



Urban food systems and COVID-19: The role of cities and local governments in responding to the emergency

1. THE DISRUPTION TO URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS CAUSED BY COVID-19

Cities, with their high population density, are particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic and many cities in developing countries do not have adequate capacity to address the disruptions caused by the response to the health emergency. The risk is particularly high for the 1.2 billion people living in the congested and overcrowded informal urban settlements where conditions are already unsafe and unhealthy for human living. The very poor and those living in slums have extremely limited access to essential health and sanitation facilities, nutritious food and adequate infrastructure such as piped clean water and electricity. The spread of the virus in crowded cities could have extensive morbidity and mortality consequences for urban populations.

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting urban food systems worldwide, posing a number of challenges for cities and local governments that are obliged to deal with rapid changes in food availability, accessibility and affordability – which strongly impact the food security and nutrition situation of urban populations. The majority of the urban population in developing countries relies on informal sector activities and casual labour including those related to food systems (street food vendors and those working in wet markets) and have access to limited or no assets or savings. Policies to limit the effects of the virus such as lockdowns, or physical distancing can spell disaster for the livelihoods of those individuals and their families leading, *inter alia*, to food insecurity and deficient nutrition.

Poor urban residents can only afford to buy food in small quantities, depend on small shops and open-air markets rather than supermarkets or food delivery services. Efforts to close or reduce the activities of small food outlets or open markets for public health reasons compromise people's capacity to buy food and the livelihoods of producers, vendors and workers unless they are accompanied by alternative and protective measures targeting the vulnerable populations and small businesses¹. Under such circumstances, it has been observed that large numbers of city dwellers return to rural areas, risking spread of the virus to isolated areas where health services are limited. Food system disruptions could lead to food price spikes that, along with the loss of income for millions of people, could trigger civil unrest as happened in many cities, especially in Africa during the food price crisis of 2007–2008.

The bottom-line is that poor people in urban areas are seriously affected not only by the spread of the virus itself but also by policies and measures to contain its spread – unless effective programmes are put into place to mitigate these effects and to support their livelihoods.

¹ Lockdowns and mobility restrictions also affect other essential goods such as heating fuel.

Supporting cities and local governments in their actions to mitigate food systems disruptions and loss of income of workers relying on this sector by sharing and scaling up experiences and practices that are being proven to work is therefore critically important. This brief introduces some of the practices that cities around the world are already implementing and provides recommendations to support cities and local governments in ensuring food security and nutrition during and after the COVID-19 emergency.

2. CURRENT MEASURES THAT CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE TAKING TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

Local and subnational governments worldwide, in collaboration with national governments, are taking action to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions include (i) putting in place and/or enforcing measures to prevent the spread of the disease; (ii) introducing programmes aimed at protecting affected households from the effects of the pandemic itself; (iii) taking food system-oriented actions to counteract the effects of restrictive measures (lockdowns, school feeding interruption, food distribution disruptions, etc.) on food security and nutrition, and ensure that food systems do not break down; and (iv) initiating actions to prevent their food systems from becoming a source of propagation of the disease itself.

- Food distribution at neighbourhood level is being scaled up by public administrations and supported by community/non-governmental actors that are stepping up activities to support public efforts.
- Food hubs and e-commerce using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms or informal networks are providing effective alternatives to support distribution to consumers, retailers, caterers and producers.
- Local governments and other food system participants are taking actions to improve the food environment (i.e. what physically surrounds people and which is fundamental for the availability of and access to nutritious food). Such actions aim at enabling continuous flow and access to nutritious food for all, particularly for the more vulnerable while at the same time complying with sanitary provisions and food safety standards.
- Urban administrations promote education campaigns for responsible food purchase behaviour, for reducing food waste, and activate innovative mechanisms for sourcing and distributing food to vulnerable people (e.g. alternatives to school feeding programmes where schools are closed).

However, the actions of urban and local governments often fall under the radar of national governments, donor agencies and global or regional financial institutions. Examples of local governments' actions include:

The municipality of Wuhan has been improving the “Vegetable basket” project to guarantee food supply during the lockdown. Wuhan has cultivated 20 000 hectares since February 2020, mainly with fresh vegetables, and will continue to recover local production step by step, consistent with the quarantine policy. Moreover, the municipality of Wuhan has ensured normal operation of the wholesale and retail markets, while taking strict hygiene and health measures to limit the spread of the virus. Supported by other municipalities within and outside of the Hubei Province, the municipality of Wuhan has distributed food within the city utilizing both public transportation and military trucks. The e-commerce also plays an important role in

linking farmers with consumers – based on the National Agricultural Product Market Association platform, the municipality of Wuhan collaborates with the private sector to facilitate online purchase and delivery of food. The market monitoring department within the local government also supervises food prices through the municipal agricultural products information system.

