.

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to threaten both lives and livelihoods, along with the trading and supply networks people rely on for survival. Many countries are struggling with compound crises of protracted conflict, the extreme weather effects of climate change, locust invasions, fragile health systems and pre-existing economic insecurity, reinforcing the vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

East Africa is currently facing the worst locust plague for 70 years, threatening to destroy thousands of hectares of crops, with a looming threat of famine and devastating impact to food security and livelihoods. The FAO has warned the locusts could move West, threatening pastures and livelihoods in the Sahel.<sup>5</sup>

This briefing highlights the intersecting nature of these crises, exploring how vulnerabilities caused by conflict and climate-related hazards are a substantial driver for food and nutrition insecurity. It also highlights how the current approach to managing Covid-19 in complex contexts may be limiting access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food for millions of people around the world, with women and girls being particularly affected due to existing gender-inequalities.

This briefing further explores the importance of building resilience to shocks that impact upon vulnerable communities. This includes promoting disaster risk reduction using early warning systems to help decision makers at the local and national level to anticipate weather-related crises and mitigate the associated impacts on food security and social protection systems.

1. Accurate as of 5 August 2020, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-51235105](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-51235105)

2. [redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/international/british-red-cross-international-strategy-2019-2024.pdf](http://redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/international/british-red-cross-international-strategy-2019-2024.pdf)

3. [reliefweb.int/report/world/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-2020-transforming-food-systems-affordable](https://reliefweb.int/report/world/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-2020-transforming-food-systems-affordable)

4. [icrc.org/en/document/climate-change-and-conflict](https://icrc.org/en/document/climate-change-and-conflict)

5. <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/preparing-invasion-desert-locust-threat-west-africa>

# Executive summary

- Almost 690 million people went hungry in 2019 around the world. According to UN estimates, another **83 million and as many as 132 million could be tipped into hunger in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic**. Countries struggling with the compound crises of conflict, weather-related hazards, pre-existing food insecurity and weak social protection systems are particularly at risk.
- **The impact of Covid-19 is expected to be more severe among populations affected by food scarcity and malnutrition**, as a weakened immune system as a result of undernourishment poses greater risks of contracting serious illnesses.
- **Restrictions to combat the virus may result in loss of income and livelihoods** – Around 434 million more people may be pushed into extreme poverty (that is living off less than \$1.90 a day), while 548 million more could fall below \$5.50 a day.<sup>6</sup> The disruption of agriculture production and regional and global trade flows could have a devastating impact upon countries with the least resilient food systems and those reliant on imports.
- **Availability of food, access to food and nutrition security will all be affected by the economic shocks of Covid-19, particularly in vulnerable countries**. Existing social protection mechanisms – which are crucial to enable individuals and households to cope with this crisis – may be further impacted by a reduction in GDP resulting from the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- **Children are particularly vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity**. UNICEF and WFP estimate that the futures of around 370 million children are at further risk as a result of the deprivation of school meals, as schools shut down as part of lockdown measures.<sup>7</sup>
- **Pre-existing gender inequalities put women and girls at increased vulnerability to the economic shocks of Covid-19 and at significant risk of food and nutrition insecurity**. Girls are at particular risk of early marriage as families try to reduce their costs, exposing girls to domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health risks, and limiting their access to education.
- **Migrant workers and displaced populations are often ill-protected from economic shocks and are therefore particularly vulnerable**. Often separated from their families, they frequently rely on their employer for food and accommodation and are heavily dependent on insecure employment. As a result, they may be more exposed to increased risk of trafficking or exploitation.
- **The global Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the need to build resilience to cope with economic, climate-related and health shocks which significantly impact food security**. It is critical to enhance community- and household-level resilience, food and nutrition autonomy, as well as develop alternative opportunities to diversify income sources, protect livelihoods and avoid asset depletion. Pro-resilience policy making at the national level is essential to mitigate the impacts of climate and other shocks on food security.
- **The global Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the need to act early in humanitarian contexts, in order to reduce the exacerbating impact of colliding risks**. Early warning systems can be used by policy makers and humanitarian organisations to anticipate crises and mitigate the severity of their impacts on the most vulnerable, including food insecurity impacts. The ability to translate early warning data and forecast information into anticipatory action is essential to prepare an effective humanitarian response plan for impending crises.

6. [oxfamapps.org/media/press\\_release/half-a-billion-more-people-could-be-pushed-into-poverty-by-coronavirus/](https://oxfamapps.org/media/press_release/half-a-billion-more-people-could-be-pushed-into-poverty-by-coronavirus/)

7. [wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp](https://wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp)

- **Building social protection systems to alleviate poverty and help vulnerable people cope with crisis and shocks is essential.** These should include aspects such as social safety nets, social insurance, and labour market protection.
- **Providing cash can be the most effective shock responsive safety net in the face of crises such as Covid-19 and food insecurity.**
- **Directly engaging those communities experiencing crisis is key in order to meet humanitarian needs effectively.** This should include an on-going dialogue, where people's needs are listened to and acted upon.
- **Locally-led approaches are critical to addressing food insecurity in the context of the Covid-19 response.** Community-led organisations need support and must be placed at the centre of decision making on funding and receive flexible long-term funding to respond to the needs identified by them.



