



## editorial

# food sovereignty in a time of pandemic

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, few imagined the scale of the devastation that the disease would wreak across the world, or for how long it would last. As COVID-19 swung from country to country on its deadly course, it became clear that governmental actions or inactions, and social-economic-political contexts were as responsible as the virus for triggering impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic is far from abating: infections continue to spike in numerous countries with the emergence of new, more contagious strains of the SARS-COV-2 virus.

*Focus on the Global South and Friends of the Earth International*

### Farm Workers -Vegetable and Fruit Pickers –

Essential Worker Portrait #6 by Carolyn Olson, <http://carolynolson.net>

The long awaited vaccines have started to be rolled out but may well be out of reach for majority of the world for several months or even years due to “vaccine apartheid.” Despite the limited availability of vaccines due to the time needed for production and testing, many wealthy nations have purchased sufficient vaccine supplies to immunize their own populations at least twice, and are backing monopolistic control over vaccines by pharmaceutical companies through legally enforceable intellectual property rights in the World Trade Organization.

This edition of the Nyéléni newsletter presents excerpts from some of the documentation and research conducted by practitioners and advocates of food sovereignty, particularly, Voices from the ground, From COVID-19 to radical transformation of our food systems, prepared by the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism to Committee on World Food Security. Links to the full reports/papers are provided with each excerpt.

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## who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **The Nyéléni Newsletter is the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Food First, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, VSF Justicia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People.

## now is time for food sovereignty!

## box 1

### COVID- 19 underlines why corporate-controlled global food supply chains must go

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of the global food supply chains that have increasingly dominated food production and distribution in both the global North and the global South. The chain is already breaking down at one of its most critical links: migrant labor. Workers are falling victim to COVID-19 owing to their being deprived of the most basic protective gear, like facemasks, and their working in crowded conditions that make a mockery of social distance rules.

But the global supply chain is not only threatened by problems at the production and processing ends, but by transportation bottlenecks, especially at key hubs, like Rosario, Argentina, owing to people's fears that long distance transportation is a major transmitter of the virus. The 2007-2008 global food crisis should have underlined the vulnerability of corporate-controlled global supply chains but they were extended even more.

What changes to the global food system does the COVID-19 debacle urge on us? Probably the most important measure is to move food production back to more sustainable smallholder-based localized systems. In addition localized production, being less carbon-intensive, is much better for the climate than production based on supply chains.

Traditional peasant and indigenous agricultural technologies should be respected because they contain a great deal of wisdom and represent the evolution of a largely benign balance between the community and the biosphere.

It has been said that one should never let a good crisis go to waste. The silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis is the opportunity it spells for food sovereignty.

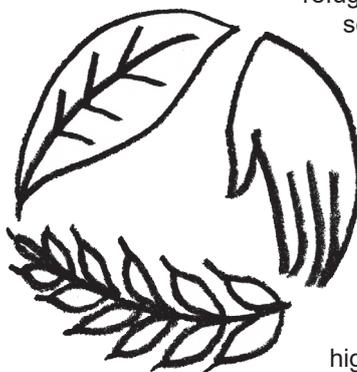
The full article is available at [https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_covid-19.pdf)

## in the spotlight

### 1 Voices from the ground: Only a radical transformation of the food system can tackle COVID-19

The emergence, spread and devastating impacts of the COVID- 19 pandemic exacerbate existing and avertable systemic injustices. How we build, organize and govern our food systems are key in determining and shaping these injustices. Decades of neoliberal policies, reducing the role of the state and privileging a free market-led food system, have led to the dismantling of public policies and regulation, prioritized commodity exports and food corporations' profits over small-scale producers' livelihoods, local food systems and food sovereignty. COVID-19 is just the latest in a series of infectious diseases and crises linked to the industrial food system and it won't be the last.

Those most deeply affected by the pandemic include women, youth, refugees and migrants, workers and small scale food producers, landless peoples, urban food insecure, and indigenous peoples. Many peoples were unable to lock down as they were dependant on daily wages, and have neither the financial reserves, nor adequate social protection or state support systems to draw on in times of crises. COVID-19 has revealed that the so-called competitiveness of the industrial agriculture model is built on high insecurity and abuse of workers, low wages and substandard working conditions as well as environmental and health risks.



