



# VOICES FROM THE GROUND

FROM COVID-19 TO RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF OUR FOOD SYSTEMS

2020 | SHORT POLICY REPORT



## IMPRESSUM

Working Group on Global Food Governance of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM)  
for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).  
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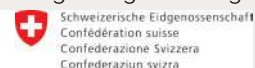
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## Key Messages

- The emergence and devastating impacts of COVID-19 are closely linked to the economic, social and environmental injustices provoked by neoliberal policies and a food system based on intensive, export-oriented agriculture production, global supply chains and market-led food provision, and corporate profit. The COVID-19 crisis cannot be fixed by emergency measures and stimulus packages that perpetuate the same injustices.
- Evidence collected on the ground around the world confirms that the pandemic brought existing inequalities and vulnerabilities into sharp relief and underscored the need for systemic change towards socially just food systems with agency, sustainability and stability at its heart, which CSM members characterise as agroecology and food sovereignty.
- The evidence also shows that few government responses to the pandemic aimed at the realization of human rights or addressed the needs of marginalized communities. They reflect biases against the centrality of peasant production, artisanal fisheries, small-scale herding, gathering/foraging, local food systems and food-agricultural labour in ensuring food security. The most affected peoples include rural and urban working classes, small-scale producers, landless peoples, Indigenous Peoples, women, peoples suffering from racism/discrimination, migrants, youth, refugees, peoples living in areas of war and conflict, and peoples in countries enduring economic blockades.
- Human rights and democracy have been eroded, with abuses of emergency executive powers; the use of force; enhanced surveillance and control of telecommunications, media and press; human and constitutional rights suspended and human rights defenders threatened; lockdowns, curfews, physical distancing and emergency measures harshly enforced through armed police and military, leading to arrests, violence and death.
- Communities' responses have fostered values of solidarity, resilience, sustainability and human dignity. In some cases authorities have dialogued with people's movements and taken their proposals on board. However, official policy, financial support and stimulus measures have mostly favoured corporations, large producers and global supply chains ensuring them the capital and work-force they need to keep operations running. This came at the expense of local food systems, creating hardships and deepening food insecurity. These two approaches cannot co-exist.
- The primacy of public policies over market and corporation-led responses is a precondition to support a radical transformation of food systems, realize the right to adequate food and put food sovereignty into practice.
- Putting the food sovereignty vision into practice in this crisis highlights the essential role that agroecology and territorial food systems, small-scale food producers and family farmers (mostly women) and workers play in feeding the majority of the population in a resilient way, in particular those most affected.
- More than any other international governance space, the CFS is the only forum which can ensure that all actors affected by the crisis can autonomously and legitimately organize to co-construct a global response, for which governments hold the primary responsibility.

"We cannot go back to normal. We need to democratize and socialize our food system. We need agroecology, we need to produce and consume locally and, at the same time, demand global climate justice. We cannot depend on agribusiness to feed ourselves. This is the time for the world to recognize the role of local food production and also the role of women in agriculture, since 60% of food production is carried out by women." World March of Women, Africa

We, as Youth, are the future custodians of our food systems and territories. In order to respond to COVID-19 and the other numerous ongoing crises, as well as to realize our human rights, we must radically transform our food systems, including reconfiguring whose rights are prioritized by our governance models and whose voices lead the way. Youth must be the cornerstone of any public policy on food security and nutrition, agriculture or the food system more broadly.

*(Youth declaration)*



## Introduction

This report presents the experiences and concerns of millions of small-scale food producers, workers, consumers, women and youth represented in the organizations that participate in the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM)<sup>1</sup>.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swung from country to country in its deadly course this year, the members of the CSM Coordination Committee gathered virtually to discuss how it was affecting their communities and regions. From these discussions emerged the conviction that addressing the pandemic and its implications should be at the center of discourse and action not only in the CSM, but in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as a whole. It would be inconceivable for the CFS to fail to assume its responsibility in the face of the worst food-affecting phenomenon to strike humanity since the 2007-2008 crisis that sparked its reform. The World Food Programme (WFP) warns that COVID-19 could almost double the number of people suffering from acute hunger, pushing it to more than a quarter of a billion by the end of 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, over the past months the CSM has advocated that the CFS exercise all of its agreed functions in addressing COVID-19, including that of policy convergence. The cogency of this position has become increasingly apparent as the weeks have passed, bringing evidence that COVID-19 is not a passing episode, but a manifestation and harbinger of deeply-rooted challenges, that globalized food supply systems are subject to multiple fragilities and generate deep and often fatal inequalities, and that a coordinated and coherent global response adhering to agreed prin-

ciples and guidelines has never been more indispensable.

The present report is intended as a contribution to meeting this challenge. The methodology adopted for its preparation has been inclusive and participatory. All CSM Coordination Committee members were asked to reach out to the constituencies and regions they facilitate, responding to three questions: 1) What impacts is COVID-19 having on food systems, food security and the right to food? 2) How are communities, solidarity movements, constituencies reacting to these impacts? 3) What public policy proposals are emerging for building more equitable and resilient food systems? The Women's and Youth Working Groups of the CSM have made dedicated contributions from the viewpoints of their constituencies elaborating, respectively, a women's autonomous report and a youth declaration. The hundreds of inputs received have been synthesized into the present report and live links provided to longer documents. Video recordings have been inserted where possible in order to provide readers with the possibility of obtaining more detail and direct testimony. The diversity of style of the sections testifies to the fact that they have been authored by different groups in different places.

