



# Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and family farming

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILY FARMING

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As the [Coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#) continues to spread both within countries and globally, the present document aims to assess the initial impact of this pandemic on family farming. This document suggests possible interventions which could support family farmers to re-balance negative impacts of the health crisis and related economic disruptions on food security and nutrition, in particular in local food systems.

The COVID-19 crisis puts both lives and livelihoods at risk. It shows that health is a public good and the importance of systemic and comprehensive interventions. These actions can address health, economic and social challenges.

While the disease hits countries, societies and individuals at different speeds and force, it affects both food supplies and demands worldwide. Unless measures protect the most vulnerable, we risk a food crisis. To mitigate the pandemic's impact across the food system, both global and country interventions are necessary. Measures meant to preserve and re-adjust food supply chains need to be complemented with context-specific solutions using locally-available resources and goods.

Crises have significant impacts on countries with high levels of food insecurity, primarily affecting the most vulnerable groups of the society, the poorest people. Family farmers – including peasants, fisher folk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, mountain farmers, forest users, women and youth – especially small-scale farmers, are particularly exposed to the effects of pandemics.

Family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family, and is primarily reliant on the family labour of both women and men (FAO and IFAD, 2019a). This family-based agriculture<sup>1</sup> is the predominant farming model as it accounts for 90 percent of the 608 million farms in the world. It produces the majority of the world's food in value terms (Lowder, Sánchez and Bertini, 2019) and therefore is the foundation of food security and sustainable healthy food systems. Family farms are mostly operated at small-scale level considering that 95 percent of existing farm units are less than 5 hectares and more than 98 percent of farms are less than 20 hectares (HLPE, 2013). Those farms are essential for food systems in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, south Asia, and China, where farms less than 20 ha produce more than 75 percent of most food

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<sup>1</sup> In this document, agriculture refers to crop, livestock, fisheries (capture and aquaculture) and forestry.

commodities (Herrero *et al.*, 2017). However, family farmers are among the most affected by poverty and vulnerability, and face economic, financial and social risks.

In context of COVID-19, they might be disadvantaged due to the temporary movement restrictions hindering their access to markets, and as perishable goods and small animals – mostly produced and kept by family farmers – are cut off from markets and slaughterhouses. In addition, family farmers' market access can be undermined due to the change in consumers' behaviours, the closure of farmers' markets, and commercialization channels such as schools and other procurement opportunities. Family farmers lacking storage facilities risk losing their products (FAO, 2020).

Direct interventions targeting family farmers can bring sustainable benefits to rural economies. As family farmers and their organizations and cooperatives are rooted in their territories and in their communities, they are closely embedded in local realities. For production activities, family farmers rely on their own production (or reproduction) of resources and on locally available inputs. Supporting them would enable comprehensive and long-term solutions, even in situations of crisis.

Ultimately measures promoting socially equitable forms of food production, processing and distribution can mitigate the pandemic's immediate impacts across food systems and revamp economic dynamics, cultural and ecological diversity of rural areas, and of small and medium municipalities (Maluf, 2020). The following considerations are proposed to re-balance the negative impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition, in particular in local food systems, now and in the longer-term.

### **POSSIBLE MEASURES TO MITIGATE IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON FAMILY FARMERS**

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#### **1. Stabilizing access to food by supporting rural incomes, preserving ongoing livelihoods and keeping family farmers producing**

Past health crises impacted food security of the world's poorest, of which more than 75 percent live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods (FAO and IFAD, 2019). Family farming is characterized by a unique nexus between the family and the farm; in an emergency situation such as the current one, interventions should ensure rural families' livelihoods and uphold and incentivize the continuity of family farm production, while their access to markets is disrupted.

Often family farmers, especially small-scale farmers, carry out various economic activities to ensure their family's income. While – as main activity – they produce and sell, in general, their income is complemented by additional, formal or informal, permanent or temporary work. Reduced economic activities and closed small businesses in their neighbouring areas can impact the final income that family farmers' generate. The shortage in family income can impact their capacity and decision to continue investing, as inputs for production will compete with immediate and basic family needs.