COVID-19 makes the need for a transformation of the food system towards food sovereignty, agroecology, based on human rights and justice more urgent than ever. The crisis cannot be fixed by emergency measures and stimulus packages that perpetuate the same model.

Yet few Government responses were aimed at the realization of human rights or centred on the needs of marginalized communities. Official policy and financial support have mostly favoured corporations, large producers and global supply chains ensuring them the capital and workforce they need to keep operations running. Government responses were and continue to be shaped by historical economic and social disparities within and among countries. Now developing countries face a new spectre of capital flight, large loans with conditionality leading to higher debt, and impending structural adjustment policies. Grassroots reports show that official responses most often reflected siloed approaches, lack of preparedness and coordination. There was also insufficient international cooperation to address the factors leading to the emergence and devastating spread of COVID-19, as well as to respond adequately to short-term needs and long-term recovery.

Worryingly, many governments invoked emergency powers—in the name of controlling the pandemic—that allow them control over all aspects of governance and security with no democratic oversight. These powers have been used to criminalise dissent and brutally enforce unfair lockdowns. Although governments and global institutions use the narrative of “build back better”, their policies feature more support for big corporations and pro-corporate digitalization and new technologies.



# in the spotlight

→ In contrast, communities' responses have fostered values of community, solidarity, resilience, sustainability and human dignity. These two approaches cannot co-exist.

Grassroots movements have clear demands, based on our evidence on what is needed for a Just Recovery from COVID- 19:

1. Break with neoliberal approaches of the past
2. Put Food Sovereignty into practice
3. Reaffirm the primacy of the public sphere
4. Strengthen Human Rights based global food governance

We call for a paradigm shift that reclaims food systems as public commons for the well-being of people and the planet, based on the centrality of human rights, that puts food sovereignty into practice, recognizes the primacy of public policies and strengthens a genuinely inclusive, democratic and coherent model of governance to realize the right to adequate food for all, now and in the future.

## 2 Can Agroecology stop COVID- 21, 22, and 23?

Pathogens are repeatedly emerging out of a global agrifood system rooted in inequality, labour exploitation, and the kind of unfettered extractivism that robs communities of their natural and social resources. In response, some industry representatives propose more agricultural intensification under the guise of sparing 'wilderness', an approach that—in backing the agribusiness model – leads to greater deforestation and disease spillover.

Land sparing omits many peasant, Indigenous, and smallholder agricultures that are integrated within forest ecosystems and produce food and fibre for local and regional uses. Indeed, peasant and Indigenous land sharing preserves high levels of agrobiodiversity and wildlife diversity that keep deadly pathogens from spreading.

Pandemic Research for the People (PReP) is an organisation of farmers, community members, and researchers focusing on how agriculture might be reimagined to stop coronaviruses and other pathogens from emerging in the first place. We advocate for agroecology, an environmentalism of the peasantry, the poor, and Indigenous long in practice, which treats agriculture as a part of the ecology out of which humanity grows its food. A diverse agroecological matrix of farm plots, agroforestry, and grazing lands all embedded within a forest can conserve biocultural diversity, making it more difficult for zoonotic diseases to string together the line of infections that then escape onto the global travel network. Such diversity also supports the economic and social conditions of people currently tending the land.

Peasant agroecologies are more than matters of soil and food, as important as those are. Their work in stopping pandemics and other social goods arises from their broader context. Agroecologies are founded upon practical politics that place agency and power in the hands of poor and working class, Indigenous, and Black and Brown people. They replace the dynamics of ecologically (and epidemiologically) harmful forms of urbanization and agricultural industrialization operating in favour of a racial and patriarchal capitalism. They place planet and people before profits none but a few reap.

## box 2

### Relocalization of food systems and agroecology, the ways forward

The COVID- 19 crisis has shown that local food systems and short supply chains have proved resilient and are better able to innovate in times of crisis as well as feed people local healthy food without being dependant on numerous links in supply chains.

The most effective initiatives to address the COVID crises have largely come from diverse organized local communities at multiple levels sometimes working with responsive government bodies and public authorities. They have mobilized and supported the distribution of food parcels, cooked meals, delivered basic necessities, health protection materials, seeds, production inputs and other livelihood supports for vulnerable families and communities in their own countries as well as in other countries and regions.