The report is structured as follows:

- The **premise** sets the context by identifying the multiple, interlinked preexisting structural problems which the pandemic has only exacerbated and rendered more visible.
- The **main section** presents evidence and analysis from the ground, organized according to the different constituencies and regions whose participation in the CFS is facilitated by the CSM. It illustrates the richness of evidence contributed by those most affected, which constitute important contributions, alongside of science-based evidence and macro-economic statistics, in considering policy choices. This section is

<sup>1</sup> The CSM is articulated into the 11 constituencies enumerated in the CFS reform document (smallholder family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, herders/pastoralists, landless, urban poor, agricultural and food workers, women, youth, consumers, Indigenous Peoples, and International NGOs) and 17 sub-regions.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>



not included in the shorter version of our report. We urge all readers to consult it [here](#).

- The **concluding section** draws key themes and lessons from the evidence and demonstrates why it is incumbent on the CFS to play a leading role in developing a global policy response to COVID-19 in the direction of a radical transformation of our food system, as urged by the HLPE in its *Global Narrative* report.

## 1. Preamble - Understanding COVID-19 in the context of food systems transformation

The CSM stands in solidarity with all those whose lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The heavy toll on human life continues to be profoundly shocking. Several months after the start of the pandemic, it is clear that the emergence, spread and devastating impacts of the pandemic exacerbate existing and avertable systemic injustices. As grassroots movements we have witnessed that how we build, organize and govern our food systems determine and shape these injustices. Therefore they determine the impacts of COVID-19 including who can and cannot meet their basic needs, who lives and who dies. The FAO is predicting an impending food crisis, but for many it is already a reality.

## Interconnected planetary, food system and human health

Food systems transformation was imperative even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, with two billion facing food insecurity<sup>3</sup>, increased distress migration<sup>4</sup>, rising diet-related ill health, children across the world - even in the richest countries - one school meal away from food

<sup>3</sup> The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World, FAO, 2020 [http://www.fao.org/3/cag692en/online/cag692en.html#chapter-Key\\_message](http://www.fao.org/3/cag692en/online/cag692en.html#chapter-Key_message)

<sup>4</sup> Conflict, Migration and Food Security, FAO 2017 <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7896e.pdf>

insecurity, workers paid poverty wages, countries extremely dependent on international markets to feed their populations, the continuing destruction of ecosystems by industrial food chains<sup>5</sup>, gender violence and lack of access and control over natural resources for women. Deforestation from industrial farming, mining and infrastructure, factory farming of animals as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people. The pandemic has now brought all these existing inequalities and vulnerabilities into sharp relief – deepening their reach and combining them with new ones. It has underscored the need for systemic change towards socially just food systems with agency, sustainability and stability at its heart, which CSM members characterise as agroecology and food sovereignty.

## Market failure and the erosion of public policies

Decades of neoliberal policies, reducing the role of the state and privileging a market-led food system, have led to the dismantling of public policies and regulation, prioritized commodity exports, food corporations' profits and global markets over small-scale producers, local food systems and food sovereignty. This market-driven paradigm has proven to be a critical pre-existing systemic weakness. It has resulted in decades of official neglect of the public realm integral to building robust health, welfare and food systems, environmental jus-

<sup>5</sup> The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Chapter 5, 2019 <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>





tice, gender justice and fundamental human rights, especially the Right to Food. Now its long supply chains have demonstrated considerable fragilities under COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> COVID-19 is just the latest in a series of infectious diseases and crises linked to the industrial food system and it won't be the last.<sup>7</sup>

## Layers of inequality

Between 83 and 180 million more will be pushed into hunger because of the pandemic<sup>8</sup>. The most affected peoples are those with no social protection, insecure livelihoods, and reduced access to and control over resources. These include rural and urban working classes, small-scale producers, landless peoples, Indigenous Peoples, women, peoples suffering from racism/discrimination, migrants, refugees, peoples living in areas of war and conflict, and peoples in countries enduring economic blockades. These groups face existing inequalities, exacerbated by neoliberalism, such as lack of access to healthcare, water and sanitation, increased co-morbidities and many other structural injustices that increase their vulnerability to COVID-19.

6 Impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition: developing effective policy responses to address the hunger and malnutrition pandemic, HLPE issues paper Sept 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1000en/cb1000en.pdf>

7 Coronavirus outbreak highlights need to address threats to ecosystems and wildlife UNEP 2020 <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/coronavirus-outbreak-highlights-need-address-threats-ecosystems-and-wildlife>

8 The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World, FAO, 2020 [http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/online/ca9692en.html#chapter-Key\\_message](http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/online/ca9692en.html#chapter-Key_message)



## The necessity and opportunity for food systems transformation

During the 2008 food price crisis, our movements - along with many scientists and academics - declared that we could not afford to go back to business as usual. Yet over a decade later it is clear that we have done just that, with damaging consequences. The global food system is even more fragile today with increased corporate concentration and control<sup>9</sup>, financialization<sup>10</sup>, destruction of ecosystems, markets that serve the interests of profit rather than food security. Food stocks are at record highs<sup>11</sup> and eight of the biggest food and drink companies paid out over \$18 billion to shareholders since January 2020<sup>12</sup>. Yet the fixation with productivity or 'sustainable intensification' accompanied by technologically advanced free markets continues to reign in many multi-lateral spaces and national contexts, even as a response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Human, food system and planetary health are intimately connected as indigenous peoples and small-scale food producers know, and as the framework of food systems transformation towards agroecology and food sovereignty elaborates. For example the diversity inherent in small scale agroecological systems has been shown to provide resilience to natural as well as socio-economic difficulties, healthy crops animals, diets and ecosystems all of which are a counter to COVID-19.<sup>13 14 15</sup> In this

