

Discussion Paper for 21 July 2020 CFS Open Meeting

COVID-19 is Threatening Food Security and Workers' Health

A call to all stakeholders to increase the resilience of safe food supply chains

Introduction

The world is facing an unprecedented threat from the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Many countries are following the advice from the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding the introduction of physical distancing measures, handwashing and wearing of face coverings as some of the effective ways through which the transmission of this disease can be reduced. However, the application of lockdown measures in many countries has resulted in the closure of businesses and schools, restrictions on travel and social gatherings, and put the livelihoods of millions of people at risk.

With respect to the agri-food sector, the pandemic has had disruptive effects on many nodes of the food supply chain. The production of high-value, and especially perishable commodities, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, and milk was particularly affected. Smallholder farmers were unable to buy inputs or sell their products in local markets or to schools, hotels and other hospitality and leisure establishments, which have been temporarily closed. The pandemic has also affected the production of labour-intensive agricultural crops. In some countries and sectors, demand and production reductions have led to significant job loss. In others, border closures and domestic restrictions of movement have led to shortages of seasonal and temporary migrant workers in agriculture. Nonetheless, most agri-food workers have had no choice but to continue working even when no additional protection and preventive measures were put in place to protect them and their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the nexus between public health, food security and employment and labour dimensions. Having laid bare the fragility of our food system, it underscored the importance of strengthening the resilience of food systems, ensuring decent working conditions of all agri-food workers who are essential for our food security, and preparing for possible future waves of COVID-19 – or other pandemics – by adopting national policies and enacting procedures and laws that will build more robust food systems and safer food supply chains.

Food workers and food supply chains

While current understanding indicates that there is no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses – like SARS-CoV-2 – being transmitted by food or food packaging, the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly disrupting the functioning of some key food supply chains. Food industry personnel, Particularly for perishable commodities, do not have the opportunity to work from home and are required to continue working in their usual workplaces as essential workers. Many of them are low-paid, female, and (undocumented) migrant workers with low job security, inadequate health care, and no bargaining power; and their workplaces often include workstations that are positioned in close proximity (e.g., in abattoirs and meatpacking plants), entail exposure to large numbers of customers (e.g., food markets, retail), reflect climatic conditions conducive for the survival of the virus (e.g., in-door workplaces with low temperatures, high humidity, and lack of natural ventilation,) and elevated noise levels that force workers to shout thereby generating more aerosols and increasing risks of COVID-19 transmission. Ensuring the safety and health of all workers in agricultural production and along food supply chains is critical to building safe and resilient food supply chains.

Travel restrictions and extended delays occurring at all nodes of the supply chain are also affecting the movement of goods – food in particular, whether locally-produced or imported. As a result, markets may see food commodities in scarce supply, leaving space and opportunities for sub-quality products. In this context, ultra-fresh, fresh and perishable food commodities constitute a matter of high concern as they are at a higher risk of damage and deterioration, in turn presenting higher food safety risks. Such situations can be aggravated by lack of timely phytosanitary services, laboratories, and inspection companies, oversight capacity, and level of controls.

Informal/traditional markets deserve a separate discussion. On one hand, some aspects of informal/traditional markets

are intrinsically risk-amplifying, while others are risk-mitigating. For example, inadequate hygiene, poor waste disposal, lack of training of workers, and selling of live and dead, wild and domestic animals along with produce and other goods increase risks. On the other hand, selling in outside conditions with natural ventilation and high trust relations between buyer and seller decrease risks. Food in these markets is often cheaper, closer to home, more local, and processed in traditional ways attractive to a wide range of buyers.

Maintaining the movement and safety of food along food chains – from producers to consumers – is an essential goal to which all stakeholders along these food chains need to contribute. This will enable us to maintain trust and consumer confidence in the safety and availability of food, while protecting the health and safety of workers who are growing, processing, and selling our food.

