

Recipe for disaster: COVID-19 and world hunger

by Dane Moores

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World hunger is soaring under the shadow of COVID-19. As many as **161 million** more people faced hunger in 2020 compared to the previous year – more than the total increase over the past five years combined. Most worryingly, right now more than **41 million** people are suffering emergency levels of food insecurity and/or famine-like conditions in large swathes of Africa and the Middle East.

Based on current **estimates**, more people in the world are now dying from starvation than they are from COVID-19.

While the drivers of food insecurity and hunger are inherently local – driven by their own unique combination of environmental, economic, and social shocks – there are three common ingredients in the mix, combining to create a ‘recipe for disaster’.

The first ingredient is record food prices. In **May 2020**, global food prices reached their highest levels in a decade. Retail food prices have risen in most countries since COVID-19, but the impact has been greatest in poor countries where food accounts for a larger share of household budgets. Since the pandemic was declared – between February 2020 and July 2021 – Australian food prices rose by an average of 3.5%. This was dwarfed by **food price increases** in Myanmar (54%), Mozambique (38.3%), Vanuatu (30.9%), Syria (29.2%) and Timor-Leste (17.7%) – among people who could least afford it. Higher food prices are also affecting the work of humanitarian actors, with the **World Food Programme** forced to pay 13% more for wheat in July 2021 than it did in the previous year.

The situation is particularly dire for 47 low-income countries reliant on food imports, classified by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as **Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries**. These countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, are forecast to see **food import costs** jump 20% this year alone.

But to what extent are these ‘price shocks’ related to COVID-19? The relationship between COVID-19 and food prices is not straightforward. On the one hand, loss of income and rising unemployment from lockdowns and movement restrictions have

put downward pressure on food prices as families reduce their expenditure on food. At the same time, COVID-19 and measures to contain the virus have disrupted food supply chains, labour mobility and the availability of inputs such as seeds and fertilisers, which has affected the availability of food and increased the cost of production and transport, placing upward pressure on food prices.

The second ingredient is pandemic-related job losses. The sharp rise in food prices comes as the pandemic has triggered job losses and, in turn, the ability of millions to afford nutritious food. Developing countries alone are expected to lose more than **US\$220 billion** in income because of COVID-19. The knock-on effects of the pandemic could plunge **150 million** people into extreme poverty by the end of 2021. Seven countries (including Indonesia and Samoa) have dropped entire income categories since the pandemic, according to the latest **World Bank classifications**.

As incomes fall, so does household purchasing power. According to the **State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021**, three billion people (40% of the world's population) could not afford healthy diets in 2020. A World Vision survey of more than 750 households across the Pacific and Timor-Leste in late 2020 found that one in five households had skipped meals or ate cheaper meals since COVID-19 because they could not afford a healthy diet. The situation was even worse in Asia, where **World Vision's survey of 14,000 households** found that 50% of families were relying on cheaper, less nutritious food, 36% reduced their food portions, and 28% skipped meals. Based on these findings, up to 85 million households across Asia have no or limited food stocks.

The third ingredient is reduced access to nutrition services. There has been a **40% reduction** in the coverage of essential nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries since the pandemic, reaching 75–100% in lockdown contexts. This means that countless people are missing out on potentially life-saving early detection and treatment of malnutrition. School closures meant that **370 million children** missed out on an estimated 39 billion in-school meals during the pandemic. For many children, a school meal was their most reliable source of nutritious food.

Together, rising food prices, reduced incomes, and disrupted nutrition services are creating a global food emergency. The **United Nations** has warned that, without large-scale coordinated action, this crisis could have “consequences for health and nutrition of a severity and scale unseen for more than half a century”. **One recent study** concluded that, by the end of 2022, the nutrition crisis from COVID-19 could result in 13.6 million more children suffering from wasting or acute malnutrition, 2.6 million more children suffering from stunting, and 283,000 more deaths for children under five.

It's not too late to prevent the worst of this nutrition crisis. Organisations like World Vision have already ramped up responses to the hunger crisis, but a multi-sector collective response is required. The upcoming UN [Food Systems Summit](#) (23 September) presents a historic opportunity for the international community, and for the Australian Government, to recommit to equitable food systems.

Australia has an opportunity to be a leading voice at the summit to build back better and fairer food systems in the wake of the pandemic. In addition to longer-term reform, immediate action is needed to provide life-saving food and cash assistance to those on the brink of famine. The Australian Government should lead by example by delivering an emergency famine prevention package to the Horn of Africa and the Middle East to prevent a crisis from turning into a catastrophe.

For a more comprehensive analysis, see [World Vision Australia's report](#) 'Price Shocks: How COVID-19 is triggering a pandemic of child malnutrition... and how we can stop it'.

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