



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the first cases of COVID-19 made headlines a year and a half ago, few would have imagined the magnitude the pandemic would reach and the disastrous outcomes that would follow. What started as a health crisis, quickly turned into a livelihood and food crisis. Millions of people have lost their jobs and sources of income, especially those in the informal sector. With no, or inadequate, social protection schemes in place, the number of those suffering from hunger has increased by up to 161 million in just over a year.

This year's *State of the Right to Food and Nutrition Report* places the spotlight on the right to food and nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks at the measures that governments have taken to contain the spread of the virus, and the impacts these have had on different population groups. It equally provides insights to the ways in which communities and civil society groups across the globe have self-organized to confront the crisis and support those in need.

The report shows strikingly similar patterns across regions. Yet, it also highlights that the impacts are far from the same for everyone. Across societies, the pandemic and the measures to contain it hit marginalized and disadvantaged groups the hardest. In many instances, no precautions were taken or relevant exceptions made to protect the rights of these groups, and to shield them against the effects of restrictive measures. In most countries, social protection schemes have proved incapable of protecting those most in need, and of supporting them to get back on their feet.

The pandemic laid bare the structural discrimination, inequalities and exclusions that underpin our societies and make people vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. It has placed a spotlight on the precarious and unsafe working conditions that food and agricultural workers, and especially migrant workers, find themselves in, and the limited access to basic services and social protection they enjoy. It has, moreover, highlighted the plight of Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities, who deprived of their territories and access to natural resources, have been left with little resilience to confront the pandemic and related food crisis.

Across regions, the colossal increase in care work largely landed on the shoulders of women, who in turn have been more likely to lose their jobs. Women have equally had to endure higher levels of stress, as they are often responsible for putting food on the table. On top of everything, they have faced an escalation in domestic violence. Children living in poverty have suffered from missing out on school meals, or from a reduction in the quality of meals. In some instances, children have been pressed into hazardous jobs to help their families make ends meet.

The report also highlights how governments have used the pandemic to (further) militarize societies, and forcefully push through harmful laws, policies, and projects. In this sense, the pandemic has served as a perfect pretext to silence social protests, violently target communities, and criminalize human rights defenders.

The report points to, on the one hand, the multi-layered vulnerability produced by the global industrial food system and, on the other hand, the resilience of local food systems and small-scale food producers in times of crisis.

The industrial food system is not only associated with the rise of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19, it also enhances the risk of severe infection, for example, through the promotion of ultra-processed food products and exposure of people to agro-toxics. Its reliance on long supply chains and commercial farming inputs, moreover, has rendered those who depend on it vulnerable to disruptions in global trade and price fluctuations. On the contrary, local peasant food systems based on agroecology have proved highly resilient amid the crisis and found innovative ways to confront it. Across regions there has been a surge in interest in agroecology, community-supported agriculture, and urban / community gardens, with new webs created between rural and urban communities.

This is despite the fact that many governments, especially initially, have shown a bias towards the corporate food system and against small-scale food producers in their responses to the pandemic. This included, for example, the closure of informal and farmers' markets while supermarkets were allowed to remain open, the introduction of curfew times that interfered with the work routines of small-scale fishers, restrictions on movement that impeded peasants, especially women, from accessing their land, or the closure of borders that obstructed pastoralists in the search for fodder.

Across regions there has been a huge amount of solidarity and community organization to face the crisis and support those in need. Small-scale food producers across the globe have organized themselves to donate and exchange their produce. Rural women have shared their knowledge on medicinal plants and made these available for populations in need. Communities and civil society groups have organized community pantries and soup kitchens, while community supported agriculture initiatives have sought new solidarity formulas to include those with fewer resources.

Moving forward, it will be critical to learn from the lessons of the pandemic and the responses to it. We must not forget that hunger and malnutrition has been there before, and in fact on the rise for years. The construction of a "new tomorrow" hence needs to move beyond "fixing things" to addressing the structural discrimination, inequalities and exclusions that have created the conditions for the crisis to unfold in such a dramatic and unequal way.