To ensure that our food is safe, as well as the workers who produce it, the food industry needs to implement Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles to manage food safety risks and prevent food contamination, although these principles might be more difficult to implement in informal markets, which dominate supply of perishables in Low and Middle-Income Countries. Food industry FSMS are underpinned by prerequisite programmes that include good hygiene practices, cleaning and sanitation, zoning of processing areas, supplier control, storage, distribution and transport, personnel hygiene and fitness to work – all the basic conditions and activities necessary for maintaining a hygienic food processing environment. The Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene lay down a firm foundation for implementing key hygiene controls at each stage of the food processing, manufacturing, and marketing chain for the prevention of food contamination.

Vulnerabilities of the food system and existing guidance

Much guidance has been developed with common elements to include physical distancing, the use of personal protective equipment and the risk-based selective deployment of the oft-limited capacities of national authorities to provide regulatory oversight, controls and inspections. Where applied consistently, these measures have shown great success in the reduction of new infections in the general population as well as in the work force (e.g. reduction of salmonella in poultry in Europe). However, where preventive and protective measures have been inconsistently applied, weaknesses in the food systems have been reportedly been exploited, potentially harming all stakeholders in the food supply chain, especially food and agricultural workers, and exposed those workers to increased risks for their health and lives. Likewise, increases in the occurrence of food fraud and price-hikes on food products are some other risks that have been observed and widely reported in the press.

Many organizations have published helpful guidance, policy papers and other resources that aim at aiding policy makers, almost every sector of society, every stakeholder of the food supply chain, and every segment of the human population in the management of the pandemic and minimizing its potential collateral damage. A few prominent examples include:

- **FAO:** <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/en/>
- **WHO:** <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- **WFP:** <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/covid-19-pandemic>
- **CGIAR:** <http://a4nh.cgiar.org/covidhub/>
- **ILRI:** <https://www.ilri.org/tags/covid19>
- **UNICEF:** <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19>
- **The World Bank Group:** <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/financialsector/coronavirus>
- **ILO:** https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/publications/WCMS_742023/lang--en/index.htm

While these policy papers and resources encompass advice for almost every facet of societies, nations and political environments, the following commonalities for the food sector have been proven successful in the reduction of new infections in many circumstances, and especially when applied consistently:

- **Physical distancing:** reducing the density of people in specific places, changing the flow of people and flow of goods in order to maintain a safe distance at all times has probably significantly contributed to a reduced rate of new infections through person-to-person transmission in crowded settings in those countries that enforced such measures.
- **Face coverings or masks:** together with enhanced sanitation, especially hand-washing, and surface disinfection, face masks have proven to be among the most effective preventative measures; areas where these measures have been invoked with vigilance and broad support have demonstrated a sharp decline in new COVID-19 infections as well as other transmissible diseases.

What is missing?

Despite all available global guidance, the world still faces major challenges as protective measures are not universally implemented and countries continue to feel the impact of the pandemic in a multitude of devastating ways. The effectiveness and applicability to national specific contexts of such global guidance developed by UN organizations has been demonstrated in quite a number of cases.

Yet, collectively, the world has not done enough as is evidenced by increasing rates of infection and deaths among food and agricultural workers, food supplies being disrupted, jobs decimated and livelihoods lost, with food insecurity and hunger on the rise. Furthermore, too many food workers continue to be at risk through workplace constraints that are not compatible with existing guidance, a fact that continues to exist both in formal and informal settings.

- **Risk-based regulatory actions:** the huge complexity and volume of food production, processing and trade together with almost innumerable potential for food safety hazards require a science-based risk analysis approach to identify and manage the most important food safety risks. Any effectively regulated food system must be governed by such a science-based risk analysis process that is capable of adjusting quickly to risks and hazards as they emerge and decline. Regulatory systems that are designed to flexibly react to new risks have proven to be an effective measure to navigate and mitigate collateral damage (e.g., food fraud) to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic.