9 Too big to feed, IPES food 2017, [http://www.ipes-food.org/\\_img/upload/files/Concentration\\_FullReport.pdf](http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/Concentration_FullReport.pdf)

10 Barbarians at the barn: private equity sinks its teeth into agriculture, GRAIN Sept 2020 <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6533-barbarians-at-the-barn-private-equity-sinks-its-teeth-into-agriculture>

11 World Food Situation, FAO 2020 <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/csdb/en/>

12 The Hunger Virus: how covid-19 is fuelling hunger in a hungry world, Oxfam July 2020 <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621023/mb-the-hunger-virus-090720-en.pdf>

13 The State of the World Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, FAO, 2019 <http://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/CA3129EN.pdf>

14 Agroecological and other innovative approaches, HLPE, 2019 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

15 The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Chapter 5, 2019 <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>



crisis territorial food systems, not structurally dependant on long supply chains, have been resilient.–They have shown flexibility and innovation. In many cases the actors of these territorial systems have provided welfare and social protection that is the responsibility of the state. However, small-scale producers have been hit hard by COVID-19 and lockdowns and face huge challenges to continue feeding their communities in the future.<sup>16</sup>

All the issues raised and evidence provided in this report come from grassroots experiences but their causes and impacts go far beyond national borders. Responses to this pandemic must not perpetuate historical and existing inequalities and power asymmetries within and between countries.

It is urgent for the CFS to take concerted, global, coordinated action to provide guidance, policy coherence and coordination for the indispensable transformation of our food systems and realization of the Right to Food. As we face the Covid-19 crisis we must aim for a 'Just Recovery' – one that puts justice, human rights and the need of the peoples, especially the most marginalized, and of the planet at its heart.

<sup>16</sup> COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems, FAO 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1020en/CB1020EN.pdf>

## 2. Conclusions

### 2.1 Lessons from our constituencies and regions

We stated in the Premise that the COVID-19 crisis must be understood within a whole food systems framework. The testimonies and analyses across all constituencies and regions corroborate the layers of systemic injustices and interconnected vulnerabilities that must be tackled to find our way out of this crisis. In particular, the emergence and devastating impacts of COVID-19 are closely linked to the economic, social and environmental injustices of neoliberal policies and a food system based on intensive, export-oriented agriculture production, global supply chains, market-led food provision, and corporate profit. At country and regional levels, once again we see historical policy choices towards neoliberalism shaping impacts on food systems. The rise of market-based and privatized provision of public goods have baked inequalities into society on which COVID has acted. The COVID-19 crisis cannot be fixed by emergency measures and stimulus packages that perpetuate the same model. It will require a deep reconsideration of the ecological, economic and social conditions and relations inherent in the current sys-





tem. It makes the need for a transformation of the food system towards food sovereignty, agroecology, based on human rights and justice more urgent than ever.

'Never in our lives, never in the history of this region have we experienced such an accumulation of serious, deep, interconnected crises. We need structural solutions!' Ibrahima Coulibaly, President of the West African Network of Peasant and Agricultural Producers Organizations - [ROPPA](#).

## Structural inequalities determine COVID-19 impacts

Communities' and peoples' existing exposures to injustices have been strong markers for how acutely they are affected by the COVID-19 crises. Historical discrimination and unfavourable policies have resulted in lack of decent, safe and dignified living conditions for millions. Unjust socio-economic conditions have increased peoples' vulnerability and exposure to COVID-19. Many peoples were unable to lockdown as they were dependant on daily wages, and have neither the financial reserves, nor adequate social protection or state support systems to draw on in times of crises.

Those most deeply affected by the pandemic are those in our constituencies: women, youth, refugees and migrants, workers and small-scale food producers, landless peoples, urban food insecure, and indigenous peoples.

Small-scale food producers are overall reporting an increase in cases of expropriation of land and water resources, assassination of social leaders, as well as domestic violence against women. They are facing an increase in social conflicts related to natural resources tenure due to historical dispossession and territorial grabbing. The fact that pastoralists are not allowed to follow their normal seasonal movements is re-igniting conflicts with agriculturalists that had been overcome in the past years.

Our workers constituency point out "*Agricultural food workers are considered essential and are treated as expendable*". Most of them have historically bad labour conditions, low wages, are not entitled to social protection and often exposed to sexual harassment and gender discrimination. Many of these workers are also migrants, unable to lockdown at home because they are dependent on daily wages, too far from their home regions and countries, or were forced back into work by employers in unsafe and unfair conditions. COVID-19 has revealed that the so-called competitiveness of the industrial agriculture model is built on hardship, high flexibility of labour, low wages and substandard working conditions as well as environmental and health risks. The structural causes of migration, too, are linked to precariousness of peasant livelihoods created by neoliberal policies and historical injustices such as colonization and persisting social hierarchies.

COVID-19 is also tearing through indigenous populations due to historical marginalization in terms of access to healthcare, and lack of recognition of their rights, and systems of life and livelihoods. One example is indigenous peoples' fight for their Right to Water. Whether due to the lack of access to drinking water and sanitation services, to contamination from polluting industries, the dispossession of their territories, or the expansion of industrial food production, this lack of the fulfilment of their rights has increased their risks to COVID-19. Historical comorbidities in indigenous (and many other marginalized) populations caused by





ultra-processed foods has also been reflected in the higher COVID-19 numbers. Indigenous peoples are custodians of the biodiversity that sustains life and protects us from infectious pathogens, yet their lives are most at risk from industrial plantations, which are also a cause of the current crises.

