

Opinion: Local food solutions during the coronavirus crisis could have lasting benefits

April 22 2020, by Dr Shailaja Fennell



UNICEF and World Food Programme provide food aid in South Sudan. Credit: UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

A decade ago, food security in developing countries was regarded as a major challenge. The growing food insecurity in the poorest countries was seen a trigger for large scale migration to richer countries, where it

threatened human security. [It was argued](#) that humanitarian assistance to the poorest countries—through food aid—was necessary to prevent a descent into violence and protracted conflict in the face of poor institutional capacity.

In today's unprecedented times of COVID-19, all previous arguments appear to be turned on their heads. With lockdown measures in place to control the spread of the coronavirus, [food](#) security concerns now beset citizens of rich countries, as they bulk buy at supermarkets to ward off any possibility of going without basic food items.

Examined in relation to [human security](#) and international development, COVID-19 is causing a sea-change in the landscape of food security. The concerns of policy makers and communities in rich and poor countries have switched from a primary focus on the global food system, to very real and everyday worries about getting the next square meal in local contexts.

In the [poorest countries](#), domestic migrants have returned home to their villages. Their economies have closed down, and their jobs in urban factories and service sectors cease to exist. Their [journeys home have been challenging](#): roadside eateries are boarded up, and there are limited and often overcrowded means of transport to get from the city to their villages.

If there is a silver lining, it is the burgeoning of local efforts that are currently underway—in both rich and poor countries—to provide food supplies to the most marginalised in society. In the UK, there has been [an upsurge in public spiritedness](#), with [local businesses](#) and community organisations setting up food delivery networks to get food to households in isolation or with vulnerable residents.



Overcrowded transport in India. Credit: Prasanta Sahoo from Pixabay

In Asia there has been a rapid [rise in pop-up distribution centres](#), and decentralisation appears to be the most effective way to link farmers' produce to the people who need it in local towns. The creation of a new 'direct to home' model, where farmers become the distributors of their own produce to local households, is emerging as the new form of local delivery to ensure food security of households in Western India. These different firm and farmer initiatives indicate that rural entrepreneurship is developing, and finding new ways to ensure food security in local communities.

Another feature emerging within communities in both rich and poor countries is changes in the ways in which people source food, and in [how they cook and eat at home](#). People are learning how to manage within new constraints. In public broadcasts, the message is to stretch whatever ingredients are available. A new UK TV cooking programme, [Keeping](#)

[Cooking and Carry On](#), emphasises the importance of creativity in making-do, and changing recipes to use up whatever is left in the kitchen cupboard.

In poor communities in Africa, the breakdown of global supply chains has resulted in a fall in cheaper imports and a shift to local produce. Women trading fish in Kisumu, Kenya, have started to [sell local fish](#) from nearby Lake Victoria as Chinese imports are no longer available, and this has increased local income.

In Asia, Vietnam is proving to be by far the best country at managing the pandemic. While the international media has focused on its outstanding ability to manage the logistics of testing and isolation, there has been little or no focus on the excellent way this country has communicated to households the importance of staying away from fast food, extolled the [virtues of eating fresh food](#), and emphasised the importance of breast milk for babies.

It is these stories of local, decentralised solutions to managing food security in the Global South during the COVID-19 pandemic that could be the beginning of a new chapter in the field of global food security. All communities across the globe are focusing on their local food security. Now might be the best moment to work towards a widespread understanding of the relationship between food availability and nutritional outcomes.



Kenyan fish seller. Credit: Artsy Solomon on Pixabay

Eating the most nutritive foods to ensure better health and wellbeing is closely linked to the ability of communities to undertake innovative local agroecological practices. The agroecology approach aims to create sustainable food systems, and at the core of this approach is a set of practices based on 'locally adapted' farming.

Working with farmers and their knowledge base, and linking farmers to their local consumers has two benefits. Farming methods are improved, and there is an increasing awareness among local consumers of the relationship between food production methods and improved nutrition and health. This synergy ensures that agroecology has benefits for both food security and sustainability.

In this new approach, improving local links between food production and

human nutrition is the first step to advancing human security in communities across the globe. By increasing the resilience of communities, it will ensure that agriculture—which remains the primary source of livelihood for 86% of the world's rural population—will be recognised as a key priority in international development.

Through the University of Cambridge-led TIGR2ESS programme, we are looking at how to scale up successful local examples of the agroecological approach across the district of Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab. We are working in collaboration with Punjab University, Chandigarh and with the expertise of the Kheti Virasat Mission, which promotes agricultural practice that maintains an ecological balance.

A UN General Assembly Resolution set out in 2012 recognised the concept of human security as a way to bring together the pillars of international development, human rights and peace and security. Our work is revealing how an explicit linkage of food security to human security can achieve this.

With COVID-19 bringing the local imperative for food availability to the fore, there is a great opportunity to advance agroecological principles. Now is the time for global food security research to make explicit the link between [food security](#) and human [security](#), and ensure a more inclusive international development strategy.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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