UNSCN

United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition

A world free from hunger and all forms of malnutrition is attainable in this generation

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Food Environments in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Impacts and positive policy actions to deliver sustainable healthy diets for all

Food environments are rapidly changing

The current global pandemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19), and measures taken to reduce its spread, have disrupted food environments around the world. Never has a larger spotlight been placed on the ways people meet the food systems for getting the nutrition they, and their family need. Disarrangements in day-to-day food supply mechanisms and disturbances in various components of food systems are increasingly felt on an individual level.

As the pandemic spreads this interaction between people and the food system is changing at an unimaginable speed and taking on greater importance in everyday life. With strict rules placed on people's personal movement to limit the spread of COVID-19, shopping for food is one of the only points of contact with what people knew as normal life. Even so, supermarkets, grocers and markets have become a confronting barometer of the scale of the pandemic. Social distancing measures are implemented, market places are shut down, vendors are banned from selling, limits are imposed on the number of shoppers, long queues are encountered at points of food purchase and empty shelves serve as a sign of the coping mechanism many are adopting.

Unhealthy diets are the leading cause of ill-health. Without dedicated action on nutrition, all forms of malnutrition are likely to increase as a result of the pandemic's impact on food environments. Financial hardships, reduced physical activity, and altered purchasing patterns favoring products with longer shelf life and often poorer nutrition profiles can lead to higher levels of food insecurity, undernutrition, and overweight/ obesity.

Food environment disruptions are the result of many more changes than those observed at the point of sale. Both external and personal dimensions impact on people's food environments. External dimensions include food availability, prices, vendors- while personal dimensions include geographical access, affordability, convenience and desirability.
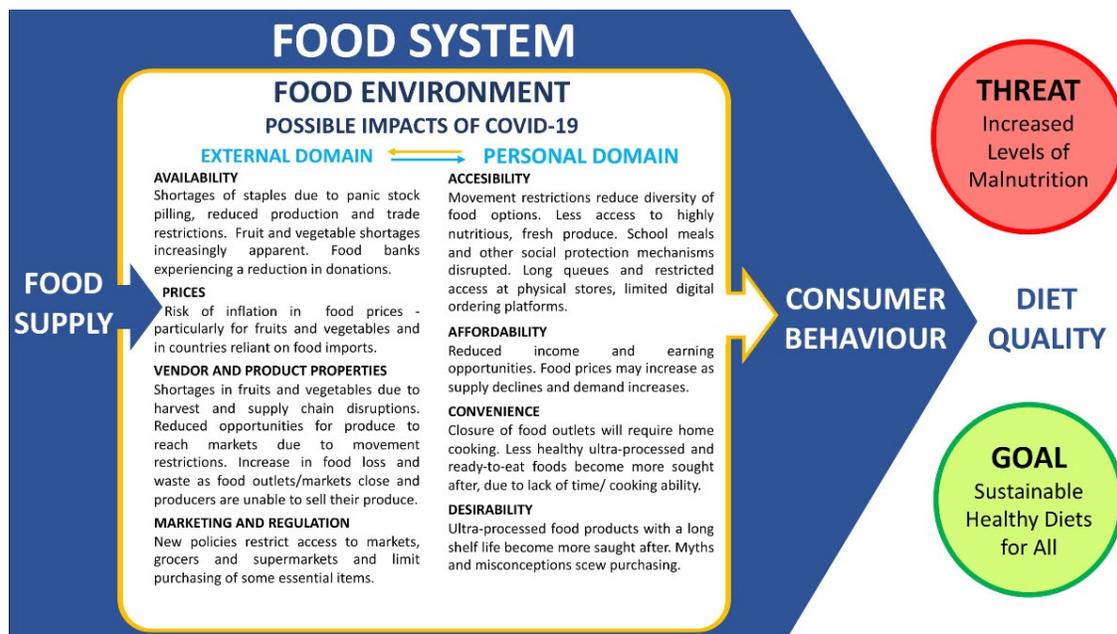
FOOD SYSTEM

FOOD ENVIRONMENT
POSSIBLE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

EXTERNAL DOMAIN → **PERSONAL DOMAIN**

AVAILABILITY
Shortages of staples due to panic stock pilling, reduced production and trade restrictions. Fruit and vegetable shortages increasingly apparent. Food banks experiencing a reduction in donations.

PRICES
Risk of inflation in food prices - particularly for fruits and vegetables and in countries reliant on food imports.

VENDOR AND PRODUCT PROPERTIES
Shortages in fruits and vegetables due to harvest and supply chain disruptions. Reduced opportunities for produce to reach markets due to movement restrictions. Increase in food loss and waste as food outlets/markets close and producers are unable to sell their produce.