The UN Secretary General has warned that the COVID-19 crisis has reversed “decades of limited and fragile progress on gender equality and women's rights”<sup>17</sup>. Women's responsibility for care and social reproductive work, as well as the pre-existing patriarchal power asymmetries resulting in economic, political, cultural and social oppression, has dramatically increased their vulnerability. COVID-19 is exposing the magnitude of the care crisis in our societies: a crisis that has developed over centuries through the failure of the current system to care for peoples, nature and territories, and its reliance on the work of women to make up for and fix the damage. Through the sexual division of labour, women have been and continue to be socially responsible for care work in their homes and communities. Women and girls are the majority of food producers and

<sup>17</sup> Generations of progress for women and girls could be lost to COVID pandemic, UN chief warns, August 2020 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1071372>

providers for their households, they are the majority of nurses and social workers, teachers and food workers. Yet, they have been consistently overlooked in research and responses to the pandemic.

Front-line health and care workers are facing even greater exposure with inadequate financial compensation for the risks they take and poor or absent protective gear. The dramatic rates' raise of gender violence and violence against women during the crisis is rooted in these systems.<sup>18</sup>

Where data is available - including in the North American section of our report - it shows that some black and ethnic minority populations are disproportionately affected. They have a death rate of nearly double their white counterparts.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>The causes are not genetic, rea-

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.tni.org/en/feminist-realities>

<sup>19</sup> COVID-19: understanding the impact on BAME communities, Public health England, 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-understanding-the-impact-on-bame-communities>

<sup>20</sup> The Color of Coronavirus: Covid-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S, APM research lab 2020 <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>





sons include high rates of so-called co-morbidities, poverty, and systemic racism.<sup>21</sup>

For communities already experiencing protracted crises — such as armed conflict, occupation natural disasters, and financial crisis — the pandemic is compounding the already difficult challenges they face in securing livelihoods and access to food. Many countries in crisis have also become host to large numbers of refugees from other fragile countries, adding to the numbers of the most vulnerable and marginalized people in their care.

Young people have been hugely impacted by the ensuing economic crisis – seeing their opportunities and futures fading away. They face job losses, no provision of social protection, loss of education and an increase in care-giving roles. Youth relying on school meals have had to go without, impacting their right to food and nutrition. COVID-19's exacerbation of existing unaddressed crises and problems is pushing more young people towards desperate routes of migration or enrolment in terrorist bands. COVID-19 has exacerbated the digital divide. Many without the technology such as computers or smartphones, or who lack access to internet at home, will be unable to continue their education.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.csp.org.uk/news/2020-06-16-phe-report-bame-covid-19-deaths-must-lead-change-says-csp>

## Learning from governmental responses

As the pandemic unfolded across the world, governments responded in varying ways, initially to prevent and/or contain the spread of the virus and limit the severity of disease and mortality, and then to address the social and economic impacts arising from pandemic containment measures. While containment measures were necessary, the way in which they have been applied has too often exacerbated food insecurity. Noticeably few responses were comprehensively aimed at the realization of human rights or centred on the needs of marginalized communities. On the contrary, grassroots reports show that official responses most often reflected siloed approaches, lack of preparedness and coordination. There was also insufficient international cooperation to address the factors leading to the emergence and devastating spread of COVID-19, as well as to respond adequately to short-term needs and long-term recovery.

### ***COVID-19 responses deepen inequalities***

Many countries imposed nationwide and/or area-based lockdowns and curfews without considering their impact on already marginalized peoples and putting in place remedial accompanying measures. For example restrictions on public transportation and movement of goods; and closures of territorial and wet markets and street vending. These measures disproportionately affected the livelihoods, jobs, incomes, and access to food, basic necessities and healthcare, of small-scale food





producers, casual and formal sector workers, migrants, refugees, informal processors and vendors, and other low-income consumers, who have neither the financial reserves, nor adequate support systems to draw on in times of crises.

Although governments recognized food and agriculture as essential services, pandemic containment measures reflect biases against the centrality of peasant production, artisanal fisheries, small-scale herding, gathering/foraging, local food systems and food-agricultural labour in ensuring food security. The particular conditions and needs of indigenous peoples, women food producers and workers, and young people were not reflected in containment and policy measures. Many food and agricultural workers did not receive even the most basic health and safety measures to combat the coronavirus, and their internationally recognised rights to living wages, healthcare, workplace safety, social protection, paid leave and collective bargaining continue to be denied across the world. Relief for rural and urban poor families, refugees and migrants was and remains difficult to access because of complicated bureaucratic requirements and corruption.

### ***Government support and stimulus favour industrial systems***

Official policy, financial support and stimulus measures have mostly favoured corporations, large producers and global supply chains ensuring them the capital and work-force they need to keep operations running. This came at the expense of local food systems, creat-

ing hardships and deepening food insecurity for large proportions of the population. What support has been made available for marginalized and vulnerable groups does not address household debt and the capital needed for future production and livelihood activities, deepening economic uncertainty and vulnerability for small-scale food providers.

