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Food Systems and COVID-19

Irish development organisations' role in building back better

Chaired by Dr Nick Chisholm, University College Cork

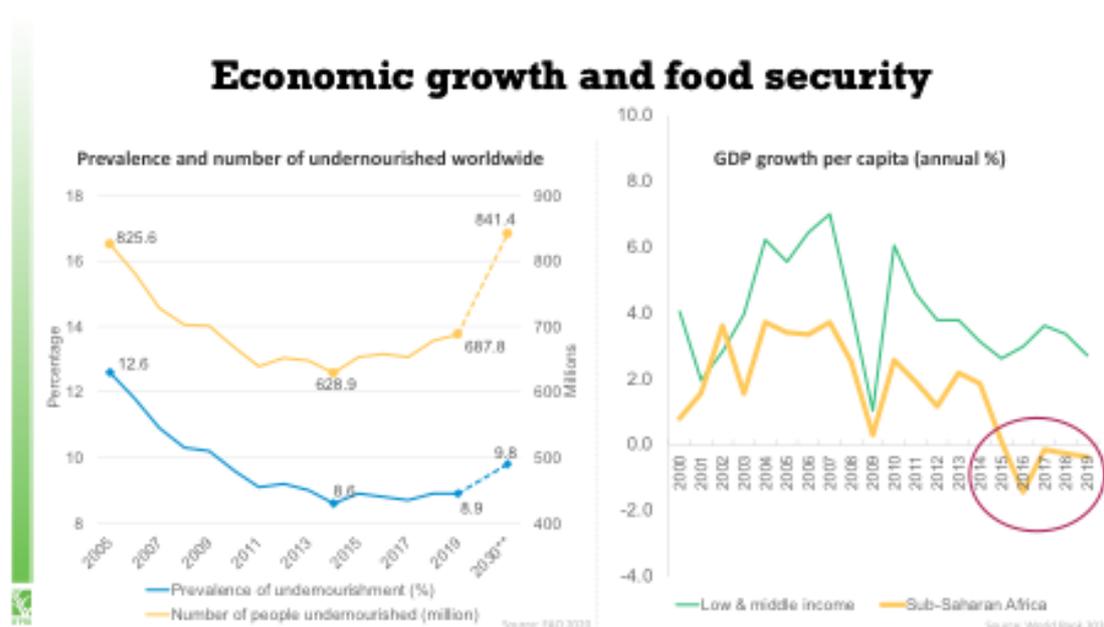
KEY MESSAGES

- In **Building Back Better** from COVID-19, we must ensure that we reach the furthest behind first, and take a 'food systems approach'. Policy responses must also be gender sensitive. One tool identified is the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) which is a practical guide for transforming gender and unequal power relations in value chains.
- **Inequality is a key consideration** in building back better. Research shows that the poorest households were disproportionately affected by the income and nutritional impacts of COVID-19 compared to middle and higher income households.
- **Irish development organisations have a role to play in building back better.** In particular there is a need to support resilient systems, emphasise local and collaborative approaches and ensure the voices of the marginalised are heard through inclusive and democratic processes. Donors can support this role through flexible financing.
- **On tackling malnutrition**, we must look at all aspects of the food systems, including WASH, Health, social protection and livelihoods; this came out strongly from IFPRI, Irish Aid, and IDS research.
- **Social protection** systems have been adaptive to COVID-19. Advocacy and oversight is necessary to ensure government transfers are sufficient to access a Minimum Expenditure Basket. In the longer term, countries need to be supported to develop shock responsive social protection systems.
- **Digitalisation offers opportunities** for more efficient food systems but we must also ensure that it is inclusive of smallholders and doesn't widen the inequality gap.
- In order to **understand food economies** in food insecure environments, it's important to know how households meet their food needs. Tools identified were the Household Hunger Scale and The Livelihood based Coping Strategy Index (LbCSI) which uses 'coping strategies' as an indicator for stress regarding access to food.
- Ensuring **Resilient Systems**: A potential trade-off was identified between designing 'very lean' systems, and having systems that are efficient but also have capacity to flex, adapt and respond in a time of crisis.

