

# Extremely Poor People Will Go Hungry As Covid-19 Response Measures Hit

COVID-19 has arrived at a time of unprecedented global need, with a record 168 million people already requiring humanitarian assistance at the beginning of this year<sup>i</sup>.

**World hunger levels have been rising since 2015 with over 820 million people going hungry on a daily basis<sup>ii</sup> and 135 million experienced acute food insecurity in 2019<sup>iii</sup>.**

## CONSTRAINED FOOD SUPPLY

The COVID-19 pandemic is already affecting global food systems, supply chains, and purchasing practices. Stockpiling and a growing demand for food items are creating a strain on global supply chains while restrictions on trade and movement have had a knock-on effect on availability of food stuffs. Price increases will further inhibit equitable access to quality nutritious food. Increasing rates of infection and widespread fear of infection, coupled with restrictive social distancing measures, are affecting agricultural input and yields, which will lead to more severe food insecurity and higher rates of malnutrition in the long term.

As the global food chain faces further disruption and food prices rise<sup>iv</sup>, availability and affordability will be affected. This will place more stress on poor families to make ends meet when they are hit by higher food costs and a drop in informal labour opportunities. Moreover, spiking food prices could potentially lead to social unrest and instability, as was the case during the food crises of 2007-2008.

Although harvests in many regions have been good this year, **there is now a high risk that the broader disruptive effect of COVID-19 will drive up levels of global food insecurity to over a billion people, figures we have not witnessed for a decade.**<sup>v</sup>

While the majority of people suffering acute food insecurity in 2019 lived in countries affected by conflict (77 million), climate change (34 million) and economic crises (24 million people), the coronavirus has massively complicated existing crises and threatens to worsen others<sup>vi</sup>. **The World Food Programme has warned that an extra 265 million people could be at risk with the potential for multiple famines in the coming months.**<sup>vii</sup>



*Figure 1 Concern teams conducting adapted social distancing distributions of food assistance in Kasai Province, DRC. Photo: Concern Worldwide*

## East Africa Locust Infestation - a Parallel Emergency

East Africa is at the epicentre of the locust crisis, with Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Uganda among the affected countries. The worst desert locust infestation in 70 years is already devastating crops, posing a grave threat to food security and livelihoods. In the affected countries, almost 25 million people are already experiencing severe food insecurity. Coronavirus restrictions are delaying the delivery of pesticides and equipment to control the locusts. With flights cancelled, shipping costs have reportedly increased by 300%.

The second wave of this outbreak, which is currently arriving after seasonal rains, is estimated to be 20 times the size of the first. This wave of locusts will wipe out farmers' livelihoods and food supplies, which will have a knock-on effect on food prices and availability. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation has called the locust outbreak, caused in part by climate change, "an unprecedented threat" to food security and livelihoods.

## THE COST OF COVID-19

A global pandemic unfolds in different ways in different countries, and adopting a standardized set of interventions can have particularly severe implications in the poorest regions.

Income losses as a result of COVID-19 are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries<sup>viii</sup>. With an estimated 55% of the global population having no access to social protection, these losses will deeply affect the poorest and most vulnerable communities in particular. The damage to fragile states is likely to be even deeper, longer lasting, exacerbating political instability or increasing the likelihood of violence. Further strain on these economies is expected due to reduced revenue from taxation and export duties.

### WHERE LOCKDOWN POLICIES HIT HARDEST

More than half the world's population live in cities, with over 200 million of the world's poorest people living in high-density poorly serviced urban settlements or formal and informal camps for displaced people and refugees. Social distancing is a useful tool to flatten the curve to enable health systems to manage the crisis, but realistically, very difficult in communities where families live in confined spaces.

**The more severe lockdown approaches in place in many Western countries are only possible if supported by broad and inclusive social protection systems to protect families and individuals whose livelihoods have been disrupted.** In

countries where neither mitigating strategy is an option due to high density of population and the inability of government to provide social protection for all, these sudden and possibly extended measures have the potential to be catastrophic. In Malawi<sup>ix</sup>, the proposed three week lockdown was suspended for seven days to allow for measures to be put in place to prevent hunger when large food markets were closed. As COVID-19 evolves, so too must responses, moving from blanket approaches to more flexible, contextually feasible strategies. The design of 'flexdowns'<sup>x</sup> rather than absolute lockdowns may be a more effective approach, a pro-poor model of social distancing, especially for highly vulnerable groups with limited resources and resilience.