Evidence from all regions indicates that supermarkets and online retail have been privileged over rural and wet markets and small-scale, local, informal retail on which majority of the population depend for access to affordable and nutritious food. Rather than adapting food supply and demand changes through short supply chains and prioritizing public procurement of the produce of small-scale producers, many policies have privileged private procurement and storage, maintaining downward pressure on the incomes of small-scale producers. Amendments to agricultural laws/regulations are undermining public procurement from small-scale producers and assurances of fair, remunerative prices for their produce.

Further, the erroneous association of local wet markets with health risks has threatened to push consumers towards digital retail and ultra-processed foods, jeopardizing the live-





lihoods and health of millions. Corporations have taken advantage of pandemic related fears and restrictions to increase market share and profits by donating ultra-processed foods for food aid and to needy communities, and marketing themselves as socially responsible actors essential to economic recovery.

'We have documented many cases of ultra-processed food companies donating unhealthy foods to mainly indigenous, rural communities, even though it is known that poor nutritional status and its consequences (obesity and diabetes) make immune systems more prone to the effects of COVID. We have noted formula companies marketing and promoting their brands by offering vulnerable communities one can of 'donated' formula for every can purchased.'

*El poder del consumidor, Mexico*

'The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the limits of the European food system : its long supply chains, dependency on migrant labor forces, excessive power concentration, export dependency, putting in stark contrast the vested interests of the corporate sector and the failures to feed adequately its population and preserve the planet' ([ECVC](#)).

### ***Emergency measures fail to provide for migrants and refugees***

People identified as stateless, non-citizens and foreign migrants have not been eligible for government organized food, health and other relief programmes, and have faced stringent restrictions and social discrimination in attempts to meet food and income needs. Lock-downs in camp-based and urban refugee situations have made it difficult for humanitarian agencies to reach these communities.

### ***Lack of international policy cooperation***

Importantly, Government responses were and continue to be shaped by historical economic and social disparities within and among countries.

Now developing countries face a new spectre of capital flight, large loans with conditionality leading to higher debt, and impending structural adjustment policies. Such conditionalities have adverse effects on populations' health because they include ill-designed policy measures such as budget cuts, reducing the number and wages of health and social workers, weakening workforce protections, or promoting privatisation. This is in addition to existing





debt servicing payments. Developed countries have ploughed billions into stimulus packages, which our evidence indicates are heading in the wrong direction. It is clear that developing countries will also need to invest resources for recovery. All stimulus and bailout packages need to be aimed at supporting those that need them the most, including local food producers and local food economies rather than large players in the industrial food chains. This will require international cooperation for actions such as debt cancellation, unconditional loans and tax justice.

### ***Erosion of Human rights and Democracy***

In April, the UN warned that *“against the backdrop of rising ethno-nationalism, populism, authoritarianism and pushback against human rights in some countries, the crisis can provide a pretext to adopt repressive measures for purposes unrelated to the pandemic”*<sup>22</sup> This has unfortunately borne true. Around 78<sup>23</sup> governments have invoked emergency powers—in the name of controlling the pandemic—that allow them control over all aspects of governance and security with no democratic oversight. While the fine print may vary across countries, these emergency powers enable governments to put in place measures con-

sidered necessary in a state of emergency, including full control over financial allocations; power to authorize the use of force; enhanced surveillance and control of telecommunications, media and press; suspensions of human and constitutional rights; and the authority to determine the period of emergency.

In many countries, lockdowns, curfews, physical distancing and emergency measures have been harshly enforced through armed police and military, leading to arrests, violence and death. On the pretext of stimulating economic recovery, the expropriation of forests, land and water resources for industry continue unabated, environmental and labour protection laws have been weakened, and neoliberal policy reforms that favour corporations have been pushed through with limited democratic process and virtually no public participation. Human rights defenders at all levels face heightened risks of criminalization, violence and assassination, with courts and judicial processes suspended under the COVID-19 emergency. In some countries, repressive measures and disinformation have targeted refugees, low-income migrants and those of particular races, religions and ethnicities, leading to social discrimination and conflicts.

Regretfully, governments have not used these

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, COVID-19 and Human Rights, We are all together, April 2020, p. 3

<sup>23</sup> States of Emergencies in Response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CCPR <https://datastudio.google.com/u/o/reporting/1sHT8quopdfavCvSDk7t-zvqKISoLjiuo/page/dHMKB>





emergency powers to invest in the necessary infrastructure to address the root causes of the pandemic, co-morbidity, and the resulting social-economic crises.

'Despite the COVID-19 crisis, municipal corporations and other agencies in India continue to evict so-called 'encroachers' from the public places. The police and administration showed no respect for basic norms and practices in doing so. On the one hand we are asking people to stay in and the other side demolishing their homes despite the fact that United Nations Human rights Commission and UN Housing Rights Rapporteur have categorically asked governments to put a complete moratorium on evictions and displacement.'

*CSM landless constituency.*

## What worked effectively to tackle the pandemic, hunger, poverty?

### ***Emergency actions from the constituencies and regions***

The most effective initiatives to address the COVID crises have largely come from people themselves, acting with diverse organized communities and sectors at multiple levels, including responsive government bodies and public authorities. Across the world, organ-

isations and networks of small-scale food producers, women, consumers, workers and others have conducted campaigns to prevent contagion; protect agricultural and food workers (especially migrants); ensure food and economic security; halt evictions, land-grabbing and environmental destruction; and stop violence against and criminalization of movement leaders and human rights defenders. They have mobilized and supported the distribution of food parcels, cooked meals, delivered basic necessities, health protection materials, seeds, production inputs and other livelihood supports for vulnerable families and communities in their own countries as well as in other countries and regions. They have established safe shelters for migrant workers, refugees, women at risk of domestic violence and social discrimination, and social groups/communities discriminated against on the basis of their citizenship status, religion, ethnicity, race and caste. Indigenous peoples have generated their own sanitary and pandemic control initiatives, combining ancestral knowledge and practices, traditional medicine and materials provided by public authorities. They have put in place distancing and isolation measures, while taking care to ensure local healthy and safe food systems, and strengthening mechanisms of solidarity and traditional reciprocity.