THE CHALLENGE

Johan Swinnen, Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute, presented an **Overview of Covid-19 Impacts on Food Security and Nutrition**. In the past 5-6 years there has been a reversal in trends for hunger and malnutrition, driven by climate change, conflict and a slow-down of economic growth in developing countries. Three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet. At the same time, food systems are exerting pressure on

planetary boundaries accounting for 20% GHG emissions. COVID-19 has led to economic depression and major food systems disruptions, with income and job losses having the biggest impact on poverty and food security. There is a strong correlation between income and diet, with declining incomes, there is a shift from more nutritional food to basic staples (calories). Women are especially vulnerable.



Evidence of COVID-19 Impacts and Responses from Irish Research and Development Partners

Solange Cullen, Department of Food Business & Development, UCC, presented a **Rapid Assessment of the Impacts of COVID-19 Restrictions on Household Food Security within the Gergera Watershed, Tigray, Ethiopia**.

The study focused on food consumption habits, food availability, food market prices and demand for food, with the main livelihood of sampled households being farming. Some of the impacts of COVID-19 observed through this study included consumption of smaller portions than usual, price rises especially for cereal pulses and nuts, and reduced market access due to COVID-19 restrictions. Common coping mechanisms were use of savings or sale of assets. Overall, COVID-19 put pressure of existing vulnerabilities in current food production and distribution systems.

Mary Baganizi, Resource Rights Programme Manager, Trócaire Uganda, shared experiences of the impact of COVID-19 in Uganda. She noted that the closure of markets had impacted on smallholder farmer businesses and that border closures had affected food exports. Farmers reported using their saved seed for food. There was increased migration to rural areas which in some instances resulted in conflict and a 'scramble for land'. On building back better, a number of strategies were identified by Trócaire, including promotion of the wild and traditional food when people are unable to access markets, strengthening seed banks, scaling up Agroecology, and addressing issues of gender based violence and unequal power relations.

Chris Pain, Head of Concern Worldwide technical assistance team, presented an **Overview of COVID-19 Research Findings from Concern Worldwide**, included data collected jointly through Alliance 2015 partners, covering over 16,000 households in 25 countries. ¾ of people interviewed across 25 countries reported that their livelihoods had been affected, especially those living in peri-urban and camp settings. 1/3 of respondents were reliant on agriculture for their livelihood. In terms of food security, disruptions to market and transport systems pushed food prices up, while reductions in livelihood impacts also reduced purchasing power and access to food for the poorest people.



Food Systems and Building Back Better

Mary McCarthy, Policy Lead – Nutrition, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, **Department of Foreign Affairs**, shared Irish Aid's thinking on the building back better agenda and how it intersects with Irish Aid's prioritization of sustainable food systems. Irish Aid's development policy "A Better World" was referenced as a useful framework in thinking through the complexity of our broken food system and how it can be transformed. A key overarching principle in rebuilding food systems is reaching the furthest behind first, including empowering, and listening to marginalized people. Mary also emphasized the importance on 'doing things differently'; the question is not what we need to do, but how we do it. Strengthening our capacity, coordination, policy influence, research and learning, and public engagement will all be part of Ireland's efforts to build back better. She further identified key principles for donor's, which emerged from Irish Aid's research collaboration with Institute of Development Studies including the need for localised and collaborative approaches and to coordinate across sectors.

Ayako Ebata shared research from **Institute of Development Studies** looking at the resilience of food systems and the intersection between malnutrition, livelihoods and poverty effects. This research outlined a number of factors that can influence and enhance the resilience of food systems. Firstly, it is important to not lock-in to only looking at one aspect of malnutrition. Emphasis is often on hunger and undernutrition but over-nutrition is equally damaging for people's health and wellbeing. Secondly, we need to bring in a food systems perspective to tackling malnutrition; nutrition outcomes are interdependent on food, care, livelihoods, and broader health and sanitation environments. Thirdly, it is important to consider power relations and political economy of interventions and support inclusive dialogues with marginalised peoples and other actors in food systems policies.

Recording of the webinar is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSHwzWu24Ek&t=287s>

All presentations are available at <http://www.ifiad.ie/food-systems-and-nutrition/>