# Key policy commitments

## The UK government and wider humanitarian community should:

- 1.** Champion coordinated and multisectoral approaches to the Covid-19 response that consider the intersection of multiple crises in many humanitarian settings that serve to exacerbate food insecurity, including climate change and protracted conflict.
- 2.** Consider the impact of food insecurity when developing and financing Covid-19 responses and investing in building more sustainable and resilient local food production and livelihoods.
- 3.** Support early action. This includes ensuring early warning data is consistent and accessible; and that local, national, regional and international decision-makers and humanitarian responders are able to use the data to inform early action protocols; and funding is available to finance the necessary early action.
- 4.** Scale up cash and voucher assistance as a delivery mechanism to help restore the economic resilience and livelihoods of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities, with special attention to the needs of women and households at risk of domestic violence and exploitation.
- 5.** Continue to support the increased alignment of humanitarian support to social protection systems to complement and support other emergency response interventions in the longer-term.
- 6.** Continue to champion food security responses that are as locally-led as possible and as international as necessary and ensure key local actors, including women-led organisations, are at the centre of decision-making on funding to ensure they can access the resources they need, in line with the Grand Bargain Commitments.
- 7.** Ensure that communities experiencing crisis are engaged in an on-going dialogue and listened to, putting community engagement and accountability at the centre of food security responses.

# Context: Existing food insecurity

Over the past 20 years hunger has dropped by almost half and more than one billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, however, estimates show that since 2015, hunger levels have risen.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, 690 million people around the world experienced hunger.<sup>9</sup> An additional 1.3 billion people have experienced moderate food insecurity, bringing the total number to over 2 billion people worldwide without regular access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food.<sup>10</sup>

## Protracted conflict and food insecurity

Conflict and food insecurity are often closely connected. In 2017, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that around 60% of undernourished individuals and 79% of stunted children globally live in countries affected by violent conflict.<sup>11</sup> In **Syria**, out of a total population of 17 million, 11 million (including 6 million children and 800,000 elderly people) were already in need of humanitarian assistance – irrespective of Covid-19. Of these, 4.5 million are in acute need.<sup>12</sup>

Protracted and ongoing conflicts leave populations particularly vulnerable to both the climate crisis and food insecurity. Food insecurity can itself become a trigger of civil conflict. For instance, in **Somalia** and **Afghanistan**, which have been damaged by decades of conflict and instability, extreme weather such as floods or droughts has been threatening people's food security, forcing many to leave.<sup>13</sup> In **Northeast Nigeria, Yemen and South Sudan** a risk of famine persists with people living in refugee camps being particularly at risk and in need of humanitarian food assistance.

- **Yemen** continues to face the largest food security emergency in the world.<sup>14</sup> Protracted conflict and currency depreciation will lead to alarming rates of acute food insecurity and subsequent acute malnutrition, with the recent **flash floods** aggravating the situation and increasing humanitarian needs.<sup>15</sup> Famine could occur if interruptions to food imports as well as depreciation of currency more severely restrict access to food.

- The escalation of violence in **Northeast Nigeria** in recent years has led to hundreds of thousands of people being displaced and left precariously short of food.<sup>16</sup> It has become a cross-border protracted conflict affecting **South Cameroon, West-Chad and South-East Niger** which all sit on Lake Chad.<sup>17</sup> Famine may be ongoing in inaccessible areas of the region and, should displaced populations become cut-off by a shift in conflict, accessible areas may also be affected.<sup>18</sup>
- Periodic conflict and a dramatic rise in food prices will continue to lead to extreme food insecurity levels in **South Sudan** during 2020. Here, a prolonged absence of humanitarian food assistance may lead to famine.<sup>19</sup>
- Violence has spread in the Sahel region especially in the Liptako-Gourma region (contiguous areas of **Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali**) where 12.3% of the population is food insecure (phase 3) as of June 2020. In **Burkina Faso**, the combination of protracted conflict and climate change contributed to a sharp increase of people in urgent need of help from 371,000 in June 2015, to 954,000 in 2018, and to 2 million in 2020 according to the latest food security analysis.<sup>20</sup>

8. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/food/>

9. [reliefweb.int/report/world/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-2020-transforming-food-systems-affordable](https://reliefweb.int/report/world/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-2020-transforming-food-systems-affordable)

10. Ibid

11. [fao.org/3/CA1587EN/ca1587en.pdf](https://www.fao.org/3/CA1587EN/ca1587en.pdf)

12. [wfp.org/emergencies/syria-emergency](https://wfp.org/emergencies/syria-emergency)

13. [icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file\\_plus\\_list/rain\\_turns\\_to\\_dust\\_climate\\_change\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/rain_turns_to_dust_climate_change_conflict.pdf)