### ***Innovations from territorial food systems***

In every region, family farmers, fishers and consumer organisations have created and strengthened direct connections through community supported agriculture (CSAs), community supported fisheries, direct deliveries to households, expansion of food cooperatives and social programmes. Where possible producers have used online platforms to market their produce directly, although the required technologies and infrastructure are not available or accessible to majority of small-scale producers in the global South. An explosion of community-based solidarity and mutual aid schemes from soup kitchens to CSAs and community clinics have helped to





plug the gaps of hunger and poverty<sup>24</sup>. Small-scale food producers have joined forces with workers unions and civil society organisations to assert peoples' rights to livelihoods, safe and healthy food, land, housing, health, social protection, living wages and safe working conditions. Across constituencies and regions, organizations and networks have gone beyond immediate reactions to reflect on the paradigm and policy changes that are needed in the mid and long-term. These are documented in the conclusions of their inputs to the main body of this report.

### ***Some Encouraging actions by governments show the way forward***

In a number of cases government bodies have entered into dialogue with small-scale food producers and civil society organizations and have taken their proposals on board, for example in South Africa, Senegal, Benin, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand and the state of Kerala in India. A few governments' policy responses have shown that it is possible to move quickly to support the most vulnerable and implement Rights-based public policy for food systems, welfare and protection. These include creating shelters for the homeless, universal basic incomes, cash transfers within weeks.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>26</sup> In Europe, the European Commission's Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies for transforming Europe's food system to make it fair, healthy, and environmental-friendly, are cause for hope.

In general, local, municipal and subnational government bodies are observed to be more responsive to address the impacts of COVID-19 for more marginalized sections of their population since they tend to be more aware of ground realities than those in national capitals.

<sup>24</sup> COVID-19 and the role of local food production in building more resilient local food systems, FAO 2020 <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1020en/CB1020EN.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/spains-new-minimum-income-scheme-a-victory-and-a-historic-failure/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/11/coronavirus-homelessness-uk-rough-sleepers-lock-down-tories>

## **2.2 Ways forward towards more equitable and resilient food systems**

### **Break from the neoliberal policy orientation**

Evidence and testimonies from across the world collated in our report reveal that although governments and institutions use the narrative of "build back better", their policies feature more support for neoliberal policies, global markets, big corporations and pro-corporate digitalization and new technologies. In the best cases, there is some emergency support and safety nets for those at the margins.

This response will not address either the urgent needs or the structural failures of our food systems. Impacts around the world have demonstrated that industrial global supply chains backed by neoliberal policies are dependent on the extraction and exploitation of people and the planet. They have wreaked economic, financial, environmental and social damage, deepened climate change and inequalities. They have weakened local and regional food systems and reduced countries' self-sufficiency in food. All of this has rendered many more people vulnerable to pandemics and resultant crises.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, communities' responses have fostered values of community, solidarity, resilience, sustainability and human dignity. These two approaches cannot co-exist. ***We call for a paradigm shift that reclaims food systems as public commons for the well-being of people and the planet, based on the centrality of human rights, that puts food sovereignty into practice, recognizes the primacy of public policies and strengthens a genuinely inclusive, democratic and coherent model of governance to realize the right to adequate food for all, now and in the future.***

<sup>27</sup> <https://focusweb.org/why-the-covid-19-crisis-tells-us-that-food-sovereignty-is-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/>



## The need for human rights-based COVID-19 responses

Evidence in our report from agricultural workers and migrants, peasants, fisherfolks, indigenous peoples, women, youth, landless, urban poor, consumers, pastoralists, people in protracted crises has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic and many policy responses to it are intensifying ongoing human rights violations. They are impacting people's access to adequate food, health, decent work and incomes and shelter. The current situation requires urgent action to contain the pandemic, and to prevent further exclusion and social injustice. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, 'human rights are key in shaping the pandemic response'. They focus the attention on who is suffering most, why, and what can be done about it. Putting human dignity at the centre, they ensure that the responses to the crisis will address critical systemic causal factors and lead to equitable and sustainable societies<sup>28</sup>. States have the obligation to respect, protect and promote the human right to food and nutrition and all related human rights in all decisions and measures they take to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes practicing human rights principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and rule of law.

Democratic oversight and control over COVID-19 measures such as consultations and parliamentary legislative process, must be ensured. Adequate participation, public scrutiny and accountability mechanisms need to be put in place, while taking into account the constraints of the current crisis. Emergency powers that many governments assumed at the onset of the pandemic must be terminated and executive power must be made accountable to democratic bodies and the public. The criminalization of and violence against community leaders, indigenous peoples, workers, migrants lawyers, journalists and other human

rights advocates must end and justice systems must be restored to ensure due process for everyone, regardless of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, religion, race, caste and gender.

Directions for integrating human rights into recovery efforts are present in numerous other international conventions, declarations and standards. Of particular relevance to the present context are the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas; the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; ILO core labour standards and guidance on work in the COVID-19 pandemic; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Right to Health; the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Small-Scale Fisheries; and several CFS policy decisions.

