Vatican COVID-19 Commission

Executive summary: Economics Taskforce

Providing food aid: Department for International Development, UK

SEE: Covid-19's unfolding food crisis

How to feed the world in a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic could result in more than a quarter of a billion people suffering acute hunger by the end of the year, according to new figures from the World Food Programme.

African and Middle Eastern countries face the biggest challenge as the virus not only threatens their lives and livelihoods but also the trade networks they rely on for survival. The World Bank says COVID-19 is driving sub-Saharan Africa towards its first recession in 25 years and warns that its agricultural production will fall by 3-7% and its food imports by 13-25%, depending on how freely trade flows.

In short, the unfolding food crisis during COVID-19 entails three interrelated risk scenarios: (i) the aggravation of existing food crises around the globe; (ii) lack of access to food for millions of people due the economic impact of the virus as well as national lockdowns; and (iii) the disruption of global and domestic food supply chains everywhere due to lack of workers and travel restrictions.

Pope Francis has asked the Vatican COVID-19 Commission to consider the key issues arising from the pandemic, and to reflect on what new socio-economic-cultural approaches are needed to enable us to build a better future for everyone. This is the executive summary from Week 4 of the Commission's Economics Taskforce.

A terrible waste

The food that is lost and wasted each year accounts for 8% of global greenhouse emissions, consumes a quarter of all water used by agriculture, and requires an agricultural area the size of China. Reducing food waste would alleviate pressure on the climate as well as on water and land.

265 millon

people in low and middle-income countries are at severe risk of hunger due to the COVID-19 pandemic (source: WFP).

370 millon

children are at risk of losing school meals due to closures. For some, these are the only meals they receive each day (source: WFP, UNICEF).

1 billon

metric tonnes of global food supplies are wasted each year, even though one in nine people are undernourished (source: WRI).

JUDGE: World hunger – crop or policy failure?

Food is a common good to which all human beings are entitled.

The pandemic is exacerbating a **pre-existing food crisis** created, among other causes, by: (a) violent conflicts that impede access to essential needs; (b) climate change and its grave effects on agriculture; (c) the emergence of unusual pests that threaten crop production; and (d) food waste.

Famine studies teach us that if the pandemic exacerbates world hunger, it will not be because of crop failure but **economic and policy failure**. We cannot allow this **essential and universal good** to be exploited by a minority. Too many people are deprived of their fundamental rights to food, health and life.

Therefore, the new society post-COVID-19 must ensure universal access to food. First, we must **reduce food waste** and **improve the efficiency of food production**. How can the world feed a growing population while advancing economic development, protecting natural ecosystems and meeting the challenge of climate change? This is one of the most critical questions of our time.

Reducing food waste would save money for farmers, families and organisations, enable us to feed more people, and alleviate climate impacts.

But reducing food waste is not enough. One of the most pressing issues is the **concentration of market power** among a handful of operators. For instance, nearly 70% of the profits from the global trade in agricultural products is concentrated in the hands of a just few firms, according to Oxfam.

Laying the foundations for a more efficient and just economy means taking action against concentrations of market power and monopolies. We must achieve **food sovereignty** for people and communities. As Mark Carney, former Bank of England governor, says: it is time to put 'values' above 'valuations' so that public values help to shape private value.

ACT: During the crisis, granting universal access to food is non-negotiable.

- The imminent crisis facing developing countries could be alleviated by issuing **IMF Special Drawing Rights** (SDRs), offering **grants**, and providing **debt relief** to ensure that nations can acquire food.

- In most countries, some kind of **cash transfers** will be needed for people who have lost their livelihoods and incomes due to lockdowns and closures. However, the state also needs to ensure food provision for informal workers, migrants and displaced persons, including food banks and community kitchens, and providing doorstep delivery to people under quarantine.

- The pandemic is an opportunity to **shape the global food system** for the future by:
  (a) Intervening at the international level (possibly through the World Trade Organistion) to reduce the concentration of market power in food sectors.
  (b) Promoting a food system based on more local and seasonal produce, with sustainable agricultural and food processing practices.

- Tackling food waste will require individual and household **behaviour change**, as well as stricter rules for the food industry. The Church and other religious organisations can play a vital role by:
  (a) **promoting Integral Ecology** and raising awareness of the food sector's huge footprint. Increasing the sustainability of the global food system is of paramount importance to the care of our common home. We need to restore the social norm that it is *not* acceptable to waste food; instead, it should be normal to care about food and treat it as a precious resource. Building on the *Laudato Si'* pledge to live more simply, the Church could further develop **teachings and practices on consumption and responsibility**, using food waste reduction as a positive example.
  (b) campaigning at a local level based on previous models such as **'Love Food Hate Waste'** in UK, 'FoodWasteFree' in the Netherlands and the 'Stop Wasting Food movement' in Denmark.