14. [fews.net/sites/default/files/Food\\_Assistance\\_Peak\\_Needs\\_April2020.pdf](https://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/Food_Assistance_Peak_Needs_April2020.pdf)

15. [reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-flash-floods-flash-update-no-3-30-april-2020](https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-flash-floods-flash-update-no-3-30-april-2020)

16. [icrc.org/en/document/covid-19-conflict-coronavirus-nigeria-borno](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/covid-19-conflict-coronavirus-nigeria-borno)

17. [reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-2-fiscal-year-fy-2020](https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-2-fiscal-year-fy-2020)

18. Ibid

19. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-2-fiscal-year-fy-2020>

20. <https://www.fews.net/west-africa/burkina-faso/remote-monitoring-report/april-2020>

## Climate change and food insecurity

The impacts of climate change pose a major risk to development gains achieved over recent years, threatening to undermine key progress made to eradicate hunger. As weather becomes more extreme and unpredictable it serves to compromise peoples' ability to grow food to feed themselves and to generate an income.<sup>21</sup> This is especially challenging for poorer, rural communities who often rely on rainfed farming and agriculture as their main source of sustenance. Increased climate variability and climate related disasters such as droughts, floods, and storms can destroy crops, infrastructure and community assets, destroying livelihoods and impacting food availability. Lack of access to food often causes food prices to rise, resulting in people resorting to negative coping strategies to meet their basic food needs.<sup>22</sup> A few examples are highlighted below:

- As of December 2019, 10.8 million people were food insecure through 16 countries of the **Sahel and West and Central Africa region**. Recent PREGEC analysis identified nearly 17 million people in crisis phase (3 to 5) of food insecurity for the period from June to August 2020 in the Sahel and West Africa region.<sup>23</sup>
- Food insecurity in the region results from multiple factors which include high levels of poverty, lack of access to basic services, inadequate agriculture and food policies or weak application. The two main drivers are climate change and civil insecurity and conflict, and the consequent displacement of population.
- In **Sierra Leone**, an increase in climate-related flooding, an economic crisis driven by inflation which began in October 2019, and the Covid-19 outbreak, have led to an unprecedented food crisis. The number of people suffering from food insecurity (phase 3) in the country has multiplied by 10 over the past 6 months, affecting 1.3 million people as of June 2020.

According to recent estimates for June, July and August 2020 (lean season), in Burkina Faso an unprecedented 11,394 food insecure people are in "famine phase" (phase 5), while 500,000 food insecure people are in "emergency phase" (phase 4).<sup>24</sup>

An estimated 20 million people across nine **East African** countries are food insecure. This is likely to increase to between 34 to 43 million during the next three months due to the effects of Covid-19, according to WFP.<sup>25</sup> Covid-19 strikes at a time when the region is battling an ongoing desert locust wave that is threatening the new crop season in **Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia** and the livelihoods of people that depend on them for survival; and travel restrictions are causing delays in the supply of pesticides. In urban settings, hundreds of thousands of people employed in the informal sector have already lost their sources of income.

- Prior to Covid-19 restrictions, food insecurity in the **Southern Africa** region was already alarmingly high and on course to reach levels similar to last year, when 41.2 million people were in need – the highest number in a decade. Two consecutive poor rainy seasons, characterised by severe drought and abnormal dryness across much of the region, combined with tropical cyclones and poor macroeconomy has led to large-scale crop losses. This has resulted in atypically high food assistance needs in 2019 and continuing into 2020. It is now estimated by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) that close to 44.8 million people in both urban and rural areas of the Southern Africa region are food insecure. In **Zimbabwe**, Covid-19 may exacerbate the food security situation of 4.3 million people.<sup>26</sup>

21. [https://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/files/RCRC\\_climateguide.pdf](https://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/files/RCRC_climateguide.pdf)

22. <https://www.wfp.org/climate-change/climate-impacts>

23. <http://www.cilss.int/index.php/2020/06/23/avis-sur-la-situation-alimentaire-et-nutritionnelle-dans-un-contexte-de-pandemie-de-Covid-19-au-sahel-et-en-afrique-de-louest-pregec-virtuel-juin-2020/>

24. Cadre Harmonisé d'analyse et d'identification des zones à risque et d'estimation des populations en insécurité alimentaire au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest (Burkina Faso), period June-August 2020, 11 July 2020

25. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP%20East%20Africa%20Corona%20virus%20Pandemic-%20%28COVID-19%29%20Update\\_2020April24%20%231.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP%20East%20Africa%20Corona%20virus%20Pandemic-%20%28COVID-19%29%20Update_2020April24%20%231.pdf)

26. <https://www.livelihoodscentre.org/documents/114097690/181759481/FSL+Impact+and+COVID+19.pdf/1f4fc1c2-73d1-f756-5c1d-e8e33b94026d?t=1586863881452>



# Intersecting crises and overlapping vulnerabilities

**Covid-19 will significantly impact food security. The impact of the disease is expected to be more severe among populations affected by food scarcity and malnutrition. Widespread food insecurity will likely increase due to movement restrictions and market disruptions imposed to control the spread of the virus.**