Mitigation actions therefore need to provide social protection, to ensure access to basic goods and health protection measures (FAO, 2020a). The expansion of cash transfer programmes in rural areas, including low-income family farmers, and the inclusion of emergency cash support

through existent public agriculture programmes and policies to ensure a minimal production, can be effective in addressing immediate needs.

Simultaneously, production and market access-related interventions may guarantee that family farmers continue supplying fresh food for their communities and to local food systems. These measures can also help the local economy. Moreover, actions may consider rebuilding the productive capacity of food producers, if severe impact depletes productive assets. Measures to re-establish access to inputs, increase demands that family farmers produce (by public procurement for school feeding and other food distributions schemes, adapting famers' markets, incentivising direct delivery, and incentivizing e-commerce companies to procure from smallholders) and provide financial support, including grants to re-build production capacity, are crucial.

Interventions supporting family farmers' productive activities should be accompanied by the development of adapted advisory and financial services (FAO, 2020b). Family farmers are the major investors of the agricultural sector: their production systems are both complex and dynamic, integrating productive assets and the patrimony of the family. The economic impact of this crisis on family farmers may lead to decapitalization, in order to obtain income (cash) or repay loans or debts.

Interventions therefore may address the debt exposure of small- and medium-sized family farmers to reduce the financial burden of existing loans. Repayment deferrals and debt cancellation could allow family farmers to maintain their production base. Specific financial instruments with low or negative interest rates or the re-focalization of public extension services toward the support of family farming have to be integrated into policy interventions for more local impact.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of rural advisory services, using and combining the existing capacities from different actors in smart public-private partnerships, could fill the existent gap of available services. Services provided by cooperatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or farmer's organizations could complement the existing rural extension networks provided by the public and the private sector.

Some coordinated social protection and productive measures target specific vulnerable populations, including women and young farmers, while increasing family farmers' capacity to plan, diversify and increase the sustainability and resilience of their production. Public purchase programs from family farmers feed vulnerable groups, supply to public institutions, or supply to school feeding programs. These programs could help access to fresh food, livelihoods and basic income for family farmers, with positive nutritional, economic and environmental results, and optimize public investments.

### **Proposals for interventions:**

- Develop and promote integrated public procurement and food distribution programs (such as for public institutions, food assistance and re-arrangement of school feeding programs), to guarantee continuous and structured demand for family farmers'

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, please refer to FAO.2020.

products and services, thus to support their capacity to cope with the impacts of COVID-19.

- Promote the development of adequate social protection programs or scale up existing ones such as cash transfer, food transfer or voucher, other in-kind support, child care services, unemployment benefits, free health care, subsidized social insurance or security payments, to effectively respond to the vulnerabilities of family farmers and their communities across the life cycle by promoting their economic inclusion, income security and sustainable and resilient livelihoods.
- Promote and strengthen locally appropriate advisory, business and market support services tailored to and easily available by family farmers (extension, training, and market information). Ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory access to these services, in particularly for women and youth.
- Promote emergency financial measures for the support of affected family farmers: provide short-term stimulus packages that support sales, cash flow and working capital to maintain or increase cash flows and provide tax credits, cuts, deferrals and refunds.
- Reduce the financial burden of existing loans for family farmers through repayment, deferrals and debt cancellations and promote overall family-farmers' access to finance in the short, medium and long term: incentivize the creation of COVID-19 related guarantee schemes for smallholders;<sup>3</sup> develop direct public lending and set targets for financial institutions to lend to smallholder producer and provide grants, subsidize loans and tax incentives.