*Figure 2 In the dense informal settlements of Kibera, Nairobi, social distancing is extremely difficult. Photo: Ed Ram/Concern.*

## THE COST OF COVID-19 TO THE POOREST

In low-income countries, many of which are also affected by conflict and instability, a high proportion of the population, simply cannot survive without a daily wage and have no access to a social safety net. Of 736 million people living on less than \$1.90 a day, 413 million are in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>xi</sup>, where economies are already fragile. In anticipation of crippling losses as infection rates increase, many African countries in lockdown are implementing emergency economic policies to protect people and the economy. Nigeria, for example, is providing \$52 -four months' worth of welfare payments in three areas of the country that have been placed into lockdown. In Ethiopia, the government has relaxed rules for mobile banking and money transfers.



The economic impact of measures employed to control the pandemic will be felt most keenly by extremely poor people. Disruptions to markets and supply chains will push the price and availability of food up. The informal labour economy has been badly hit as routines are suspended across almost every country. The near collapse of the aviation industry will have consequences for tourism and the associated seasonal labour market. The drop in consumer spending in Western countries has had a direct impact on employment in countries like Bangladesh, where garment workers suddenly lost their jobs as international retail chains pulled \$2.4 billion of business<sup>xii</sup>. Additionally, unemployment in high and middle-income countries is already having a direct effect on remittances, a vital source of income for millions of families that far exceeds the monetary value of overseas aid<sup>xiii</sup>. Some payment companies have already seen an 80-90% drop in bank transfers to Africa.<sup>xiv</sup>

In urban informal settlements and camp settings for internally displaced people, or refugees, the informal labour market is the lifeline and only source of income for millions of people. If people are prevented from moving around to earn enough to buy food with no alternative safety net, they will be pushed further into debt and the likelihood of hunger and malnutrition will increase. **For the extreme poor, if they don't earn a daily income, they don't eat.**

**In conflict-affected countries, the economic and social disruption of COVID-19 restrictions is a potential trigger for further conflict.** Shutting down systems and delaying or redirecting badly needed humanitarian services will impact on stability, increase violence and opportunistic theft where resources are scarce. Humanitarian commodities will also increase in value and this will in turn increase the risk for humanitarian workers and aid recipients.

## SUPPORTING APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO MINIMISE THE IMPACT OF COVID-19



*Figure 3 In crowded refugee camps, such as those in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, access to sanitation facilities is of paramount importance. Photo: A.K.M. Jakaria/ Concern*

Responding to COVID-19 requires a high level of personal responsibility and community cooperation. **Given the nature of this virus and the possibility that up to 10 million people in Africa could be infected<sup>xv</sup>, community intervention and collaboration is an urgent priority.**

There is much we do not know about COVID-19. **What we do know is that the means to combat and minimise its spread has cost the world billions already.** A global recession has started and no one will be spared some level of financial hardship in the coming months and well into 2021.

The world is learning by doing in managing the impact of COVID-19. While there is learning from China, Italy and Spain on how to survive the pandemic, **low-income countries do not have the same resources and infrastructure to cope.**

## Work with communities to adapt to Covid-19 restrictions

The international community learned about Ebola while responding to the crisis. We must do the same again and adapt those valuable Ebola lessons to design and implement practical interventions that work to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

Restricting community activities as part of a lockdown can be an effective prevention strategy, but it is very difficult and takes its toll on people. **Creative and effective ways such as those used throughout the Ebola outbreak in West Africa can provide support during difficult and testing times.**

Increasing the frequency of and access to religious service broadcasts and adapting school curricula to be aired over the radio were welcome and effective measures supported by Concern. In countries where distributions of food and non-food items are essential and cannot be stopped indefinitely, Concern has successfully adapted distribution systems to large numbers of people, ensuring social distancing is practiced and sanitising/washing facilities at distribution sites are adequate<sup>xvi</sup>.



Figure 4 Concern Lebanon are assisting in the building of a facility for suspected positive Covid-19 cases, they also provide information to the community on prevention of the spread of the virus. Photo: Concern Worldwide

## Focus on practical measures that remove barriers to public health

Nearly three quarters of those living in least developed countries lack basic handwashing facilities at home<sup>xvii</sup>. Therefore, every alternate measure, proactive even if imperfect solutions, to protect people must be explored and instituted. Increasing access to water, improving sanitation and providing hygiene kits are essential responses to curb the spread of the virus. **Increasing information sharing and public messaging works to increase awareness and support people to change their behaviours as much as they can.**

## Enable semi-formal and informal businesses to operate safely

Small businesses are essential in communities where it is neither possible nor sensible to bulk buy. Not only are small market traders dependent on what they themselves can earn each day, their customers depend on them to sell in small affordable quantities of basic goods, and provide credit when it is needed. **These businesses must be supported and viewed as an essential community resource, to communicate information and look out for vulnerable members of the community.** Markets are often well governed by trade' associations and consultation directly with traders should influence policies on what is reasonable and workable to make market places safer.