## **Underlying food insecurity compounds the risks of infection**

The impact of Covid-19 could be particularly severe for populations who are undernourished. Existing evidence suggests that the elderly and those whose health is already compromised are at higher risk of becoming ill and dying as a result of the virus. While malnutrition as a co-morbidity for Covid-19 has not yet been researched in depth, a weakened immune system as a result of undernourishment poses greater risks of contracting serious illnesses, and so people are likely to be severely affected by Covid-19.<sup>27</sup>

Mortality rates of Covid-19 are expected to be higher among malnourished people that develop the disease. Infants and children under five are particularly affected by malnutrition which can lead to stunting, wasting, impacts on cognitive development and can result in death due to being immunocompromised.

Women are disproportionately affected as a consequence of existing gender inequalities. This can be exacerbated by increased nutritional requirements during menstruation, pregnancy and post-partum.

Access to nutritional treatment programmes may face disruption due to containment measures, changes in service provision, availability of resources and fear of attending facilities for risk of exposure to Covid-19.

## **Restrictions to combat the virus leading to a loss of income and livelihoods**

Projections from the humanitarian sector show that a Covid-19-induced global economic crisis could set back the global fight against poverty by a decade – and by up to 30 years in

Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region. Around 434 million more people may be pushed into extreme poverty (that is living off less than \$1.90 a day), while 548 million more could fall below \$5.50 a day.<sup>28</sup>

Movement, travel and trade restrictions, and border closures may lead to the disruption of production, market chains and trade and consequent loss of income and livelihoods, particularly in the informal sector.

The impact on food and nutrition security will be especially harmful in countries with weak economies which are less resilient to economic shocks and in countries with minimal social protection. The food security and livelihoods situation in **Syria** has been particularly affected, in a context where 80% of the population already live below the poverty line of \$1.90 a day.<sup>29</sup> As ICRC reports, since March 2020 food prices in **Syria** have soared by 38% with the price of bread doubling across the country and families struggling to put food on the table.<sup>30</sup>

Countries already struggling with the effects of climate change will face a double burden as Covid-19 restrictions will disrupt agricultural production. This will have a significant impact on the income and livelihoods of everyone in the agricultural value chain – from producers, to processors, transporters, and vendors, and on the availability of products in the markets. In the Sahel, the Food Crisis Prevention Network forecasted that nearly 51 million people (currently in food insecurity phase 2) are likely to fall into a food and nutrition crisis (phase 3) as a result of the combined effects of the regional security and the Covid-19 health crisis.<sup>31</sup>

27. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-could-deepen-food-insecurity-malnutrition-africa>

28. [https://oxfamapps.org/media/press\\_release/half-a-billion-more-people-could-be-pushed-into-poverty-by-coronavirus/](https://oxfamapps.org/media/press_release/half-a-billion-more-people-could-be-pushed-into-poverty-by-coronavirus/)

29. <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1920/syria-economic-crisis-compounds-conflict-misery-as-millions-face-deeper-poverty-hunger>

30. Ibid

31. <http://www.food-security.net/en/topic/food-and-nutrition-crisis-2020/>

The disruption of trade flows which are currently relied upon by millions of people across the world, may also have devastating impacts, particularly in import-dependent countries. In 2018, the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including **South Sudan and Somalia**, imported more than 40 million tons of cereals from around the world to compensate for gaps in local food production.<sup>32</sup> In **Yemen**, as demand soars and the movement of goods becomes increasingly restricted, the prices of food and other essentials are likely to rise, exacerbating food shortages and chronic hunger, and negatively impacting on the livelihoods of Yemenis in a struggling economy.<sup>33</sup> In West and Central Africa, the most significant price increase can be observed on imported rice (with variations between 11 and 17%) in **Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia**. In **Syria**, imported goods such as sugar or rice have double – or even tripled – in price, and a litre of vegetable oil now is more expensive than the average daily wage of a day labourer.<sup>34</sup>

### Availability and access to food

Economic shocks, protracted conflict and climate change, compounded by national and international restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus, may have a dramatic impact on food and nutrition security in humanitarian contexts, while at the same time serving to hinder the provision of humanitarian aid.

