



# Protecting nutrition security amid COVID-19

## COVID-19 Response Program

RAPID RESPONSE PLATFORM • June 2020

### Highlights

- The COVID-19 crisis is creating a nutrition security shock with potentially severe consequences.
- Critical areas for response include:
  - o Provide social protection and life-saving services
  - o Sustain the production, trade, retail and consumption of nutritious foods
  - o Support small and medium enterprises (SMEs)
  - o Take an integrated systems approach to building back better
- Companies, governments, development partners and civil society have unique, critical roles to mitigate negative short-term impacts and advance collective efforts to build back better.

### Introduction and context

The COVID-19 crisis is creating multiple shocks that will undermine nutrition, particularly among marginalized, vulnerable and poor populations, both in developed and developing countries. These shocks result from direct actions, such as the closure of food outlets; indirect impacts such as job, income and remittances loss; constraining purchasing power; market fluctuations such as rising food prices and currency devaluation; and value chain disruptions, reducing available and affordable nutritious foods. Consumers are already feeling these impacts: surveys in Nairobi and across India, for instance,

show significant levels of meal size reduction and meal skipping, largely due to insufficient money for food.<sup>1</sup>

These shocks may have critical consequences. Nutritional security is paramount to cognitive development and physical health, including for immune function. Children who experience undernutrition are more likely to die, and those who survive have poorer educational outcomes and lifetime earnings. Undernutrition is likely to exacerbate COVID-related mortality, and obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases have been associated with more severe outcomes among those who contract the virus.<sup>2</sup> In the macro-

economic context, every percentage point drop in global GDP will result in an additional 1.4 million stunted children – and we are entering a worldwide recession.<sup>3</sup>

Action is urgent, for today and for the long-term, in countries around the globe. We must take measures now to protect people's nutrition in the face of COVID-19 to avoid irreversible damage and long-term negative impacts on people and economies. And, as the pandemic exposes the fragility of our food systems, we must seize the opportunity to build back better for a more nutritious future.

## The imperative

Together, we must act in four key areas:

**1. Provide social protection and life-saving services.** Social protection schemes, including cash and voucher transfers, are essential to protect the economic and nutrition security of the poorest populations. Delivery of life-saving nutrition services and the safe feeding of infants must be supported. This action is primarily the role of governments, collaborating with civil society players, though businesses can offer instrumental support where assets like transportation networks might be leveraged.

**2. Sustain the production, trade, retail and consumption of nutritious foods.** Access to affordable, safe, nutritious foods must be safeguarded through a range of actions throughout the value chain. These include maintaining food production; ensuring the supply of fortified foods and specialized nutrition commodities; keeping local food markets safe and functioning; and promoting the consumption of nutritious diets.<sup>4</sup> These imperatives are central to how agriculture, food

and beverage companies prioritize products, services and models of engaging consumers and suppliers. These efforts must be enabled by monitoring exercises, such as on food prices and nutritional status. It is also important that we avoid the promotion of unhealthy food or restrictions to trade, which exacerbate food prices and jeopardize availability and accessibility.

**3. Support small and medium enterprises (SMEs).** The SME sector is the lifeblood of most middle- and low-income countries, providing both a conduit of nutritious food to consumers and essential incomes for SME workers and contractors.<sup>5</sup> As such, such SMEs represent an essential service – especially amidst the pandemic. Many SMEs operate with little financial resilience and have been highly impacted by lockdowns and related disruptions. While some SMEs have been able to innovate and pivot,<sup>6</sup> many more are facing contraction or closure. Multiple stakeholders should participate in support to SMEs, including governments, through

stimulus packages and other policy mechanisms; banks, through innovative and agile financial vehicles that improve liquidity and access to credit; investors, through creative and patient investing; and multi-national corporations, through attention to the wellbeing of their suppliers.

**4. Take an integrated systems approach to building back better.** COVID-19 presents us an opportunity to work across silos – for instance, integrating health, agriculture and climate concerns into holistic policies and guidelines at the country level. Business can collaborate with other stakeholders to incorporate measures that promote greater resiliency and access to nutritious foods. This crisis can prompt rapid strengthening of international organizations and their key capabilities to provide evidence, enable multifaceted approaches, and convene efforts across stakeholders. Such efforts can increase resilience in the face of future shocks and enable co-benefits for business, society and the planet.

## Solutions & business actions

As global leaders have urged, “The single most important thing that can be done for people’s health and for the health of economies is to protect the nutrition of every generation of children. We must deny the COVID-19 crisis an intergenerational legacy.”<sup>7</sup> Recognizing this mandate, we celebrate initial progress and urge greater action and collaboration:

- **Businesses:** The private sector has a central role in protecting and enhancing nutrition security. Such action is critical to ensuring business continuity following the crisis by preserving their delivery capacity, infrastructure and workforce. It is also essential to leadership, purpose and reputation: a recent Edelman survey found unanimous desire for brands to do everything they can to protect the well-being and financial security of their employees and suppliers, even if it means substantial financial losses.<sup>8</sup> Companies should focus on nutrition- and livelihood-supporting efforts for farmers, such as through education, production and market linkages; for suppliers, such as by sharing haulage capacity to get foods from farms to markets; and for SMEs, such as by providing new financing options. Dozens of WBCSD members and partners are already taking action on a range of such measures.<sup>9</sup>

