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Precarious food systems faltering under the weight of the pandemic

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"Coronavirus means I cannot get food," was the [response](#) of 9-year-old Nitin when asked by an Indian journalist what he understood of the current pandemic. In a world where [a quarter of the population](#) (2 billion) lives with acute to moderate food insecurity^[i], the COVID-19 crisis has thrust thousands like Nitin in a space where hunger would get them before the virus.



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A Fragile Global Food System

In a globalised world, food systems have been disrupted by lockdowns and other restrictions imposed by governments. Farmers globally have struggled to cope, forcing some to [burn their crops](#) and others to [plough them back](#) into fields. Several countries, such as India were already reeling under decades of [agrarian distress](#), that led to thousands of farmers' suicides and contributed to several mass rural-to-urban migrations. In the aftermath of the pandemic, [reduced prices](#) of cash crops will drive farm incomes even lower. An ILO [survey](#) released on May Day reveals that 1.6 billion informal workers globally lost their means of livelihood in the wake

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of the pandemic. Informal workers comprise [94% of agricultural labour](#) in the world, and in most Global South countries, a disproportionately large number of informal workers comprise migrant workers.^[ii] This informal-migrant-agricultural labour nexus operates without any contracts, social security, or safety nets. From food production to distribution,

our food systems rely heavily on a vastly underpaid and vulnerable workforce. It is both ironic and disquieting that [80% of the world's most food-insecure people are people who work on farms](#).

While providing adequate nutritious food for all has been a policy goal for several decades, our current food systems do not reflect this objective. Increased commodification and corporatisation of food within the international trade regime has allowed substantial farm-to-fork corporate control over food. Rhetoric around increasing 'efficiency' in agriculture usually includes a subtext of reducing the number of small farmers to 'solve' the problem of marginal landholding. Furthermore, policy discourses often develop within independent silos with little or no coordination. Discourses around agriculture, labour, land-use, biodiversity, water, health, nutrition, and traditional knowledge in crop genetic resources etc are yet to form key linkages to make our food systems nourishing, resilient, culturally appropriate, and sustainable.

Innovative Solutions

Pathways towards creating such systems have emerged from some creative community responses to the lockdowns. From an entrepreneur establishing [Rice ATMs](#) to provide free rice in Vietnam, to landless agricultural workers in Brazil [delivering](#) food to hospitals without any state support; from Indian farmers [using social media to sell](#) their produce to those [bartering](#) food items with one another in cash-strapped regions; from [mobile truck-shops](#) providing a door-to-door food delivery in Bangkok, to [Zimbabwean farmers](#) organising themselves to fill supply gaps to

markets; these efforts show how communities persevere to ensure production and supply of food despite disruptions.

Fostering Food Sovereignty Concepts

Insights from the food sovereignty approach developed by Via Campesina and the [Peasants Rights Declaration 2018](#) make a case for preserving and reviving small-scale food systems, controlled by local communities, and which integrate ecological, health and cultural perspectives. Food sovereignty calls for public and community-controlled markets to be built from the local level up, and a decommodification of food by recognising and promoting subsistence farming as a source of food security. Our current nationally centralised food systems control pricing and marketing of farm produce, coordinate distribution domestically over long distances, and depend heavily on international trade. Small farmers, and migrant and informal workers are invariably pushed to the margins. In a time of crisis,

In a time of crisis, a concentration of power over food means it cannot reach most vulnerable people



Empty carts at a grocery store © Mike Haupt (Unsplash)

Conclusions

This pandemic has [renewed debates](#) around reorienting our public health systems, by increasing funding in medical research, building more locally-accessible hospitals, providing cheaper medicines while loosening the grip of patents that perpetuate corporate control over healthcare. Reorienting food systems towards greater resilience is equally if not more important to meet future challenges.

[i] FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019: Safeguarding Against Economic Slowdowns and Downturns' (FAO, Rome, 2019) pg vii.

[ii] ILO, 'Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture' (3rd edn, ILO, Geneva, 2018) pg 26.



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despite [best efforts](#) of many national and provincial/state governments, such concentration of power over food production, supply and distribution has shown that food cannot reach most vulnerable people, and public funds cannot be mobilised in a timely manner to create further outreach. Such a system is bound to quaver under the pressures of further climate-change-induced disasters, seasonal changes, and future viral outbreaks.

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