



COMMENT

FOOD SECURITY MUST BE ON NATIONS' MENU

XIKOMBISO MBHENYANE
and BETRAND AYUK

THE celebration of World Food Day tomorrow calls for global solidarity to help all nations, and especially the most vulnerable, to recover from the Covid-19 crisis, and to make food systems more resilient and robust so they can withstand increasing volatility and shocks, deliver affordable and sustainable healthy diets for all, as well as decent livelihoods.

The impact of the pandemic on global public health has led to growing concerns and uncertainties.

In response, various governments have sorted and implemented a range of measures to curb the spread of the virus and to "flatten the curve".

These measures include physical distancing, restrictions on mobility and temporary closure of most workplaces and shops, which have posed significant logistical challenges including on food supply chains.

Global food systems have not been directly affected by Covid-19, except through intermittent closures of food processing facilities in some countries because of infected workforces and disruptions in food transportation due to border closures as Stephen Devereux and his co-authors pointed out in their article in Food Security (2020).

Recent forecasts reported by various UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization revealed the pandemic could tip over 130 million more people globally into chronic hunger by the end of this year. It seems Africa could be hit hardest with trends indicating that by 2030 more than half of the world's chronically hungry will live here.

In South Africa, the nationwide lockdown was implemented in five levels with the most severe level 5 comprising the shutdown of businesses with limited transport services available to support essential service workers such as health workers, food vendors and one person per household to buy food.

In their recent article in Global Food Security (2020), Channing Arndt et al argue that even though these rules were intended as physical distancing strategies, this might have unintentionally hampered the food supply chain to poor households.

It is almost certain the number of insecure households will rise this year because of lockdown restrictions which disrupted the transportation of goods and materials, reduced food production due to lack of inputs and labour, and interrupted food supply chains and trade, according to Chinese scholars Shenggen, Wei Si and Yumei Zhang in their paper for the China Agricultural Economic Review (2020).

The major determinant of food insecurity in South Africa is food accessibility, which is dependent on financial resources. The economy has been hard hit by the Covid-19 responses, resulting in loss of employment and economic contraction. Thus, many individuals have lost their source of livelihoods, exposing them to risk of food insecurity. It is noted that in South Africa the food supply chain was deemed to be essential.

This resulted in both the formal and informal food sector being allowed to operate during the lockdown. Furthermore, there were interventions to assist the agricultural sector and households through special relief grants and support for the businesses. The reality is that the purchasing power of many households has been affected negatively.

It is heartening that the UN World Food Programme has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and to improve conditions for peace in conflict areas. This highlights the importance of food in contributing to peace and stability in the world. The global community should thus pool resources to ensure the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (and its related targets) by 2030: End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. There's not much time left.

Professor Mbhenyane is research chair in Food Environments, Nutrition and Health in the Division of Human Nutrition at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University. Dr Ayuk is a post-doctoral researcher in the same division.

