

# COVID-19 and the Global Food Supply

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## Introduction

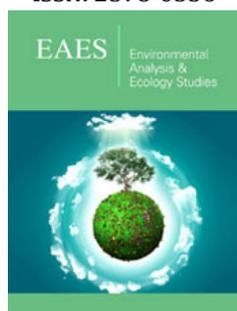
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to think more deeply about collateral risks of climate change. More immediately, it has imposed a serious stress test on the global food supply. The following are my recent findings and thoughts prepared for APSAFE 2020, a food ethics conference focused on sustainability, hosted virtually by Hiroshima University, Dec. 2020.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck and set in during the planting and growing seasons of 2020, it was the centralized, large-scale food systems that were most disrupted, for a variety of reasons. In June 2020, an group of experts in agriculture, food, ecology, and climate “released” a ‘blueprint’ for making food production more resilient to both climate and non-climate shocks that calls for \$320 billion in public and private funding to transform food systems” (Gustin July 7, 2020). Bruce Campbell, a director of the group that authored the blueprint remarked, “The disruptions caused by this terrible pandemic have at least awakened the world to the fact that our food systems are far more vulnerable than many realized.... Climate change is already compounding these problems, but the solutions we present-which seek bold transformations in everything from farming to trade, diets, and government policies-offer an opportunity to pursue a much brighter future for people and our planet” (Ibid.). The transformation that is required is ambitious, complex, and far-reaching, encompassing a range of commitments and shifts, from incentivizing farmers to cut CO2 emissions as by reducing tillage; prohibiting the opening of new farmland, especially in the tropics and subtropics; shifting to less carbon-intensive diets; reducing food waste at every stage from field to table; and encouraging soil conservation by growing carbon-retaining crops in the off-season or as part of crop rotation.

It is known that Covid 19 has disrupted food production and is imposing stress tests on food supply chains; it is less known that the number of “deaths from starvation” due to this disruption exceed those from “the disease itself” (Godin 2020). Indeed, from the onset of the pandemic, weaknesses in the world’s food supply system became apparent. Oxfam reports that over 120 million more people will be at risk of starvation due to not just disruptions in food supply and distribution but reduced aid and economic recession (Oxfam July 7, 2020). COVID-19 is the tipping point for millions living on the edge, already besieged by conflict, climate change, migration, and crop failure. The UN estimates that over a quarter billion people are at risk of starvation this year (2020) due to these causes. Affected areas include equatorial Africa and South America, South Asia, as well as Haiti and Syria in particular. In India, farms which depend on migrant labor, are idle with crops unharvested. Many women who might farm labor are confined by COVID-19 lockdown and care for children and elders. Moreover, millions of children in lockdown are deprived of their school meals, in many instances their only nutritious meal of the day.

The virus has also severely disrupted the global trade in food. In Africa, where many borders have been closed, freight lines have been unable to move food, leaving stocks rotting in depots. The food staples have grown scarce and more expensive. Curbs on the flow of trade threaten to worsen the food crisis. Trade restrictions thus threaten to make a horrendous food crisis even worse. Poor countries in Asia as well as Africa and Latin America whose economies are collapsing are hard press to feed their teeming populations.

ISSN: 2578-0336



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**Submission:**  December 28, 2020

**Published:**  January 29, 2021

Volume 7 - Issue 5

**How to cite this article:** Kirill O Thompson. COVID-19 and the Global Food Supply. *Environ Anal Eco stud.* 7(5). EAES. 000674. 2021.  
DOI: [10.31031/EAES.2021.07.000674](https://doi.org/10.31031/EAES.2021.07.000674)

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Besides the measures need to ameliorate the current food crisis and looming famine, it is incumbent on us to strive to make our food production more sustainable and resilient. The global economy is more prosperous than ever; food production and supplies are at all-time highs. However, food is not equitably distributed and is most scarce where it is most in need. Food production and supplies are sufficient\ to provision teeming humanity without sacrificing the quality and variety of foods expected in advanced economies and markets.

How to lay the foundations for provisioning teeming humanity while maintaining the quality and variety of advanced food economies? How to make the food supply sustainable, resilient, and resistant to various looming risks? Market mechanisms need to be supported and enhanced by rational government organizations; government organizations need to be synchronized through regional and international cooperation, shepherded by umbrella organizations, dedicated to upholding the ideals of equitable distribution, on the one hand, and fair competition, on the other.

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