MARKETING AND REGULATION
New policies restrict access to markets, grocers and supermarkets and limit purchasing of some essential items.

ACCESSIBILITY
Movement restrictions reduce diversity of food options. Less access to highly nutritious, fresh produce. School meals and other social protection mechanisms disrupted. Long queues and restricted access at physical stores, limited digital ordering platforms.

AFFORDABILITY
Reduced income and earning opportunities. Food prices may increase as supply declines and demand increases.

CONVENIENCE
Closure of food outlets will require home cooking. Less healthy ultra-processed and ready-to-eat foods become more sought after, due to lack of time/ cooking ability.

DESIRABILITY
Ultra-processed food products with a long shelf life become more saught after. Myths and misconceptions scew purchasing.

FOOD SUPPLY

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

DIET QUALITY

THREAT
Increased Levels of Malnutrition

GOAL
Sustainable Healthy Diets for All

Figure 1. Possible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food environments

Specific examples of positive policy actions to mitigate changes and improve food environments

Many governments at all levels, as well as civil society organizations and the private sector, are already applying positive policy actions to protect food environments. The objective is to try and adapt to unavoidable changes and support sustainable healthy diets for all.

Some examples of actions taken are detailed below:

External Food Environment Domains

- Promote the smooth and secure flow of food trade in support of food security and nutrition;
- Support and protect smallholder farmers and their value chains/ market access;
- Support local food systems, through linking them with major food supply chains;
- Monitor food prices, food security and malnutrition indicators;
- Adopt subsidies and taxes which promote the purchasing and consumption of nutritious foods;
- Strengthen and adapt social protection programmes in light of price fluctuations, income losses and nutritional needs;
- Include food system and food supply chain actors as essential services to ensure availability, while protecting workers with sanitary measures;
- Upkeep of food fortification programmes;
- Support major food providers to undertake needs-based purchasing that ensures the availability of basic food items, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

Personal Food Environment Domains

- Adapt the delivery of social protection programmes to improve accessibility and affordability in a manner that complies with movement and crowd restrictions, harnesses volunteers and creates employment opportunities;
- Explore food rationing systems based on health, nutrition, equity and decency
- Strengthen nutrition education and messaging to protect breastfeeding and promote nutritious food products, dispel myths, encourage healthy cooking techniques and place emphasis on food safety and waste reduction in line with the latest nutritional advice;
- Invest in, scale-up and explore digital and other innovative and solidary approaches for food provision and grocery shopping platforms to enhance convenience; reach vulnerable populations;

and improve wholesale markets, smallholder farmers and local producers' access to larger points of sale and consumers;
- Support local government level action to strengthen food supply and food environments – including those that look to improve accessibility through home delivery of food for vulnerable populations and create employment opportunities.

Nutritional advice during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nutritional advice does not change because of the pandemic, but it does take on added urgency:

- Consult trustworthy information sources such as UN agencies and government health/ nutrition platforms.
- Faced with fear and uncertainty it is natural to be tempted by tales of miracle foods. No food, drink or dietary pattern can protect you from, or cure infection by COVID-19. A healthy dietary pattern, diverse and abundant with fruits and vegetables, wholegrains, nuts, and seeds; modest amounts of animal source foods; minimal in amounts of processed meats, and minimal in amounts of foods and beverages high in energy and added amounts of sugar, saturated fat, trans fat, and salt, is important to keep immune systems working at their best.
- Unhealthy diets and malnutrition is the leading cause of ill health. It is now more important than ever to consume sustainable healthy diets to ensure all bodily functions work well, including immunity.
- Unhealthy diets, leading to overweight and obesity, are the leading cause of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including diabetes, heart disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease. Unhealthy diets are also a primary cause of poor control of NCDs and resulting adverse health outcomes. People with NCDs are at a heightened risk of becoming severely ill with COVID-19.
- Food safety is crucial to limit both the spread of COVID-19and exposure to other illnesses. Practice handwashing with soap before and after grocery shopping, handling, preparing and consuming food.
- Support local food producers and vendors.
- Minimise food waste.
- Practice solidarity. Avoid panic purchasing and where possible and safe, help the vulnerable with their food purchases and other needs.

Working towards a healthier, more nutritious future

The current COVID-19 generated food environment disruption poses a huge global challenge, but also an opportunity. Mitigating its consequences with collaborative solutions, solidarity and reinforcement of local food systems, may open up and lead the way towards a sustainable transformation. This builds resilient food systems with healthy nutrition at their core. People are searching for direction and reassurances in their food environments and now is the time to demonstrate the need for, and the power and possibility of sustainable healthy diets.

Overall actions and recommendations by the UN to protect health and nutrition

UN agencies and their partner organizations are continuously scaling up action and information to protect people's health and nutrition in this time of crisis (*see a full list of resources here*).