In every region, family farmers, fishers and consumer organisations have created and strengthened direct connections through community supported agriculture (CSAs), community supported fisheries, direct deliveries to households, expansion of food cooperatives and social programmes. Where possible producers have used online platforms to market their produce directly. Mutual aid schemes from soup kitchens to CSAs and community clinics have helped to plug the gaps of hunger and poverty.

Prominent proposals for systemic change demanded by these communities are agroecology and relocalization of food systems - supporting agroecological production, social economies and protection, cooperative marketing, short circuits and supply chains, and ensuring safe working environments and the adequate functioning of territorial food markets, as well as other means of provision of food produced by local, small-scale food producers, including through public procurements.

# voices from the field

## 1 Peasants and Small Scale Family Farmers

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* pages 19-22, [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

Peasant/small-scale family farmer organizations emphasize that the pandemic has revealed the unsustainability and inadequacies of the global food system controlled by big companies, and the inequalities and vulnerabilities it reproduces. Lockdown restrictions have been disproportionately affected peasants and their communities and the poor and working class most. States have taken advantage of the pandemic to exercise more authoritarian control over people. We are witnessing an increase in cases of expropriation of land and water resources, assassination of social leaders, as well as domestic violence against women. The pandemic is being used as an opportunity to push neoliberal, pro-corporate reforms in countries in all regions. Closures of territorial markets (farmers, weekly and village markets etc.) while keeping supermarkets open have had disastrous effects on small-scale producers' livelihoods, and are not justified by safety requirements.

Peasant and family farmers have been in the forefront of putting in place solidarity initiatives and mechanisms for vulnerable people and communities. Peasant organizations organized campaigns to disseminate information on how to prevent contagion, called for measures to protect agricultural and food workers, and denounced violence against leaders and peoples, especially women. They have called for a radical transformation of food systems in the direction of greater equity and sustainability, and adequate public social policies and protection mechanisms for the vulnerable. These include domestic food production for domestic consumption; territorial markets with short supply chains and more effective links between rural and urban areas; agroecology; regulation of prices in favor of producers rather than intermediaries; producers' access to and control over natural resources; support for family farmer and women's associations and direct financing to their organizations; appropriate financial measures including lower interest rates on credit.

## 2 Indigenous Peoples

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* pages 16-18 [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

Indigenous Peoples organisations have reported that COVID 19 deepened many of their pre-existing structural problems such as lack of basic infrastructure: water, electricity, paved roads. The pre-existing effects on Indigenous Peoples' health due to pollution from mining in their territory make them more vulnerable to COVID 19 and it also exacerbates pre-existing injustice, discrimination, inequalities, violations of the right to food and nutrition, the right to health and other human rights. The loss of biodiversity and habitats where many Indigenous Peoples live generate the conditions for the development of infectious diseases such as COVID-19.

Indigenous Peoples' main activities - subsistence agricultural production, small scale fishing, herding, and gathering – have all been impacted by lockdowns. In some places basic hygienic water and sanitation is not available in communities increasing their vulnerability. Faced with this situation, Indigenous Peoples have generated their own sanitary control initiatives, through ancestral or current practices. Indigenous youth voices say, “the pandemic has revealed inequalities, discrimination, sectorization, class division and fundamentalisms” of dominant societies towards indigenous peoples.” Likewise, “acts of criminalization are seen when they defend their rights. That is also a pandemic”.

Looking towards the future, Indigenous Peoples are clear they will continue to promote food sovereignty, traditional sovereignty, guarantee decent housing, revive their forms of traditional health aid, promote actions to protect the elderly possessors of traditional knowledge with an anti-colonial approach and accountability. They must preserve community practices, traditional practices.