- **Availability of food** – In the medium and long-term, severe and ongoing Covid-19 outbreaks could compromise and reduce food availability in local and international markets. As a result of border closure, transport limitation and quarantine, activities halted in supplier countries may limit availability in dependent countries. Disruption of local production, movement restrictions and social distancing can affect the availability of fresh produce and may have significant impacts in conflict-affected areas, which typically rely on internal production rather than imports.
- **Access to food** – Loss of income, increased prices and limited availability may limit access to essential food items, and movement restrictions may limit access to more affordable markets. Urban areas are likely to be affected as people are less likely to produce their own food and are dependent on markets, leaving them more vulnerable to market closure, price fluctuations and potential availability problems.
- **Nutrition** – A common coping strategy in times of crisis is a change in food consumption patterns – with many consuming less food and calories, and prioritising cheaper and less nutritious food in order to reduce household costs.
- **Humanitarian assistance and social protection targeting** – The disruption of existing humanitarian programmes resulting from restrictions on movement, supply chains and funding shortfalls will reduce the capacity of humanitarian organisations to respond to the secondary impacts of Covid-19. Existing social protection mechanisms will be further impacted by a reduction in GDP as a result of the economic impacts of the pandemic. Disruption of resources for social protection, including cash-flows, and humanitarian programmes is particularly concerning as they are crucial to enable individuals and households to cope with this crisis, and protect the livelihoods and wellbeing of all those affected in the long-term. 195 governments have planned to or started implementing social protection programmes in response to Covid-19.<sup>35</sup>

However, in some of the most vulnerable countries, direct support is limited to a one-off payment and linked with loss of income or waiving fees for utilities.

- For example, in **Sudan**, the support planned is a one-off food parcel to cover a three week need.

32. <https://insight.wfp.org/Covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072>

33. [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200409\\_acaps\\_risk\\_report\\_covid-19\\_impact\\_on\\_yemen\\_update.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200409_acaps_risk_report_covid-19_impact_on_yemen_update.pdf)

34. <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1920/syria-economic-crisis-compounds-conflict-misery-as-millions-face-deeper-poverty-hunger>

35. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/590531592231143435/social-protection-and-jobs-responses-to-covid-19-a-real-time-review-of-country-measures-june-12-2020>

- The French Red Cross - supporting Red Cross National Societies in **Niger, Mauritania, Cameroon and Chad** – observed an unusual drop in the admission of severe acute malnutrition cases in health centres since the end of March (between 17% to 40% with an average of around 25%) in some cases under levels reported in 2019. This significant drop coincided with lockdowns and Covid-19 restrictions and while a direct link has not yet been established, this drop may be related to the decrease of attendance to health centres, absence of community screening and movement restrictions.



# The disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups

**Vulnerable groups will be disproportionately hit by the secondary impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, including economic shocks and food insecurity. The loss of livelihoods can push people to adopt negative – and sometimes irreversible – coping strategies to continue to meet their basic needs, which exacerbate vulnerabilities to food insecurity.**

These strategies may include reducing the number and quality of meals (particularly adult household members for the benefit of their children), selling productive assets, reducing funds available for education to spend them on food, incurring debt to purchase food, child labour, and exploitation and sexual violence in exchange for food.<sup>36</sup>

## Children

Food insecurity and malnourishment disproportionately affect children worldwide. According to UNICEF, malnutrition is the cause of nearly half of all deaths in children under 5, either directly from it or from increased vulnerability to infections and illnesses.<sup>37</sup> Malnutrition during pregnancy and lactation can have irreversible damage on children, affecting cognitive development and growth in the long-term.

Covid-19 places children at heightened risk, should caregivers become sick, quarantined or unable to provide them with nutritious and safe food as a result of loss of income and livelihoods. With food prices rising, many families are forced to make difficult decisions about when to eat, and who to prioritise. In addition, for many children, school feeding programmes account for nearly 50% of their daily calories and with schools shutting down this critical lifeline is no longer available. For example, 37 countries benefitting from WFP-supported school feeding programmes have reported partial or country-wide closure of schools, with nearly 9 million children no longer receiving WFP-supported school meals.<sup>38</sup> This is particularly concerning in countries with a high burden of child undernutrition, as the health and growth of children who suffer from malnutrition,

as well as their future educational and economic attainment, will be dramatically affected. In total, UNICEF and WFP estimate that the futures of around 370 million children are at risk as a result of deprivation of school meals.<sup>39</sup> As a result of the pandemic, there has also been a general reduction in access to fresh food and high nutritional values, which are essential to boost the immune system.

## Women and girls in fragile or disaster-affected countries

Pre-existing gender inequalities put women and girls in fragile or disaster-affected countries at significant risk of food and economic insecurity. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to both the economic shocks and stresses of Covid-19, but also to food and nutrition insecurity and malnourishment as a result of pre-existing gender inequalities.

Women and girls often eat last and least. Where women are primarily responsible for procuring and cooking food, the responsibility to feed the family lies with them, putting them at heightened risk of domestic violence where they fail to do so, as well as the risk of dangerous coping strategies, such as offering sex in exchange for goods and food. Girls are at particular risk of early marriage as families try to reduce their costs, exposing girls to domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health risks, and limiting their access to education.<sup>40</sup> In the 2013-2016 Ebola outbreak in **West Africa** the economic impacts placed women and children at greater risk of exploitation and sexual violence.<sup>41</sup>

36. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/a-potential-secondary-humanitarian-impacts-of-a-large-scale-ebola-outbreak.pdf>

37. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/pneumonia/>

38. <https://www.wfp.org/news/world-food-programme-gears-support-children-left-without-meals-due-Covid-19-school-closures>