The HLPE states that "At a foundational level, food system transformation requires states and other food system actors to take much stronger measures to uphold the right to food and other human rights. (...) Foundational work on women's empowerment has emphasized the need for the simultaneous access to resources, the exercise of agency and the achievement of wellbeing outcomes in measuring women's empowerment. (...) Youth similarly require more support and agency in food systems."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9731en/ca9731en.pdf>, p 41-42



<sup>28</sup> COVID and Human rights: We are all in this together.



## Putting Food Sovereignty into practice

The vision of food sovereignty asserts the rights of all peoples, nations and states to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems, and to develop policies on how food is produced, distributed and consumed in order to provide everyone with affordable, nutritious, healthy and culturally appropriate food. It emphasizes the democratic control and management of natural resources and local development, ecologically sound and sustainable production methods and social justice. It is a vision rooted in practice and action that invites peoples to exercise their agency and capacity to organize and improve their conditions and societies together, as well as their ability to regain self-reliance and assert food autonomy. As such, it represents the widest framework for exercising the right to food and nutrition and connected human rights (such as the rights of women, of workers, of Indigenous Peoples, of peasants and other people working in rural areas, and of consumers).<sup>30</sup>

Putting the food sovereignty vision into practice in this crisis highlights the essential role that territorial food systems, small-scale food producers and family farmers (mostly women) and food system workers play in feeding the majority of the population in a resilient way, in particular those most affected. Support needs to be directed to maintaining their capacity to produce and provide healthy and nutritious food. Some examples of positive responses cited in our report include: supporting agroecological production, social economies and protection, cooperative marketing, short circuits and supply chains, and ensuring safe working environments and the adequate functioning of territorial food markets, as well as other means of provision of food produced by local, small-scale food producers, including through public procurements.

Prominent proposals for systemic change are

<sup>30</sup> See the Declaration of Nueleni. . <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>

agroecology and relocalization of food systems. Agroecology is a way of producing food, a way of life, a science, and a movement for change encompassing socio-economic, socio-political, and biological/ecological and cultural dimensions. While agroecology embraces the ancestral production systems developed over millennia by small-scale food producers and consumers, it is a living concept that continues to evolve as it is adapted to diverse realities. It provides a holistic understanding of our place in natural cycles, and how food systems must adapt to and restore the biocultural systems on which they depend. Agroecology goes well beyond agricultural production to embrace the entire food system, and calls for paradigm shifts on multiple fronts, including in research, food processing and distribution, consumption and policy-making related to all these aspects. The CFS's work on 'Connecting smallholders to markets' has broken ground in this direction by affirming the importance of territorial markets, which channel 80% of the food consumed in the world, and formulating a set of policy recommendations directed at reinforcing them.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> a-bq853e.pdf. See also <http://www.csm4cfs.org/connecting-smallholders-markets-analytical-guide/>.





## Reaffirm the primacy of the public sphere

States must play a strong role to champion the public interests related to our food systems. The primacy of public policies over market and corporation-led responses is a precondition to support a radical transformation of food systems, realize the right to adequate food and put food sovereignty into practice. Food is not a commodity but a human right, intrinsically linked to all human rights, and to the commons shaped by diverse peoples across the world.

As suggested in the policy recommendations documented in our report, national and global recovery strategies must direct public policies to boost the productive capacity of smallholders for the coming season, reduce dependency on food imports, and strengthen the resilience of small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, workers, women and youth in rural and urban areas. They must adopt social protection mechanisms for marginalized and vulnerable groups, including distribution of food produced by local small-scale food producers and basic income programs. The human rights of workers such as the right to collective bargaining, social protection and safe workplaces need to be integrated into public policies as a matter of urgency. All responses need to have a gender perspective that effectively address the different forms of discrimination and violence which women face, as detailed in the [key policy measures recommended in the autonomous report of the CSM Women's Working Group](#). Targeted policy responses for youth are also required, as spelled out in the [autonomous Declaration of the CSM Youth Working Group](#).

The current pandemic is also a key opportunity to put in place public policies that fundamentally change the way in which our societies are organized and the economic system by which they operate. We need strong regulations to ensure food systems offer decent livelihood opportunities, support regenerative and resilient production-to-distribution net-

works and provide access to healthy and nutritious food for all. Public sector measures are needed to reduce social, economic and power inequalities in food systems and dismantle power concentration in agro-industrial supply chains. Public investments in building and strengthening public infrastructure for public health, goods, services, welfare and territorial markets needed to be upscaled. Democratic space needs to be strengthened by ensuring that rights-holders can hold public authorities accountable for ensuring respect and legal guarantees for the realization of human rights and the respect of international engagements.

While regional and international trade can play an important role in the short term to prevent hunger and food-related conflicts, it must be subject to enforceable regulation that upholds the public interest. States must reaffirm their sovereign regulatory role over markets, including through stopping food-related speculation and derivatives, regulating prices, public procurements, public storage and market regulation, secure land and resource rights, enforced labour inspections and mandatory environmental laws.

"We cannot go back to normal. We must demand public health, education, all the basic services to which we are entitled, which are public. We need to democratize and socialize our food system. We need agroecology, we need to produce and consume locally and, at the same time, demand global climate justice. We cannot depend on agribusiness to feed ourselves. This is the time for the world to recognize the role of local food production and also the role of women in agriculture, since 60% of food production is carried out by women."