## 2. Incentives for local food systems and family farmers access to markets

Restaurant and (less frequent) grocery shop closures diminish demands for fresh produce and fisheries products, which are often produced by smallholder farmers,<sup>4</sup> affecting producers and suppliers. Transport restrictions and quarantine measures are likely to impede farmers' access to markets, curbing their productive capacities and hindering them from selling their produce. Small-scale food producers, in this context, are particularly vulnerable.

As long-haul transportation, storage and processing of fruits, vegetables and poultry are reduced due to labour shortages and other restrictions, local producers are on the frontline of market and distribution innovation, delivering a range of produce, relying on customers by word of mouth and online. This trend is catching on both in big and small towns and cities and the market range of such production systems may expand in the future .

When addressing the challenges created by the pandemic to food systems, it is necessary to dedicate attention and assess family farmers' access to markets. Interventions need to look simultaneously at the conditions of family farmers' participation in the main value chains, stimulate family farmers' associations and cooperatives to access local markets (short circuit and short value chains) and promote alliances with small and medium enterprises (SMEs). A more inclusive market environment could provide structured demand for family farmers' products resulting in their economic and productive stability.

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<sup>3</sup> For further information please refer to FAO, 2020c.

<sup>4</sup> Smallholders (farms below 2 hectare) allocate the largest percentage (55 to 59 percent) of their crop production to food compared to all other farm size classes. Farms below 2 ha produce the biggest share of the world's fruits, pulses, and roots, while medium sized farms produce more vegetables and nuts, and large farms produce more oil crops (Riccardi et al. 2018).

The economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis stresses the urgency for rural communities, small towns and cities to re-shape the economy and generate employment opportunities, once the restrictive measures end. Measures during the crisis could pave the way for new sustainable businesses that could emerge from this crisis. Local businesses that are rooted in local products and culture, and linked to the territorial socio-biodiversity and to the communities producing it can emerge from the crisis. This can help sustainability, resilience, and boost the local economic cycle or circular economy.

In this context, it is also relevant to promote innovative partnerships among actors directly related to the functioning of local value chains. To guarantee continuity for local food businesses, local producers should be empowered and SMEs should be promoted. This can guarantee employment opportunities for the local population, boosting the local economy in general. In addition, food producers' collaboration (through cooperatives or other forms of associations, networks and platforms) can provide adapted logistical, processing, distribution and marketing strategies and bring a consistent and organized supply of local products to local markets.

For example, measures related to temporary reduction or to the complete elimination of taxation of SMEs during the crisis, could be combined with the elimination of taxes on local products that are sold locally. Local governments could also facilitate alliances and networks among the different actors of the local food system and stimulate innovative arrangements with contributions coming from different actors.

To balance challenges in the food supply chains resulted by difficulties experienced in global trade and logistics, local and short circuit markets can provide an immediate, direct benefit for farmers, SMEs and consumers. Local municipalities can stimulate an enabling environment and ensure appropriate space for direct purchasing. Facilitating local food distribution opportunities can keep up production and guarantee access to fresh food for consumers, complementing the access through supermarkets. These local food distribution opportunities can be through farmers markets; farmers' markets associations promoting delivery; alternative channels to provide meals for kids while school feeding programs are suspended; and alliances between family farmers' associations and cooperatives with SMEs.

### **Proposals for interventions:**

- Maintain and promote enabling market conditions for family farmers and monitoring food flow and the change in food prices to guarantee transparency, adequate remuneration for family farmers and affordable price for consumers.
- Develop and adjust policies, including innovative partnerships (also with the private sector), related to value chain functioning that empower family farmers, including women, youth and their organizations.
- Stimulate innovative institutional arrangements also in the urban-rural continuum, to reinforce the functioning of domestic and local markets for family farmers and to provide nutritious and diversified food for all during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Support the newly emerging alternative logistics and food distribution initiatives by family farmers' organizations and cooperatives directly linking producers and consumers and applying new technologies in particular tools of e-commerce to maximize their access to reliable and remunerative markets.