39. <https://www.wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp>

40. [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE\\_Gender-implications-of-COVID-19\\_Full-Report\\_March-2020.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Gender-implications-of-COVID-19_Full-Report_March-2020.pdf)

41. UNGA A/70/723. Protecting Humanity from Future Health Crises: Report of the High Level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises; UNICEF Helpdesk, "GBV in Emergencies: Emergency Responses to Public Health Outbreaks," September 2018, p.2

Women are often employed in informal, low wage activities that are easily disrupted. During the West Africa Ebola outbreak, movement restrictions hampered women's ability to cultivate land, engage in other agricultural activities and conduct trading activities. In countries such as **Lebanon**, women's village savings and loans associations are already being impacted by Covid-19: women are unable to pay back loans, affecting their long-term economic prospects and causing them to turn to dangerous coping mechanisms or taking loans with high interest. The African continent hosts the highest number of members of saving groups globally, with 11.7 million members (79% of whom are women) out of 12.4 million worldwide.<sup>42</sup> These saving groups, which are crucial to strengthen individual and household resilience and enable economic activity at the community level, are being impacted by Covid-19. The loss of jobs and income will place pressure on women and girls to engage in unsafe livelihood activities and expose them to exploitation.<sup>43</sup> The specific impact of Covid-19 on the economic and social well-being of women risks creating a reversal of development gains, impacting on the ability to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5.

### **Migrant workers and displaced populations**

Migrant workers and displaced populations working both formally and informally are often ill-protected from economic shocks and are therefore particularly vulnerable. Migrant workers are often separated from their families, they frequently rely on their employer for food and accommodation, or they live in communal rented accommodation or slums. They often lack family and social networks and are heavily dependent on insecure employment.

This leaves many migrant workers, including domestic workers, exposed to increased levels of violence or exploitation at the hands of their employers or traffickers. This includes a heightened risk of sexual exploitation and abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.<sup>44</sup>

Many migrant workers who lose their job will become unable to support themselves or send money to their families (remittances), resulting in both a local and remote impact, and depriving families from an often essential source of income. The World Bank estimates a decline in global remittances to low and middle-income countries by about 20% due to the Covid-19-induced economic crisis – the sharpest in recent history – with Sub-Saharan Africa suffering a 23.1% drop.<sup>45</sup> Where migrant workers are forced to return home for their survival, they may put additional pressure on already stretched resources.<sup>46</sup>

42. <http://mis.thesavix.org/dashboard/admin>

43. [https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE\\_Implications\\_of\\_COVID-19\\_on\\_WEE\\_300420.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE_Implications_of_COVID-19_on_WEE_300420.pdf)

44. See GBV AoR Helpdesk, COVID-19 Covid-19 Impact on Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East

45. [worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history)

46. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/iom-eu-bolster-response-economic-impact-covid-19-returning-migrants-across-west-and>

# Building resilience

**The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the need to support communities to build resilience to cope with economic, environmental, and health shocks, all of which can exacerbate food insecurity. Proven interventions should be scaled-up to support an effective transition from vulnerability to resilience in contexts affected by humanitarian crises, including food insecurity.**

## **Preparedness, resilience and livelihoods protection**

Anticipating and reducing the risks and vulnerabilities to shock is essential as their impact can extend far beyond communities directly affected and slow or setback socioeconomic progress for an entire country in the long-term, often for generations. Covid-19 has highlighted the many ways in which agricultural systems around the world are vulnerable to economic and climate shocks, particularly in countries which are less economically resilient and highly dependent on external markets. This makes it more crucial than ever to enhance food autonomy and nutrition in those contexts, creating a culture of prevention and resilience.

For example, small household measures like keyhole gardens are being used across the African continent to increase homegrown vegetable cultivation in drought-prone regions. They have increased the resilience of families and communities by improving household food autonomy and dietary diversity. Keyhole gardens have also become an excellent tool to empower women in local communities, who are in control of production and selling their own vegetables, and can strengthen their social networks.<sup>47</sup> Supporting local capacity to grow food is essential during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis, as it can help tackle food insecurity, empower individuals and households and minimise dependence on external sources and markets.<sup>48</sup> Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies are promoting many of these low cost low tech actions through their network of community volunteers.<sup>49</sup>

Because food security is highly dependent on markets, it is crucial that people are able to maintain their sources of incomes at all times,

protect their livelihoods, avoid asset depletion, and develop alternative opportunities to diversify income sources. The British Red Cross is supporting strengthening the capacity of small-scale farmers and pastoralists in **Kenya** to adapt to climate change. We promote financial inclusion through local saving groups for people to become more financially autonomous, for example in **Chad and Niger**.

Resilient national policy making is essential to mitigating the impacts of climate-related and other shocks on food security. Efforts from governments in the Sahel region to implement policies that consider the impacts of climate change and ongoing conflicts between pastoralists and farmers are currently insufficient. Although Early Warning Systems that monitor food insecurity exist, they rarely lead to early action. Competing priorities due to conflict and civil insecurity make it more difficult for humanitarian actors, including Red Cross Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC to respond.

