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FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots July 2020



Global Network
Against Food Crises

Integrated
actions for
lasting solutions

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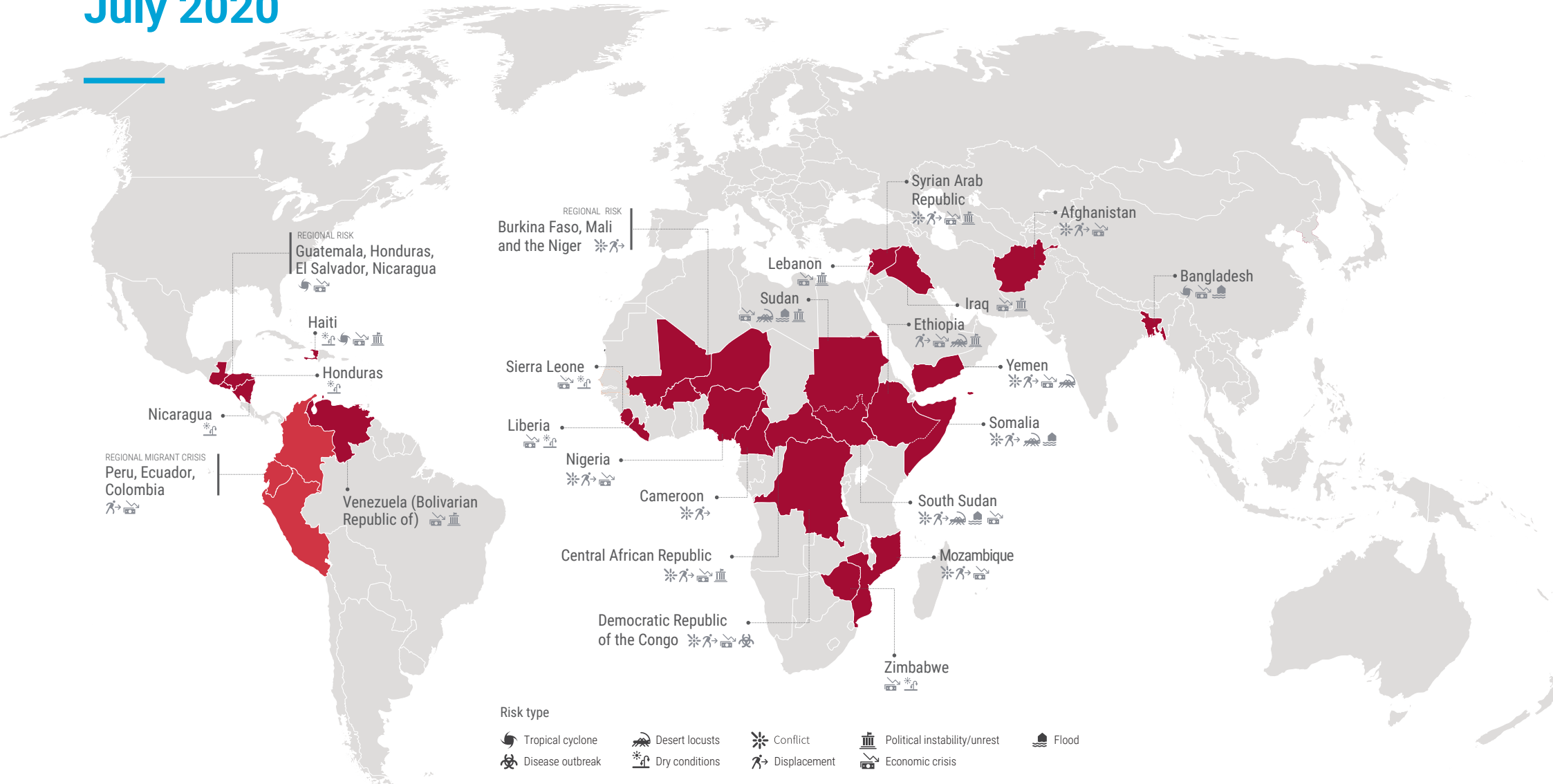
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FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots

July 2020



Source: FAO, April 2020. Map conforms to UN World map, February 2020;

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis unfolds at a time when the number of acutely food-insecure people in the world has already risen over the past four years, largely due to conflict, climate change and economic downturn. According to the latest Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC 2020), in 2019 almost 135 million people across 55 countries experienced acute hunger. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, these numbers have been further increasing. The UN Secretary General has recently warned about an impending global food emergency.

The secondary effects of the global pandemic beyond the health impact are wide-ranging and affect a large number of countries worldwide. While the evolution of COVID-19 and containment measures remain dynamic and unpredictable, and the medium and longer-term impacts of the crisis are yet to be fully understood, it is already clear that low and middle-income countries will be disproportionately affected.

The World Bank forecasts the deepest global recession since the Second World War and estimates that up to 100 million people across the world will be pushed into extreme poverty (WB 2020). For households in fragile contexts, the pandemic is particularly troubling, as it exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, driving communities deeper into hunger and destitution.