[World March of Women](#), Africa



## Strengthen food governance

As this report shows, knowledge, evidence and experience from the ground should be an indispensable contribution to framing policies. Small-scale producers, family farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, consumers and urban populations know their conditions and have pertinent policy proposals to advance. They have been at the forefront of innovative solutions building on peoples' knowledge to feed their communities during the pandemic, and many of these can be scaled up and out with appropriate backing. The report also demonstrates how local movements have been monitoring impacts at the grassroots levels constantly since the start of the pandemic but that their voices are hardly heard in many other national and international governance spaces.

Governance in a human rights framework, at all global levels, implies that all necessary measures to ensure rights-holders' agency are taken. It calls on authorities to ensure that right to food strategies and policies are developed, implemented and monitored through inclusive processes that ensure the participation of women and other concerned groups, and that they facilitate sound consumers' choices<sup>32</sup>.

Global policy coherence and accountability are key to the governance of our food systems. States must ensure that their actions do not cause foreseeable harm beyond their borders, nor hamper the ability of other countries to honor their human rights obligations. It requires States to uphold their obligation- individually and as members of international organizations and international financial institutions - to cooperate in order to safeguard the rights of those most at risk and to guarantee an enabling environment for human rights during the current crisis, instead of acting solely based on their own national interests.

Proposals advanced in our report include relieving the debt of all low and middle-income

32 FAO, 2005, Right to food Guidelines 3, 8, 9 and 11

countries to enable them to mobilize "maximum available resources" to protect those at risk during the pandemic, ending economic sanctions which impede states from protecting and fulfilling the human rights of their population, enhancing policy space for import-dependant countries and removing food governance from WTO and trade agreements and relocating it at the CFS.

## 2.3 A CFS-led Global Policy Response to COVID-19

### Why is a global policy response needed?

Past experience teaches us that a food crisis in this globalized world cannot be addressed in the absence of a coordinated global policy response. This was clearly acknowledged in the 2011 HLPE report on '[Price volatility and food security](#)', which recommended global coordination measures to counter the key causes of the 2008 crisis.<sup>33</sup> The structural factors that render food systems extremely vulnerable to such shocks are largely constituted in the international sphere. Their nature is well-known, yet little action has been taken to remedy them. The 2020 HLPE '[Building a global narrative towards 2030](#)' cautions us that 'the urgent and worsening FSN situation due to the COVID-19 crisis is a wake-up call to address the multiple complex challenges facing food systems.'<sup>34</sup> We are well advised this time: without a multilateral global policy response these vulnerabilities will continue to generate crises.

### Why is it needed now?

The evidence from the ground presented in this report amply documents the heavy impact that COVID-19 is already having on the local food systems that ensure the food security and livelihoods of most of the world's

33 Specifically: multilateral rules that take into account special needs of poor and vulnerable countries, international cooperation regarding world food stocks; promotion of transparency in futures markets and tighter regulation of speculation.

34 HLPE (2020), pg.xviii.



population, including the most vulnerable. The pandemic is threatening democratic and participatory processes that are the best guarantee of peace and justice. It is endangering the attainment of international human rights obligations and engagements, including the SDGs. Impacts over the mid- to long-term will depend to a large degree on the policy responses put in place now by governments. Yet, as reported above, in countries around the world the reactions of national authorities are uncoordinated, lack coherence, and are often tending to aggravate the underlying structural problems. International cooperation takes time to build. We need to start now.

#### HLPE 2020 Global Narrative:

*'Policies that promote a radical transformation of food systems need to be empowering, equitable, regenerative, productive, prosperous and must boldly reshape the underlying principles from production to consumption. These include stronger measures to promote equity among food system participants by promoting agency and the right to food, especially for vulnerable and marginalized people. Measures to ensure more sustainable practices, such as agroecology, also address climate change and ecosystem degradation. And measures to reshape food production and distribution networks, such as territorial markets, help to overcome economic and sociocultural challenges such as uneven trade, concentrated markets and persistent inequalities by supporting diverse and equitable markets that are more resilient...'*<sup>35</sup>

### Why is the CFS the appropriate place to craft it?

The CFS is able to build on the orientations of the HLPE 2030 Global Narrative report, its COVID-19 policy brief, as well as the other HLPE reports and numerous CFS policy recommendations which are highly relevant to addressing the current crisis. These include the guidelines and recommendations regarding food securi-

ty in a context of protracted crisis, food price volatility, social protection, responsible tenure, investing in smallholder agriculture, and connecting smallholders to markets. The current CFS Multi-year Programme of Work (MYPoW) directly responds to critical issues highlighted during the pandemic: women's empowerment and gender equality, youth engagement and employment, reducing inequalities, as well as the need to ensure a sound analysis of the evolving nature of the crisis on the basis of evidence from the ground.

More than any other international governance space, the CFS can count on a deep understanding of how food systems function thanks to its HLPE and to the participation of various constituencies, first and foremost those who produce most of the food we consume. Grounded in a human rights framework, it is the only international forum which can ensure that all actors affected by the crisis can autonomously and legitimately organize to explain their situations and co-construct a global response, for which governments hold the primary responsibility.

The CFS Reform, endorsed by all Member States, established it as the most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together in a coordinated way to ensure food security and nutrition for all by promoting coordination and policy convergence at the global level. The CFS has the mandate and the capacity to address the fragilities of the world's food system which COVID-19 is dramatically highlighting. It has the mandate to place the needs of workers, migrants, women, smallholder food producers, Indigenous Peoples, consumers, the urban food insecure, refugees and displaced, the landless and communities in protracted crises at the center of policy proposals. The voices raised in this report urgently call on it to do so.



Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism  
for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security