## **Anticipating crisis and climate shocks: Early action and early warning systems**

Reliable, timely and up-to-date information with regards to weather forecasts, food prices, production and availability, as well as levels of food and nutrition insecurity, can support governments, humanitarian organisations and communities to effectively anticipate and prepare for humanitarian needs. The need to act early in humanitarian contexts has been exacerbated by Covid-19 as it can reduce the impact of colliding risks.<sup>50</sup> The ability to translate data and early warning on food and forecast information into anticipatory action has become essential to prepare a humanitarian response plan for impending crises.

47. [fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/docs/FSNL%20Fact%20sheet\\_Keyhole%20gardens.pdf](https://www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/docs/FSNL%20Fact%20sheet_Keyhole%20gardens.pdf)

48. [agrilinks.org/post/food-security-frontlines-using-agroecological-solutions-household-food-production-during-covid?utm\\_source=USAID+Bureau+for+Food+Security+%2F+Agrilinks&utm\\_campaign=531534fd82-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_08\\_21\\_07\\_27\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_8f8d227958-531534fd82-57506759](https://www.agrilinks.org/post/food-security-frontlines-using-agroecological-solutions-household-food-production-during-covid?utm_source=USAID+Bureau+for+Food+Security+%2F+Agrilinks&utm_campaign=531534fd82-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_08_21_07_27_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8f8d227958-531534fd82-57506759)

49. <https://www.livelihoodscentre.org/-/easy-volunteer-actions>

50. <https://future-rcrc.com/2020/07/03/a-humanitarian-recipe-for-a-green-resilient-and-inclusive-recovery-from-covid-19/>

Early warning systems can be used by policy makers and humanitarian organisations to anticipate crises and mitigate the severity of their impacts on the most vulnerable, including food insecurity impacts. National early warning and weather observation capacity is crucial to maintain early action protocols that are in place. The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) Global Observing System provides observations that are used for the preparation of weather analyses, forecasts, advisories and warnings by the 193 WMO Member states and territories. However, WMO is concerned about the increasing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the quantity and quality of weather observations and forecasts, as well as atmospheric and climate monitoring. Surface-based weather observations are in decline, especially in Africa and parts of Central and South America where many stations are manual rather than automatic.<sup>51</sup>

Weather forecasts will be central to informing the recovery of food security crises resulting from Covid-19, as the livelihoods of people at risk of or suffering from food insecurity are often climate sensitive. Weather forecast and observation data should to be complemented by the monitoring and analysis of markets and prices, livelihoods, nutrition, disease outbreaks, and conflict situations to help governments and humanitarian actors shape their responses.

For instance, FAO raised the alert of the desert locust plague in East Africa back in April – the worst in several decades – with the situation being particularly alarming in the Horn of Africa, where widespread breeding was in progress and new swarms are threatening food security and livelihoods for the upcoming crop season. In the absence of sustained scaled-up control operations, desert locusts are likely to continue to breed and spread during the coming months, exacerbating food insecurity in the region. Key drivers include consecutive failed rainy seasons, torrential rains and flooding, as well as economic shocks and ongoing conflict. The greatest food security impacts will be felt by households reliant on cropping activities, who are already facing food insecurity.<sup>52</sup>

Predictions for West Africa show that conflict will continue to have a detrimental impact on the livelihoods and food security of populations in **Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger**, particularly on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities. Access to food and markets has been challenging, and concerns for displaced pastoralists are particularly high in **Burkina Faso**, where vegetation is scarce due to the negative outcome of the previous rainy season. May and June are fundamental months to prepare for the forthcoming agricultural season. Failure to scale-up action to improve access to land for IDPs and people affected by insecurity, as well as pasture and water for pastoralists is likely to further aggravate their situation and increase humanitarian needs in the long term.<sup>53</sup>

The UK has worked multilaterally to support the development and adoption of ambitious initiatives such as the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP), and funding innovative programmes such as Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) and Science for Humanitarian Emergences and Resilience (SHEAR).

However, more needs to be done to allow for early warnings to be accessible and effectively translated into early action. Early warnings often include complex data that can be difficult for policy makers to understand, let alone farmers and communities on the ground. When there are multiple sources of data provided that can vary, this information can be confusing. In addition, regional taskforces are not yet set up with clear roles and responsibilities assigned to know how to respond to these forecasts.

51. <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/wmo-concerned-about-impact-of-covid-19-covid-19-observing-system>

52. [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CA8606EN.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CA8606EN.pdf)

53. Ibid

Finally, lack of funding remains a major issue. Scaling up the forecast-based financing through the development of Early Action Protocols with pre-agreed triggers and risk analysis is urgently needed. Moreover, building adaptive social protection systems that integrate climate information and are shock responsive could help mitigate the impact of crisis on the most vulnerable.