As jobs are lost, the flow of remittances slows down and food systems come under stress or are disrupted, the number of people facing acute food insecurity – the most extreme form of hunger – is going to increase. At the same time, should COVID-19 persist, and unless acute hunger is rapidly addressed and prevented, the world may also see a further rise in chronic hunger, with long-term consequences for hundreds of millions of children and adults. Prior to COVID-19, this trend of increasing chronic hunger had already been confirmed in many of the hotspot countries by the latest State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report (SOFI 2020).

This joint FAO-WFP analysis highlights countries that are at risk of significant food security deterioration, and in particular acute hunger and associated malnutrition. The analysis takes into account all major drivers of food insecurity, with a particular focus on the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides a forward-looking perspective, outlining the likely evolution of impacts over a period of approximately six months, aiming to inform urgent action to safeguard the food security of the most vulnerable communities in these locations.

The hotspot countries were selected through a consensus-based analytical process by FAO and WFP, focusing primarily on the following elements:

- levels of food insecurity and malnutrition prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on acute food insecurity;
- projections of acute food insecurity at country level;
- presence of existing compounding shocks and stressors including, among others, economic crisis or political instability, climate conditions, conflict and insecurity, plant pests and animal diseases;

- presence of natural-hazard risks, economic risks and conflict risks in an outlook of six months;
- government capacity to address COVID-19 impacts and severity of containment measures;
- dependence on commodity exports, food imports and remittances;
- planned and ongoing agricultural activities during the July-December period and existing or likely COVID-19 impacts on these activities;
- presence of particularly vulnerable or at-high-risk populations, including displaced populations; and
- issues concerning humanitarian access and operational constraints.

The analysis is based on the latest, available evidence. However, it is important to note that the situation on the ground is fast evolving and will require careful monitoring, as well as updates as more evidence becomes available.

Impacts of COVID-19 are highly context-specific and affect population groups differently. Overall, pre-existing vulnerabilities of population groups are likely to be exacerbated as availability of and access to basic services, employment opportunities, safety nets and resources to protect or rebuild livelihoods are more strained than ever before. Women, elderly people, youth, children, persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, minorities, mobile and displaced populations including refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and poor-labour migrants (international and internal) will likely face even greater challenges as existing formal and informal safety nets and social structures will be negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The urban poor living in densely populated areas, and households depending on the informal sector (both rural and urban), are expected to be among the hardest hit. For children from already impoverished and food-insecure households, the negative effects of the crisis, including extended school closures and missing out on school meals, could have lifelong effects and further perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty and inequality. Overall, COVID-19 will have group-specific implications which will need to be closely assessed and monitored to ensure 'no one is left behind'.

The report is divided into three sections. The first is an overview on the main pathways of secondary impacts of COVID-19 on food security, nutrition and agriculture, followed by regional overviews and a focus on hotspot countries. The last section lists strategic recommendations that should be urgently implemented to avoid a large-scale deterioration of acute food insecurity.

This report is part of a series of analytical products produced under the Global Network Against Food Crises initiative to enhance and coordinate the generation and sharing of evidence-based information and analysis for preventing and addressing food crises.

COVID-19 pathways of impact on food security

The COVID-19 pandemic has potentially far-reaching and multifaceted indirect impacts on societies and economies, which could last long after the health emergency is over. These could aggravate existing instabilities or crises, or lead to new ones with repercussions on food security, nutrition and livelihoods. This section outlines some of the key pathways of impact through which the pandemic is pushing vulnerable people further into food insecurity.

Pathway 1: Impacts on food access through reduced household purchasing power

The loss in purchasing power due to falling incomes, lost remittances and, in some contexts, higher food prices will disproportionately affect the ability of the urban poor and other market-dependent groups to access food.

- The impact on employment appears to be larger than initially expected, with ILO estimates recently being updated to an equivalent of 400 million full-time jobs lost and a 14 percent reduction in global working hours. In particular, countries with a high share of people employed in the informal sector, high working poverty rates and underperforming social protection systems are at risk of increasing food insecurity (ILO 2020).
- With over two billion people, or 62 percent of all those working worldwide, employed in the informal economy according to ILO data, millions of people face a growing risk of hunger. Earnings for informal workers are estimated to decline by 82 percent, with Africa and Latin America to face the largest decline (ILO 2020). Women and young people are disproportionately affected since they are

employed in sectors that are most impacted by the crisis.

- While remittances often serve as an important informal safety net in times of hardship, they typically slow down during a global economic crisis. The World Bank estimates remittances will fall globally by 20 percent in 2020 due to the economic impacts of COVID-19 (WB 2020).
- Domestic food prices have increased in many countries since the beginning of the pandemic and might still come under further pressure. A fall in poor countries' export earnings due to plummeting prices for primary commodities (oil, ores, metals) and/or a drastic fall in tourism have put a strain on currencies and driven up food prices, particularly for imported foods. Border closures and suspension of weekly and open-air markets in many countries have led to reduced regional trade and prevented farmers selling their produce, sometimes leading to localized food scarcity and increased prices.