## 3 Fisherfolk

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* pages 12-15 [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

Millions of women and men are directly involved in small-scale fisheries including processing and marketing of fish and depend on fish as a healthy and affordable protein. Fisherfolks report that indiscriminate lockdowns demonstrated a pre-existing tendency to underplay the role of fish in food systems. Meanwhile social distancing measures and closing of local markets have stopped many small-scale fishers from going fishing. The “virus stigma” on wet markets where fresh fish is often sold also created problems. Women comprise 80–90% of the post-harvest sector, and work in close proximity in processing and retail facilities, putting them at higher risk for COVID-19. In processing plants worldwide, women tend to occupy temporary and lower-paid positions, do not have access to social protections after losing their jobs, are more likely to be laid off, and cannot defend their labor rights. Many migrant fishers were stranded on vessels or in harbors, unable to return home, living in cramped living conditions without adequate water or food. Meanwhile large scale offshore freezing vessels and those involved in fishmeal fisheries could continue their activities.

On the other hand, there are numerous examples of fisherfolks contributing to address food insecure populations in their communities. In Oaxaca, Mexico, local fishers contributed their time and boats to provide 50–60 tons per week of free seafood for their communities. In Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa, they organized themselves to provide 100 parcels of food to the most needed.

# voices from the field

## 4 Agricultural and Food Workers

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* pages 8-12  
[http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

During the pandemic, government authorities qualified agricultural and food workers as “essential workers”, meaning they had to continue to work in conditions where they were treated as expendable since employers often failed to provide adequate protective measures.<sup>1</sup> The work they do is essential; their health and lives, it seems, are not. This is true of workers in food supply chains who help feed the world - but who, paradoxically, are often least able to feed themselves as their wages or income are insufficient to ensure food security by obtaining sufficient, safe, and nutritious food.

Risks are high in food and agricultural industries because of systemic weaknesses. Only 5% of the workers in agriculture have any access to a labour inspection system or legal protection of their health and safety rights. COVID-19 outbreaks at meat processing plants around the world provide the best illustration of the high risks and the price paid by meat workers in ensuring food supplies to markets, shops, supermarkets, canteens, restaurants, cafes and bars. Tens of thousands of workers in meat plants have caught the disease due to a combination of factors: poor employment practices often predominantly of migrant workers, poor and crowded working and health and safety conditions, and in some cases, poor living quarters.<sup>2</sup> The global meat processing industry is controlled by very few, large corporations with significant power over workers and governments.<sup>3</sup>

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on how companies are using their political clout to influence governments. While huge profits are made and dividends are paid to shareholders, the pandemic is used to freeze wages and social protection benefits.

Further reading:

*COVID-19 and the impact on agriculture and food security*  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_742023.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742023.pdf)

### ILO instruments and tools in agriculture:

- The Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No.129)
- The Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921 (No.11)
- The Plantations Convention, 1958 (No.110)
- The Rural Workers' Organizations Convention, 1975 (No.141)
- The Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001 (No.184)
- The Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No.202)
- The Code of practice on safety and health in agriculture (2011)

1 - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25892&LangID=E>

2 - <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/11/chaotic-and-crazy-meat-plants-around-the-world-struggle-with-virus-outbreaks>

3 - <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/power-profits-and-pandemic>

## 5 Pastoralists

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* page 35  
[http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

Pastoralist organisations in 12 countries of West Africa have recorded that COVID 19 is increasing multiples crises afflicting territories that were already heavily affected by the insecurity that has prevailed in the region for a number of years. Risks include the death of cattle due to the limitations on movements and seasonal migrations. Seasonal migration is a practice they have developed to address shocks. If they cannot practice it their whole range of resilience mechanisms will be threatened and we are likely to see a recurrence of famine leading to a breakdown of families and massive exodus towards urban centers. Rural conflicts could increase and there will be a significant reduction in the offer of animal protein for the local populations.

Other pastoralists from Iran and Mongolia are also facing impacts of lockdowns - Delayed seasonal migration could cause weight loss and illness in livestock due to rising temperatures in wintering grounds, as well as extra expenses for buying feed and water. Herders are not able to sell raw materials including wool, cashmere, as well as meat products as local markets, factories and tourism spots are all closed.

## 6 Urban Food Insecure

Excerpted from *Voices From the Ground* pages 23-25  
[http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)

The incidence of COVID-19 infection is higher in cities than elsewhere, where socio-territorial inequalities in urban areas contribute significantly to existing inequities in access to adequate food. Those consumers who buy their food through supermarkets found supplies severely disrupted, especially in the early stages of COVID-19. In addition, there was an increase in the consumption of industrialized products, of low nutritional quality. One of the most relevant public food and nutrition security programs that has been discontinued in many cities is school feeding. An FAO survey shows that among cities responding to an electronic form 88% reported having suspended the offer of food to students. However, Community Supported Agriculture delivery to consumers has been authorised unilaterally in all countries, even where other forms of direct sales were stopped, mainly because the food is not packaged and is handled safely by producers.