- **Governments and development partners:** National governments and donors are uniquely positioned to provide funding and services for those most in need, underpinned by science-based nutritional guidance. Governments should consider how nutrition can be incorporated into economic stimulus packages or policy responses, focusing short-term bail-out packages directly on the most vulnerable workers/communities while integrating long-term systems thinking on health, agriculture and nutrition following the pandemic. GAIN’s recent report cites many examples of proactive government and donor responses.<sup>10</sup>
- **Civil society, convening platforms and international organizations:** Organizations and platforms that connect people and information are all vital to nutrition security amidst COVID-19. Such organizations are mobilizing quickly: for instance, UNICEF is targeting programming specifically toward children’s nutrition,<sup>11</sup> FAO is serving as a global information database, including for governments’ nutrition-related responses,<sup>12</sup> GAIN is collecting real-time information from the ground and publishing additional insights through Nutrition Connect,<sup>13</sup> the SUN

Business Network is mobilizing support to SMEs through its global network,<sup>14</sup> and thousands of faith leaders, grass-roots initiatives and local community action groups across the globe are providing aid and support to those in need. These efforts and many more will be essential to keep nutrition at the center of our focus amid and beyond the pandemic. Especially in the context of a complex, global pandemic with tremendous complexity and vast implications for economies, trade and human wellbeing, organizations like the WHO, FAO and UNICEF are critical across to enable informed multilateral coordination.

Critically, all stakeholders can achieve the greatest positive impact through collaboration across these efforts to reinforce and amplify each other. The ever-evolving and interconnected nature of food systems requires a holistic approach, using tools ranging including policy, the market, social services and trusted information, among others. Aligning efforts toward common goals, such as access to nutritious foods, can propel leadership and innovation.

- <sup>1</sup> "Impact of Covid-19 on Food Systems: A Situation Report." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/impact-covid-19-food-systems-situation-report>.
- <sup>2</sup> "2020 Global Report on Food Crises." Accessed June 10, 2020. [https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC\\_2020\\_ONLINE\\_200420.pdf](https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC_2020_ONLINE_200420.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> All insights in this paragraph are cited in a COVID Nutrition Call to Action, developed by DFID, GAIN, USAID, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, Access to Nutrition Index, Micronutrient Forum, SUN Movement Secretariat, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and technical leads from FAO, UNICEF and WFP.
- <sup>4</sup> These priorities were articulated in the COVID Nutrition Call to Action. (ibid)
- <sup>5</sup> "Blog 24: Preventing a COVID-19 Food Crisis – the Role and Opportunity for Multinationals | Nutrition Connect." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://nutritionconnect.org/resource-center/blog-24-preventing-covid-19-food-crisis-role-and-opportunity-multinationals>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Impact of Covid-19 on Food Systems: A Situation Report." (ibid)
- <sup>7</sup> COVID Nutrition Call to Action. (ibid)
- <sup>8</sup> Edelman. "Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust and the Coronavirus Pandemic." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.edelman.com/research/covid-19-brand-trust-report>.
- <sup>9</sup> "Member Companies - World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.wbcscd.org/COVID-19/Member-companies>.
- <sup>10</sup> "Impact of Covid-19 on Food Systems: A Situation Report." (ibid)
- <sup>11</sup> "Protecting the Most Vulnerable Children from the Impact of Coronavirus: An Agenda for Action." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action>.
- <sup>12</sup> "FAO - Fapda - Food And Agriculture Policy Decision Analysis Tool." Accessed May 22, 2020. <http://www.fao.org/in-action/fapda/tool/index.html#main.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> "Latest News and Views on COVID-19 and Food Systems | Nutrition Connect." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://nutritionconnect.org/covid-19>. See especially blogs 1, 8, 17, 20, 24.
- <sup>14</sup> "Business and SBN's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic - SUN Business Network." Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://sunbusinessnetwork.org/business-and-the-sbns-response-to-covid-19/>.

## COVID-19 Response Program

WBCSD has initiated a special call to action for our members, leveraging our combined business expertise to address the COVID-19 crisis and support the critical role of business. As part of this [program](#), three new projects – vital supply chains, return to "normal" scenarios and long-term impacts – are underway with regular updates provided through our channels.

## About the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

WBCSD is a global, CEO-led organization of over 200 leading businesses working together to accelerate the transition to a sustainable world. We help make our member companies more successful and sustainable by focusing on the maximum positive impact for shareholders, the environment and societies. Our member companies come from all business sectors and all major economies, representing a combined revenue of more than USD \$8.5 trillion and 19 million employees. Our Global Network of almost 70 national business councils gives our members unparalleled reach across the globe. Since 1995, WBCSD has been uniquely positioned to work with member companies along and across value chains to deliver impactful business solutions to the most challenging sustainability issues. Together, we are the leading voice of business for sustainability: united by our vision of a world where more than nine billion people are all living well and within the boundaries of our planet, by 2050.

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