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Increase in awareness raising: knowledge as the foundation for greater adaption

With this current pandemic, all humans are at risk and no one is too remote to be safe. With every single person needing to engage in measures to protect themselves and their families and with the pandemic affecting all economies, increasing knowledge through awareness-raising must remain a key goal of CFS and its members. While knowledge in and by itself is often not sufficient to trigger behavioural changes that are needed, knowledge per se is a critical precondition to enable these behavioural changes. Knowledge-building campaigns can be global or local, multi-sectoral and/or focused on very specific sectors of society.

It will be imperative to continue awareness-raising efforts to increase the knowledge and capabilities of every human being to more effectively participate in measures to protect themselves and their families. Knowledge will also be the basis for increased participation and engagement in retooling economic activities and food supply chains to ensure that all economic activities can continue in a safe manner. Such a retooling must include consideration of appropriate safeguards for full compliance with workers' rights as well as for uninterrupted food production, transportation, processing.

The alternatives are simply not acceptable. From this crisis, CFS can seek to share and promote trusted and applicable knowledge that is suitable to protect all humans from hunger and poverty, in line with its mandate to promote the progressive realization of the right to adequate food, and its unique, multistakeholder composition.



Have we identified the correct incentives?

With knowledge being the basis for understanding, incentives create the impetus for changes in behaviour. Inducing a desired change of behaviours from all relevant actors at a societal level requires careful planning and clearly understood incentives. It also requires these incentives to be achievable and the desired behaviour to be implementable at a local level. This will require a finely tuned approach with a clear incentive structure that is interlinked and cascading through various sectors and population groups. Such incentives need to be tailored to local settings in order to be effective and must be adapted to cultural context. Powerful incentives can be created in a multitude of ways and may take many shapes and forms, including economic benefits. For example, an incentive structure can be formed to encourage food companies to retool their manufacturing lines with the aim of providing better protection for their line workers. Many countries have successfully employed campaigns to mandate food vendors or restaurants to publicly display their latest hygiene inspection scores. Finding incentives that work in informal and traditional markets can be more difficult although there are few examples of success. In some cases, subsidies may be needed as it is otherwise not rational for actors to invest in providing safer food. Previous attempts to improve food safety in LMICs have tended to rely on “command and control or inspect and punish” approaches or else on “premature modernisation” both of which have a poor track record.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has also introduced perverse incentives, for example, some meat-packing firms, unable to meet their demand, provided bonuses to their workers - with already poor health care - to come to work. This behaviour encouraged people who were ill to continue working.

CFS could use its powerful platform to help raise awareness and promote lessons learned and good practices for such measures and allow for the exchange of success stories.

How can we deploy the correct incentives?

Deploying a network of linked and cascading incentives will require more awareness and more information for all relevant stakeholders. It will require the efforts of CFS members to speak with a uniform message to promote and leverage suitable incentives in order to induce desired changes at the individual, regional, national and ultimately global levels. While investments and economic incentives can be effective, they may not be accessible, possible or desirable in all circumstances.

Building on the work of behavioural economics, and here in particular the “nudge theory”, powerful incentives for behavioural change can be delivered through relatively small inputs. Where deployed successfully, such “nudging” has proven to be cost-effective and widely applicable. Identifying suitable processes and incentives that would “nudge” stakeholders in the food supply towards a desired behaviour is, however, a formidable task. CFS may have the potential to become a platform for the sharing and exchange of incentives that have been successfully applied to “nudge” towards desired behaviours - behaviours that will help keep us fed, safe and will protect our economies.

Building incentivized feedback loops

Awareness raising, information campaigns and other outreach that aims at protecting food and agricultural workers, strengthen their health, and increase food security, improve nutrition, and boost the resilience of food supply chains will need to be started involving all relevant stakeholders. CFS can provide a platform for coordination and mutual exchange of best practices, including those related to incentives and their implementation. The global and inclusive forum of CFS is a suitable platform for facilitating the aims noted above.

¹ Nudge is a concept in behavioral economics, political theory, and behavioral sciences which proposes positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions as ways to influence the behavior and decision making of groups or individuals