# voices from the field

## 7 Women

Excerpted from *Gender, covid-19 and food systems: impacts, community responses and feminist policy demands*, 2020 [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NEW\\_Gender-COVID-19-and-Food-Systems-October-2020\\_compressed.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NEW_Gender-COVID-19-and-Food-Systems-October-2020_compressed.pdf)

We believe that the right to food, food security and nutrition and food sovereignty will never be achieved without ensuring the full respect, protection and fulfilment of women's rights and the dismantling of patriarchal, feudal and neoliberal power relations. We want to go beyond the universally agreed goal of gender equality and women's empowerment, which does not explicitly assert the centrality of women's rights, the recognition of our self-determination, autonomy and decision-making power in all the aspects of our lives and bodies, including the food we produce and consume. We recognize, in light of this pandemic, the need to deconstruct the dominant narrative on women who are very often portrayed as victims in need of anti-poverty policies and social assistance.

We believe that the current global food system builds on and perpetuates gender-based discrimination and the violation of women's rights. In order to achieve a fair and equal society where women can fully enjoy their rights and self-determination, we must put at the center the alternative model of consumption and production founded on agroecology and the food sovereignty paradigm.

We believe that any policy demands must be grounded on key feminist principles such as gender justice, equality and equity, non-discrimination and intersectionality, participation and recognition.

## 8 Youth

Excerpted from *Youth demands for a radical transformation of our food systems*, <http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Youth-Covid-Report-final.pdf>

Covid-19 and the responses of governments are having devastating impacts on young people and our communities around the globe. We are experiencing the combined impacts of an acute health crisis, a current and looming food crisis, and a climate crisis – all illustrative of wider systems crises.

In this time of multiple crises, Youth are facing several challenges. As markets fail, schools close, and jobs disappear, we see opportunities and our futures crumble away.

However, we are not standing idly by. We, as a diverse community of Youth from around the globe, are active in developing solutions to the challenges facing our communities: we are organizing ourselves to continue providing food for our communities and caring for the elderly as well as our children; we are shortening the distance from producer to consumer; we are defending school feeding programs and local markets; we are rebuilding rural economies and territories, ensuring youth can stay and return in the country-side; we are caring for and healing the earth by growing nourishing food through agroecology; we are standing up to domestic violence against women and girls as well as racism, homophobia, xenophobia and the patriarchy; and, we are defending workers' and migrants' rights as well as the rights of rural people. We are also imagining new ways to organize the world: envisioning healthy, sustainable and dignified food systems, and taking steps towards achieving them.

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## to read, listen, watch and share

- *Voices From the Ground: from COVID-19 to radical transformation of our food systems*, 2020 [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID\\_FULL\\_REPORT-2020.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EN-COVID_FULL_REPORT-2020.pdf)
- *Youth demands for a radical transformation of our food systems*, 2020 <http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Youth-Covid-Report-final.pdf>
- *Gender, covid-19 and food systems: impacts, community responses and feminist policy demands*, 2020 [http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NEW\\_Gender-COVID-19-and-Food-Systems-October-2020\\_compressed.pdf](http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NEW_Gender-COVID-19-and-Food-Systems-October-2020_compressed.pdf)
- *COVID-19 and the impact on agriculture and food security*, 2020 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_742023.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742023.pdf)
- *The winds of change are blowing harder: COVID-19 update on peasants, rural workers and other marginalized groups* 2020, <https://viacampesina.org/en/the-winds-of-change-are-blowing-harder-covid-19-update-on-peasants-rural-workers-and-other-marginalized-groups/>
- *Farm workers during COVID: Biggest casualty of Neoliberal Food Systems*, 2021 <https://focusweb.org/publications/farm-workers-during-covid-biggest-casualty-of-neoliberal-food-systems/>
- *COVID 19 Snapshots from Asia*, 2020 <https://focusweb.org/covid-19-snapshots-from-asia/>

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