## Invest in nutrition and food security

Experience from previous crises, shows the significant impact of movement restrictions and disease containment efforts on food production and access, and the importance of maintaining and upscaling humanitarian food security interventions for the most vulnerable populations. **Early response to the ongoing locust infestation is essential to minimise the impact on countries in the Horn of Africa of multiple shocks on food security.**

Undernutrition puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, increases the frequency and severity of such infections and delays recovery<sup>xviii</sup>. Nutrition programming must be recognised as a priority service to protect the health and welfare of children under 5, pregnant and lactating mothers and other vulnerable groups.

**Millions of children are losing out on essential nutrition with schools closed**, and many families cannot afford to feed their children as they have lost their income. Providing families with the means to feed their children must be a priority to prevent children from becoming malnourished and to protect their health. **Cash assistance to urban communities with no other means of earning a living, or where no social protection system exists**, must be prioritised in countries where no state social protection system exists.

## Prioritize communicating with the public to build trust

Accurate information communicated clearly, is key to successful effective prevention strategies. Messages should be consistent and driven out through multiple channels of communication. In Concern's experience, collaboration with trusted community members, such as teachers, traditional chiefs, religious and public figures, as well as engagement with youth groups is essential to reach across society.



Figure 5 Concern staff show how to identify the degree of malnutrition by using colour-coding of a MUAC tape during a session on Mother MUAC training at a Concern Supported Nutrition site in Cox's Bazar Refugee Camp, Bangladesh. Photo: Shah Arafat Rahman / Concern

## Stay and Deliver: Adapt humanitarian programmes to this new context

It is imperative that international aid programmes remain operational as far as is possible so as not to neglect existing humanitarian need, thus potentially generating even further global upheaval, conflict, displacements, resource depletion and the spread of other diseases in the coming months.

**Full funding of the COVID-19 UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan and investment in scalable actions that can curtail the spread of the virus must be prioritised**, preferably complementing and strengthening existing programmes. A diversion of funding from ongoing humanitarian services will undermine progress in some of the world's poorest countries and extend the breeding ground for the coronavirus itself.

**Life-saving humanitarian activities such as the distribution of food and cash must be considered essential services and be exempt from restriction or impediment by authorities.** As humanitarian staff provide life-saving assistance to the most vulnerable people in crisis, the movements of essential staff must be allowed to continue unrestricted by local and national authorities. The additional impact on our target groups if humanitarian programmes are suspended for any extended period of time will be disastrous.

**Governments must recognise humanitarian programmes as essential services and secure movement for humanitarian actors.** Humanitarian agencies need to do everything they can to stay and deliver interventions, and to adapt these to changing needs.

In conflict settings, state and non-state actors must also recognise the essential services provided by humanitarian actors and step up to allow access in accordance with international humanitarian law.

## Do the extraordinary

The world faces an unprecedented challenge. COVID-19 is a pandemic that has highlighted global inequality as never before, and our collective vulnerability to suffering and loss, regardless of wealth and power. The response in many countries has required greater courage and commitment to protect each other, and minimise the multiple impacts of the virus on the most vulnerable.

**A greater global response and exceptional political commitment is now needed** to ease the impact of COVID-19 on countries with the least resources to cope with its impact.

**Funding is desperately needed** to increase humanitarian response capacity and support national governments to protect their citizens.

**In conflict contexts, peace is essential** to allow all people the time to protect themselves and their families, and to allow assistance reach those with no means to avoid COVID-19. All states should support the call from the UN Secretary General for a global ceasefire.



*Figure 6 As part of the response to Covid-19, Concern Syria have begun distributing hygiene kits while social distancing in Northern Syria Photo: Concern Worldwide*

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IT TAKES

#### FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

**Réiseal Ní Chéilleachair**

Head of International Advocacy

Concern Worldwide

[reiseal.nicheilleachair@concern.net](mailto:reiseal.nicheilleachair@concern.net)