The municipality of Milan², in collaboration with the Food Policy Office, the Social Policies Department, the Civil Protection, the Food Bank for sourcing food, private sector and civil society organizations, has developed the “Food Aid Systems” to compensate for the restrictive measures taken to limit the spread of the virus. The Food Aid Systems currently target mainly the elderly and vulnerable people. A temporary food supply infrastructure has been created including: i) one logistic centre at the Food Bank; ii) seven temporary food hubs with storage capacities; and iii) vehicles and minibuses for food delivery. The system serves around 20 000 people and it is coordinated at city level. The municipality has also created a map with food retail outlets at neighborhood level that includes grocery shops offering home delivery service

The **City of New York**³ has been active in facilitating access to food for all. The city government, nonprofit and community organizations, academic institutions and private industry are currently active on different fronts, including: i) setting up of an inter-agency team in the city government to ensure a coordinated response; ii) making three free meals available daily for any New Yorker through 400 Meal Hubs across the city; iii) promoting special or exclusive supermarket shopping hours for seniors and/or pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions; iv) developing food resources guidelines for each neighbourhood in New York City; v) scaling up food bank services; and vi) repurposing restaurants to feed first-respondents and provide at-cost meals for vulnerable communities.

According to Rikolto⁴, the **municipality of Quito** is facilitating access to food through: i) food hub mobile units utilizing municipal buses (following the Wuhan example of mobile food hubs); ii) partnering with food banks; iii) communication campaign for responsible food purchasing; and iv) mapping the food access vulnerability.

In **Lima**⁵, the municipality is supporting the decentralization of food shopping. A mobile wholesale market service has been established to distribute food in eight districts of the Lima Metropolitan area. Moreover, the city is also working with the Municipal Enterprise of Market to monitor market prices and avoid speculation.

The municipality of **Medellin**, in coordination with rural producers and private companies, mobilizes resources for the sale and distribution of more than seven tonnes of food from farmers’ markets.

² Lockdowns and mobility restrictions also affect other essential goods such as heating fuel. Municipality of Milano. Milan’s Food Policy. Food Aid System. [online]. Milan. [Cited 9 April 2020] <http://www.foodpolicymilano.org/en/food-aid-system/>

³ New York City. COVID-19 Food Assistance Resources. [online]. New York. [Cited 9 April 2020] www.nyc.gov/getfoodnyc

⁴ Rikolto International s.o.n. [online]. Leuven. [Cited 9 April 2020] <https://www.rikolto.org/>

⁵ Municipality of Lima. MERCADO MAYORISTA MÓVIL SE TRASLADÓ A VILLA MARÍA DEL TRIUNFO Y ATE. [online]. Lima. [Cited 9 April 2020] <http://www.munlima.gob.pe/noticias/item/39823-municipalidad-de-lima-mercado-mayorista-movil-se-traslado-a-villa-maria-del-triunfo-y-ate>

In **Montevideo**, citizens and local organizations are implementing a traditional model of home deliveries of food, fruits and vegetables called “*ollas populares*” – some directly from producers to consumers, with special attention to vulnerable people.

In **Brasilia (DF), Caixias do Sul (RS) and João Pessoa (PB)** in Brazil, popular and community restaurants kept functioning and expanded their distributions to reach all the marginalized populations. Direct serving of meals is being replaced by packed meals for takeaway.

The municipality of **Chía** in Colombia, created a space for those who wish to donate non-perishable food. They can do so without leaving their home, using a digital platform or a municipal call centre dedicated exclusively for this initiative.

3. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO SUPPORT CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN ENSURING FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY?

Short-term actions

In the short term, it is key to support cities in mitigating the social costs of the disease and costs related to the response to the COVID-19 emergency while ensuring compliance of the population, including the business community, with the required measures/restrictions. This can be done as follows:

- Developing capacities on **mapping vulnerable people and their access to nutritious food**, combining the knowledge of communities and local organizations (e.g. Slums Associations) with innovative ICTs for identifying those that are most in need and develop approaches that build on existing activities.
- Supporting the development of mechanisms for **designating food chains as essential services** or ensuring that workers and producers can continue to circulate freely, while abiding to social health and physical distancing regulations, and monitoring and curbing collusive behaviour and other actions that may lead to sharp food price increases.
- Supporting, through context-specific evaluations, the implementation of **strategies that allow local markets to remain open**, while putting in place strict physical distancing measures within and outside markets. Cities that are allowing only supermarkets to remain open may see adverse effects in the long run. The involvement and dialogue with local food systems actors and civil society organization is crucial.
- Strengthening the **capacity of local governments on actions to promote smooth food system functioning**, food assistance and other relevant programmes operated by local administrations and better link those with nationally operated programmes to ensure consistency.
- **Support the collection of information at local and municipal level and the drafting of policy guidance.** The collection of primary information is key to map the local and subnational government responses to the COVID-19 emergency, to identify challenges and gaps to be resolved, to catalogue successes, good practices and challenges faced by local governments as well as by other food-related actors (e.g. the private sector and civil society organizations) and propose areas for strengthening coordination among them. Particular attention should be given to the identification of actions and measures experienced in developing countries/cities, as most of the existing publications are mainly based on experiences from the global North.

