

Food quantity and quality were disrupted by the pandemic but long-term undernourishment lingers-on worldwide

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a series of disruptions in the US food supply over the last nearly year-and-a-half. In the early days of the pandemic in the US, we saw a reduction in the amount of food being consumed in restaurants and a matching increase in food purchases for home consumption.

The results: greens destined for restaurants were left rotting in piles near the fields where they were produced, primal meat cuts piled up in storage, and hamburger was nearly impossible to find on grocery store shelves.

Since then, there have been intermittent shortages of various meat products as processing facilities are temporarily shut down when workers test positive for COVID-19 and the plants have to be sanitized before resuming operations.

For the most part, programs to address unemployment in the COVID-19 era and resources directed at hunger programs were successful and the US avoided a sharp increase in hunger and undernutrition, though an underlying pool of adults and children suffering from undernutrition remains.

The story of food insecurity in the rest of the world is more problematic.

According to “2020 The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, Transforming Food Systems for Affordable Healthy Diets” (the latest in a series of annual publications previously known as State of Food Insecurity or SOFI), published by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “The most recent estimate for 2019 shows that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, almost 690 million people, or 8.9 percent of the global population, were undernourished.”

The report goes on to say, “Preliminary projections based on the latest available global economic outlooks, also presented in this report, suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may add an additional 83 to 132 million people to the ranks of the undernourished in 2020.

“Beyond hunger, a growing number of people have had to reduce the quantity and quality of the food they consume. Two billion people, or 25.9 percent of the global population, experienced hunger or did not have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food in 2019. This situation could deteriorate if we do not act immediately and boldly.”

From an economics perspective, the 690 million people who are undernourished represent ineffective demand. They need food but are unable to fully back up that need with the ability to purchase or grow food. Those who don't have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food also represent ineffective demand during some portions of the year.

As agricultural economists and policy analysts, we are faced with a conundrum.

On the one hand we write about crop farmers who experience long periods of prices that are below the full cost of production.

On the other, we know there are people who need access to those crops but can't afford the price of entry into the market, even when prices are low. Others find themselves in the ineffective demand category when they experience a personal crisis or when the price rises to a level higher than they can afford.

It looks like the deck is stacked so that we either have farmers who are going broke or a significant percentage of the world's population experiencing either chronic or episodic hunger.

For us that is an unacceptable choice.

So, what are we to do?

To protect people who are thrust into hunger when prices go sky high because of a shortfall in production in a major grain producing area of the world, we propose the establishment of an international system of regionally located grain reserves whose stocks can be released when the regional price exceeds an agreed upon price level. The grain in each of those reserves would come from farmers in that region and would also have the effect of supporting regional farm prices and local economic development.

Major grain producing countries would also be a part of this international system of regional grain reserves and would provide a cushion 1) when one of these countries experiences a production shortfall like 2012 in the US or 2) when one of the other regional grain reserves does not have sufficient stocks to meet their immediate needs.

These grain reserves will not meet the needs of those who experience either chronic hunger or episodic hunger unrelated to price spikes. For that portion of the world's population, the major economies of the world will probably need to provide the bulk of the funding required to ensure that no child or adult goes to bed lacking sufficient food to meet their nutritional needs.

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