

1. Introduction



Photo: Lisa Robins



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Photo: Li Peng Monroe

1 Introduction

A mere six months has elapsed since the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak was declared a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern' by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30 January 2020 (WHO 2020a). With no reprieve in sight, the global tally of lives lost in the COVID-19 pandemic has so far surpassed 600,000 (WHO 2020b), and the disruption to billions of livelihoods is costing trillions of dollars (Naidoo & Fisher 2020). Uncertainty is high as the situation unfolds and continues to change rapidly (Swinnen & McDermott 2020).

This report focuses on the disruption to food systems in the Indo-Pacific region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dramatic impacts have occurred as a result of emergency responses enacted by state and non-state actors to tackle the public health imperative, coupled with measures for countering the twin threat of an economic crisis. The challenges are diverse, from food shortfalls in countries dependent on imports to a multitude of supply chain failures and the threat of soaring food prices with attendant risks of social unrest. Some rural villages have seen an influx of returnees from urban centres.

Many local markets have closed, next season's crops might not be sown, and the livelihoods of households dependent on remittances have suddenly become precarious. In the face of this pandemic-driven upheaval and the amplification of its effects by climate change, pests and diseases and other existing and overlapping stressors, it is the poorest and most

vulnerable groups who have the least scope for adjustment. As food stocks, savings and other reserves are utilised, the COVID-19-driven crisis is expected to deepen across the Indo-Pacific region (ADB 2020, Kim et al 2020).

A large body of work already exists regarding the determinants and drivers of food security, with most describing these causes as immediate, underlying and structural. External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic result in immediate impacts on dietary intake, nutrient needs and food utilisation at the individual level. Underlying issues can increase or lessen shocks and are often interactive. These operate more at the household or regional level. Examples include pre-existing household food and nutrition security status, care practices and access to health services and facilities. Finally, structural issues such as resource allocation at the societal level, resulting from policies, governance and societal attitudes, can also serve to increase or lessen specific shocks (FAO 2017ab).

In regions that depend on traditional agriculture, health shocks can be devastating for smallholder livelihoods. Food system impacts are also gendered and have particular implications for women and girls. These shocks often erode production capacity and the ability of affected communities to recover, making them more susceptible to underlying or structural issues.

This research assesses food system vulnerabilities, impacts and opportunities for action in the Indo-Pacific region in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The time frame of the assessments is the first six months of the pandemic: January–July 2020. The research addresses two key questions:

- What existing food system vulnerabilities are being exposed or amplified by the COVID-19 shock?
- How can this shock be used to inform future research and development to support food systems resilience in the Indo-Pacific?

The COVID-19 crisis is examined through the lens of food and nutrition security, primarily from the perspective of smallholder farmers. Consideration is given to the pillars of food and nutrition security (Figure 1.1) recommended by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security (HLPE 2020). Indonesia, seven Pacific island countries, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Timor-Leste comprise the five focal geographies assessed. The same analytical framework was applied for each

(Chapter 2), while recognising their very different agrifood systems.

These assessments were collectively analysed for common themes that have resonance for the broader Indo-Pacific region. Special attention was paid to identifying opportunities for action through research and development investments that might strengthen the resilience of food systems to future shocks for each focal geography and the Indo-Pacific region more generally. These opportunities and their respective investment time frames are described as short-term (up to 1 year), intermediate-term (up to 5 years) and longer-term (up to 10 years).

This work forms the second stage of the Assessment of Food Systems Security identified in the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) Business Continuity Plan as a high-priority activity for operationalising in response to the pandemic. Stage 1 was a rapid internal horizon scanning activity conducted by ACIAR across its Indo-Pacific network during the period 20 April–8 May 2020, which identified 10 high-level impact areas (Sanderson et al 2020).

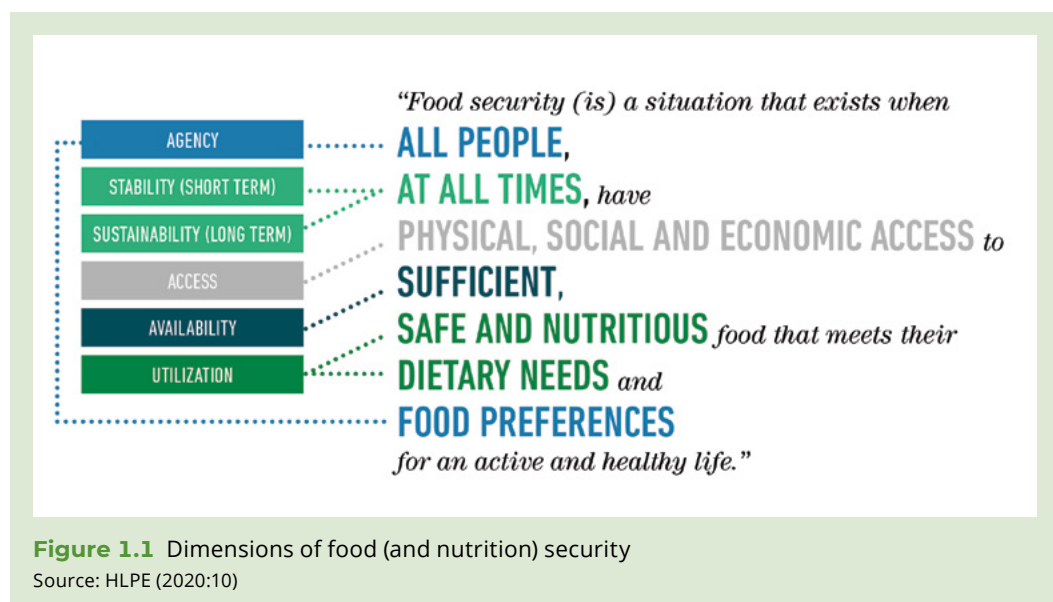


Figure 1.1 Dimensions of food (and nutrition) security

Source: HLPE (2020:10)



Ten impact areas identified in Stage 1

1. Large-scale migration of displaced people is placing pressure on local food and resource systems.
2. Transport suspensions and movement restrictions are disrupting the delivery of food and essential agricultural inputs.
3. Government interventions in food markets are placing strain on domestic and international food markets.
4. Rising unemployment and underemployment is reducing incomes of low-income households and their ability to acquire nutritious food.
5. Movement restrictions are leading to labour shortages for production and marketing activities within food systems.
6. Existing threats to food systems are amplified by the COVID-19 disruption.
7. Impacts are not evenly distributed across social and economic strata.
8. Impacts on food systems are gendered and have particular implications for women and girls.
9. Accessing credit is becoming more difficult throughout food systems.
10. Human health implications of food systems remain prevalent and may be amplified amid COVID-19 disruptions.

Photo: ACIAR

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