### 3. Ensuring that family farmers are not exposed to COVID-19 transmission

When defining interventions to minimize the impacts of COVID-19, governments may consider a broader interaction with food security and nutrition: As no current evidence suggests that food would be a source or route of transmission of the virus (FAO and WHO, 2020), the focus should be on the protection of food producers and workers to avoid catching and spreading COVID-19.

In that sense, measures should consider the around 550 million family farms (Lowder, Sánchez, Bertini, 2019) – essential for the local food systems producing the majority of food – and the specific organization of their production systems based on the intrinsic interconnection between the way they produce and live. For family farming, labour is a key feature, as the farm is run relying predominantly on family labour and they derive from that work a large but variable share of its income. Members of the family also engage in activities other than farming to complement their livelihoods. Part of family farmers' investments is also often made through family labour. This implies that it is of primary importance to maintain their health conditions, as to guarantee for their production capacities and productivity.

Family farmers should be provided with advice and instructions – also in local and indigenous languages – on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19, in particular the importance of hand washing with normal soap and physical distancing as a protective barrier to infection (WHO, 2020). Family farmers should receive information on national guidelines that need to be followed for reporting cases or suspect cases of COVID-19, and on the need to notify all close contacts of the infected person so they can take measures to minimise spread.

On the other end, interventions should focus on the commercialization of the family farmers' products in all the different forms. These forms could include different value chains, local markets, and public procurement. Interventions should also focus on organizations of local markets, to ensure effective compliance with the specific regulations established for COVID-19. Family farmers delivering their produce to local markets and food premises should have received the information on the potential risks involved in contact transmission of COVID-19.

Local markets should remain open as much as possible, and the security of sellers and buyers should be guaranteed. Those are the markets where the majority of family farmers' production is commercialized and where the consumers and communities are accessing fresh food. However, governments and local authorities may take specific measures, in collaboration with the family farmers' organizations, and re-organize those markets in order to mitigate all risks of exposure to sellers and the consumers arising from COVID-19, in terms of person-to-person infection or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects.

Possible interventions could address the enlargement of the dedicated space for the market to better separate the different stands and the reduction of, in a rotated base, the number of open stands while guaranteeing the availability of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for the sellers. In the same time, to respect the safety distance, the access to the market place can be regulated, if needed with the presence of a dedicated personal.

Even if family farmers mainly use family labour they also rely on limited temporary, seasonal or long- term hired labour. Governments should share information with family farmers on the

necessary personal hygiene and PPE (face masks, gloves, and disinfectant) that should be used by all workers, regardless of worksites, tasks performed and source of exposure. To the extent possible, such equipment should be made available to all family farmers.

### Proposals for interventions:

- Ensure the dissemination of guidelines and instructions – in particular in local languages – related to personal hygiene and physical distancing, as of World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation, to protect family farmers, and temporary, seasonal or long-term hired labour from contracting COVID-19.
- Provide protective equipment for family farmers and farm workers.
- Promote regulations to guarantee appropriate conditions and logistics at closed and open market spaces (such as rotation of sellers or distancing of stands).

## CONCLUSIONS

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To mitigate the pandemic's impacts across the food system, global and country-specific interventions should be taken simultaneously at different scales: measures meant to preserve and re-adjust the global food supply chains need to be complemented with context-specific solutions harnessing locally-available resources and goods. Family farmers are well-positioned to provide contextualized and comprehensive solutions. Working with them, governments can address multiple challenges and reach objectives encompassing economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Beyond the immediate interventions addressing the current emergency situations, countries may take this opportunity to pursue permanent solutions and promote transformation towards more resilient, sustainable food systems. The United Nations Decade of Family Farming offers a comprehensive framework, to be adapted into context-specific National Action Plans, to accelerate actions undertaken in a collective and coherent manner to support family farmers. Family farmers have proven their capacity to develop new strategies and provide innovative responses in situations of emerging social, environmental and economic crisis. Taking actions with them will simultaneously mitigate the impacts of the current crisis and contribute to the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development.

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