

Good Food for All: Averting a COVID hunger crisis

New UN figures show that we are not on track to achieve targets on hunger and malnutrition that leaders have agreed. Ceres2030 and the SDG2 Advocacy Hub convened key food and nutrition actors to examine how COVID-19 is affecting progress and identify what more can be done to deliver good food for all.

Worrying [new numbers](#) from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) show another 132 million people may have been pushed into hunger as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The figures show that governments are not on track to deliver on world leaders' promises to end hunger and malnutrition by 2030—a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals that were agreed at the United Nations (UN) in 2015.

Drawing on [new research](#) generated by the Ceres2030 project, IISD's Carin Smaller told an [online event](#) convened by Ceres2030 and the SDG2 Advocacy Hub on July 21, 2020, that tackling the crisis will cost another USD 10 billion.

However, the increased funding amounts to small change compared to the massive rescue packages governments have unveiled recently—such as the European Union support package agreed earlier this week.

Healthy diets out of reach

Maximo Torero, Senior Economist at the FAO, told participants that too many people simply could not afford the healthy diets that are needed to put an end to malnutrition. Countries in Africa are particularly affected.

“Today, most of the incentives in the world are not aligned to healthy diets,” he said.

Gerda Verburg, Coordinator of the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, warned that an overriding focus on calorie consumption needs to give way to a more holistic understanding of nutrition. Nutritionists and food security experts have increasingly argued in favour of complementing the focus on caloric availability needed to tackle hunger with a focus on other aspects of malnutrition, including obesity, overweight, and micronutrient deficiencies.

“How can you, as agriculture minister, support this change of mindset?” Verburg asked Koutéra Noël Bataka, the Togolese agriculture minister.

Tackling hunger and improving nutrition

Agnes Kalibata, the UN Special Envoy for the 2021 Food Systems Summit and a former agriculture minister herself, flew to Bataka's aid. She made the case that governments need first and foremost to tackle hunger before addressing other aspects of malnutrition.

“The bottom line is, people need to fill those caloric needs,” she told the meeting.

Kalibata also warned that the economic downturn in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was leading to a new crisis, as people lose jobs and businesses are forced to close.

“This is going to be the next crisis,” she warned.

The impact on farmers and rural communities

Elizabeth Mpofu, a farm leader representing Via Campesina, told participants that the crisis facing small farmers predates the COVID-19 outbreak. She also argued that farmers have yet to see evidence of the impact of the new aid and support packages that have been announced.

“There’s a huge amount of money being put in place to deal with this emergency. But many people are suffering. We’re not really getting the help we need,” Mpofu said.

However, Esther Penunia of the Asian Farmers Association said that it is important not just to see small farmers as victims of COVID-19.

“Family farmers are front-liners in the struggle to improve health, to improve nutrition, to improve climate,” she said.

Maintaining the supply of food

Kalibata said that, despite the economic downturn, governments need to take steps to ensure food continues to make its way from producers to consumers. She argued that trade in food and farm goods should not be hampered by new restrictions that could impede food security.

Verburg also made the case that governments ought to ensure that the ability of farmers to access markets is not disrupted by emergency government response measures during the crisis.

An urgent situation

Event moderator Feni Oke also challenged participants to keep in mind the urgency and scale of the crisis.

“COVID-19 is not like anything we’ve ever seen before on a global scale,” she cautioned.

Guaranteeing nutrition is ultimately the responsibility of governments and national leaders, said Thanawat Tiensin, Chair of the Committee on World Food Security, who also participated in the event.

Verburg concurred, arguing that political pressure is needed to ensure that governments deliver on sustainable food and nutrition for all.

“Hold your politicians to account: make it part of the elections!” she told participants.