Pathway 2: Impacts on availability of food, agricultural production and food supply chains

The COVID-19 pandemic is having significant – and likely increasing – implications for food production and supply, which is particularly concerning in already fragile settings.

- The smooth functioning of food value chains and the flow of agricultural products are critical to food security and nutrition. However, government measures such as import restrictions and movement limitations, necessary to contain the spread of the virus, have been disrupting entire food chains – from production to processing, packaging, transporting, marketing and consumption – as well as livestock movements, which are critical for the survival of pastoralists.
- Even though food and agricultural commodities are considered in many countries to be essential and are often exempt from restrictions, supply chains have been slowed and disrupted by transport delays, closed markets and export restrictions. These factors particularly affect farmers producing perishable goods, such as fruit and vegetable growers, resulting in waste of agricultural products, reduced wages and negative repercussions on their ability to prepare for the next cropping season.
- Moreover, labour shortages have further disrupted the food chain, with many labourers returning from neighboring countries or urban centres to their original homes in rural areas, awaiting the restrictions to be eased and the risk of infection to be minimized.

- The income of rural households has been decreased due to reduced remittances, limited opportunities for daily labour, closure of local markets and decline in local demand. This constrains their ability to purchase inputs – such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, animal feed and treatment – for the next planting season. In addition, due to supply chain disruptions, input prices are increasing in many countries. This dynamic is likely to lead to a vicious cycle of declining production, reduced agricultural labour opportunities and increasing food prices, resulting in negative coping strategies and a further deterioration of food and nutrition security.

Pathway 3: Impacts on government capacities to protect vulnerable populations

Primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19 have overstretched governments' capacities to protect vulnerable populations.

- Due to export earnings from primary commodities and tourism running dry, and ensuing currency depreciation, countries risk not having sufficient means to pay for vital imports or respond to the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic through measures such as scaling up social protection programmes.
- Countries with already low foreign exchange reserves or high public debt face particular difficulties. With a significant portion of the public budget devoted to servicing debt, it will be a struggle to find the necessary resources to respond to the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 and protect the most vulnerable against destitution and food insecurity.

Pathway 4: Impacts on political stability

Once movement restrictions are lifted and the economic slowdown hits harder, socio-political instability could increase in several countries due to different factors, often combined:

- Aggravation of core socioeconomic grievances with rising levels of unemployment (particularly among the youth), loss of income and livelihoods, increasing poverty, inequalities and food insecurity. This can further exacerbate existing social discontent and fragmentation – especially in countries with pre-existing and compounding economic crises. Analysis indicates that, in the coming months, levels of civil unrest risk being higher and having more destabilizing effects compared to recent years.
- Aggravation of existing political crises, increased fragmentation within ruling elites or new fractures that may increase political instability under heightened pressures from the pandemic and its response. Poor handling of COVID-19 outbreaks may turn public opinion against governments.
- As of 1 July, at least 67 countries and territories in the world had postponed elections due to COVID-19, according to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA 2020), and a number of countries had implemented measures affecting freedom of expression according to the COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker, a collaborative effort between the International and the European Centres for not-for-profit Law, and the UN Human Rights Office.

Pathway 5: Impacts on conflict dynamics

The indirect effects of COVID-19, and the actions taken in response, can contribute to increasing tensions and violence, and also affect the capacities and behaviour of local, national or international actors, which in turn may alter existing conflict and peace dynamics. Under certain conditions, COVID-19 may exacerbate existing drivers of conflict and undermine social and economic resilience. Conflict and violence are amongst the main drivers of food insecurity globally.

- Movement restrictions and border closures continue to affect transhumance and disrupt access to natural resources. Where disputes, tensions and conflicts have previously existed, their frequency and intensity will potentially increase, especially if movement restrictions remain in place for extended periods.
- Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are using a more permissive security environment as an opportunity to intensify operations and to change tactics towards de-facto control of areas. Capacity to address NSAGs has reduced, with security forces overstretched as they focus on COVID-19 responses, and as states struggle with less resources and other political and socioeconomic challenges. The ability of international coalitions to respond to NSAGs has also been affected due to concerns over infections and refocusing on domestic responses.
- NSAGs may increase recruitment in areas hit hard by high unemployment, attracting more people to the profitable illegal economies under their control. NSAGs may also seek to exploit previous socioeconomic grievances, identity group marginalization and concerns over state legitimacy.
- In ethnically or religiously diverse contexts, specific groups may be blamed for transmitting the virus, be discriminated against or made a scapegoat for outbreaks, increasing intercommunal tensions.
- The demands of the pandemic may divert international attention and resources away from conflict prevention and mediation, reshaping stakeholders' engagement. This may include fewer opportunities for face-to-face diplomatic efforts and temporarily hamper peacekeeping operations if troop deployments and rotations are disrupted by travel restrictions.

Regional overview and country hotspots



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