### **Building social protection systems**

Building social protection systems to alleviate poverty and help vulnerable people cope with crisis and shocks should be a priority. These usually include safety nets, social insurance and labour market protection. There are significant links between government-led social protection systems and humanitarian assistance which have grown with the increasing use of humanitarian cash, connecting humanitarian action to development.

The shocks of Covid-19 have led many governments to expand and adapt their social protection measures to address the crisis. A new report from the International Rescue Committee estimates that an additional \$1.7 billion in cash transfers are needed to meet the acute hunger needs caused by the crisis.<sup>54</sup> The linkage of social protection and humanitarian cash is becoming more and more relevant at this time, and Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies and the ICRC have a key role to play.

For example, the Eswatini Red Cross Society has been advocating with the government of Eswatini for several years on the benefits of using cash transfers. Since the end of May, the Government of Eswatini has adopted cash as a modality to support Covid-affected families, reaching over 300,000 people mainly working in the informal sector. This is the first time in Eswatini's history that social protection grants are being delivered through mobile money. However, more needs to be done to build the resilience of these systems, so that they are able to respond to emerging crises and scale-up humanitarian responses, while also recognising the important role of local actors in identifying and targeting vulnerable groups in need.

### **Building economic and livelihoods resilience: The contribution of Cash and Voucher Assistance**

Multi-purpose cash can be the most effective emergency response of government-led shock responsive safety nets in the face of crises such as Covid-19 and food insecurity. As a major complementary component to health and sanitation interventions, the provision of cash or voucher assistance can help to:

- Facilitate ongoing access to key basic services and basic goods including food and protect people's livelihoods and incomes. Early action is key as it can strengthen communities' coping capacity and economic resilience, while also reducing the secondary impacts on vulnerable households from longer-term economic effects.
- Meet basic needs and reduce exposure to exploitation and the use of damaging coping strategies which could have long-lasting effects.
- Protect livelihoods and prevent asset depletion to levels that would undermine the recovery capacity of the household or lead to destitution and food insecurity.
- Kick start markets' functionality and restore availability and access to basic food and livelihoods in contexts where there is lack of demand and markets are unable to adapt to the crisis. It can do so by working with retailers with market-based interventions and vouchers.
- Reduce risk of transmission to staff, volunteers and communities, by using digital payments to deliver help and adapt to each specific context.

The provision of support for livelihoods restoration and diversification through cash grants can help support the recovery of small businesses by replacing stocks, paying utilities and debts, and helping them adapt to new market demands. It can create new income opportunities for women, youth, and those who are unable to resume their former activities and increase employability and skills development through technical, vocational and educational trainings.

CVA can also be used to mitigate the risk of domestic violence, dangerous household coping mechanisms and exposure to exploitation,

54. [rescue-uk.org/report/cost-living-Covid-19-humanitarian-cash-transfers-prevent-hunger-and-hardship?edme=true](https://rescue-uk.org/report/cost-living-Covid-19-humanitarian-cash-transfers-prevent-hunger-and-hardship?edme=true)



including by human traffickers, if the programmes are carefully adapted and target households at risk. Promising practice from the Ebola crisis integrated gender-based violence elements into cash-based assistance programmes. For instance, a USAID / Food for Peace cash transfer in **Sierra Leone** provided sexual exploitation and GBV training to distribution partners, including mobile money agents.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the ICRC, supported by the British Red Cross, have implemented cash grants for survivors of sexual violence in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**. Women-headed households need to be prioritised when implementing cash transfers. It is essential to develop targeted economic strategies to empower women economically as active agents of recovery and change, to mitigate the outbreak's long-term impacts and support them to build resilience for future shocks.<sup>56</sup>

### Engaging communities

Engaging communities experiencing crisis through on-going dialogue, where their needs are listened to and acted upon, is key to effectively tackle humanitarian needs, including food insecurity. Community engagement is also the most effective way to avoid the spread of rumours and misinformation, as shown during the Ebola epidemic. Community engagement can take many forms, including building community awareness and participation; ensuring that issues and concerns among the community are understood and considered as part of the decision-making process; empowering communities to make decisions and implement change; and informing and consulting the community as part of a process to develop government policy. To effectively engage

communities, a locally-led approach is critical to maximising responses to tackle food insecurity during Covid-19. Past humanitarian responses to epidemics show that local actors, who have strong links to and are generally more trusted by communities, are key effective respondents on the ground, as they can reach the most vulnerable and hardest to reach populations. The **Kenya, Zimbabwe** and Eswatini Red Cross' ability to reach populations in need through cash-transfers are great examples of this.

However, to become resilient in the face of crises, small, community-led organisations, women's civil society organisations and community volunteers need support. They must be placed at the centre of decision making on funding and receive flexible long-term funding to respond to the needs identified by them and ensure effective prevention and behavioural change. This also includes support to supply chains and funding for core costs, as well as support to keep local staff and volunteers safe.

55. <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

56. [gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-03/GiHA%20WG%20advocacy%20brief%20final%5B4%5D.pdf](http://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-03/GiHA%20WG%20advocacy%20brief%20final%5B4%5D.pdf)

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