- Establishing an **Urban Food Actions (UFA) COVID-19 Knowledge Hub** for facilitating not only local governments' access to reliable information on practices by national peers but also by peers around the globe. The platform will serve for sharing information and experiences on programme, design and implementation successes, challenges and scaling up modalities. The [Urban Food Actions Platform](#), already in place and hosted by FAO, could serve as a starting point.
- **Promoting the initiation of municipal dialogue including dialogue with national networks/alliances of local governments**, aiming at facilitating the exchange of experiences and at raising the voice of local governments in the global arena. International city networks such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), United Nations Agencies and international organizations can play a crucial role in fostering the municipal dialogues.

Medium and long-term actions to strengthen urban food systems' resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic exposes serious limitations in the global but also urban food system functioning and resilience. Along with the evolution of the pandemic and also in its wake, important questions have to be answered regarding how urban food systems can be better managed to avoid that such events turn into food security, nutrition and livelihood crises.

Part of the response should be the greater spatial integration of the food systems. Could a (further) decentralization of food systems and the provision of the appropriate legal frameworks and resources improve its management and effectiveness? What have the experiences been from more decentralized systems? Can an increase in local power (as in the case of Wuhan) result in better management of the health / food system links? Below, possible actions are presented:⁶

- Facilitating the establishment of an **integrated policy and planning frameworks** for bridging the national-urban governance gaps linking health and food systems. Such frameworks will create an enabling environment for cities and local governments to effectively act in emergency situations. The planning framework should also include social protection schemes and risk prevention and reduction plans that include pandemics.
- Supporting the development of the **urban food systems analysis, the development of food systems stakeholder maps, retail food environment (formal and informal) maps** aiming at identifying gaps, mobilizing various actors and promoting context-specific strategies in emergency situations.

Establishing or strengthening multi-stakeholder and multi-sectorial food governance mechanisms at the level of the local-municipal governments (e.g. Food Policy Councils or similar entities) for promoting structured and interconnected actions including those in cases of emergency. Food governance mechanisms can act as a consultative forum and advise local governments on structures and integrated actions, support the development of a preparedness food systems plan and develop adaptive measures involving also other actors such as civil society organizations, smallholders and family farmers, involving the private sector throughout the food chain. The experiences of Milan, New York City, Quito and Lima among others demonstrate that factors such as the integration of food and health systems into urban policies and plans, the existence of a food policy office or a food

⁶ The actions are in line with the FAO Framework for the Urban Food Agenda (<http://www.fao.org/3/CA3151EN/ca3151en.pdf>).

systems department are crucial for quickly identifying and implementing coordinated actions among different actors to have immediate positive impact on vulnerable people.

- **Promoting short supply chains (buying from closer sources) and strengthening rural urban linkages** to adequately support food systems. While there is a global call to not disrupt international trade, the crisis has put a strain on distribution channels, and the importance of domestic food supply has come to the fore. The crisis provides an opportunity to underline the multiple benefits of local food systems, enabling local actors to better coordinate during such crisis to avoid main gaps in food distribution, and above all, making cities more food resilient to such crisis thanks to existing urban and peri-urban food production, processing and the setup and maintenance of local food reserves.
- **Developing capacities on innovative food distribution and logistics strategies**– The COVID-19 emergency can become a catalyst for transforming the way food systems are managed in urban areas. Many of the responses could also be appropriate after the pandemic for rethinking urban food systems. Optimizing last-mile logistics, the physical distribution of food occurring in the last part of the food supply chain, is for example key in many cities worldwide. Initiatives such as the mobile wholesale markets in Lima and the temporary food hubs in Milan are innovative strategies supported by local governments that actively connect food supply and distribution according to need. The establishment of food hubs as a permanent solution can have a positive impact on reducing congestion and carbon emissions while also becoming an important component of the emergency preparedness plan. Moreover, e-commerce represents an innovative strategy to be explored and scaled up if it can contribute to facilitate the access to food for all, including vulnerable people, particularly in emergency situations.

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