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Viewpoint, Policy Forum or Opinion

Equity as both a means and an end: Lessons for resilient food systems from COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Food systems are important sites of economic stress, political response and adaptation. Access to food is also an important marker of how well a society distributes its wealth, reflecting the state of political accountability, economic redistribution, and the society's level of commitment to uphold the right to food. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the interconnected weaknesses of our food, social and economic systems and offers lessons for building more just and resilient food systems. We focus on three lessons learned anew in the pandemic: (1) food insecurity both reflects and reinforces inequity, (2) food workers are essential yet treated as sacrificial, and (3) racialized migrant food workers face unique forms of inequity. These lessons – chosen for their ethical salience, global relevance, and political urgency – show how interconnected inequities revealed by the pandemic are undermining resilience. We conclude with specific policy recommendations for redress, both within and beyond food systems. This will not be the final global pandemic, nor is it the only shock that regions are currently experiencing. COVID-19 is an opening to think about how societies might center justice and equity in efforts to build back better. Governments should take this opportunity to invest in structural changes to reduce persistent inequities in food access due to poverty, health outcomes, decent work and overall wellbeing, especially for racialized communities and migrants.

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Throughout history, food systems have been important sites of political and economic stress, response and adaptation (Rimas & Fraser, 2010). Access to food is an important marker of how well a society distributes its wealth, reflecting the state of political accountability, economic redistribution, and the society's level of commitment to uphold the right to food (Drèze & Sen, 1989). The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception; fears of rising levels of global hunger and famine came hard on the heels of the first responses to contain the disease due to resulting loss of livelihoods, food access and food distribution mechanisms.

We present three lessons for resilient food systems that have emerged from the pandemic, chosen for their ethical salience, global relevance, and political urgency: (1) food insecurity not only reflects but *reinforces* socio-economic inequity, (2) food workers are essential yet treated as sacrificial, and (3) racialized migrant food workers face unique forms of inequity. These lessons demonstrate how inequities undermine food system resilience, and just how deeply vulnerabilities are related to injustice. We acknowl-

edge and share some of the criticisms of the resilience framework as promoting persistence of the status quo; yet, when coupled with transformative reorganization for equity and justice, we assert that resilience – the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change – remains a desirable system characteristic (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). The concluding recommendations underscore that equity and justice cannot just be end goals, but must be a means of achieving more resilient food, social and economic systems.

1. Food insecurity both reflects and reinforces inequity

Around the world, people are adapting to the dual challenges of protecting themselves from COVID-19 and coping with the equally threatening implications of the measures that have been imposed on societies to limit the spread of disease. For many, this has meant an adjustment to working remotely and the solitude of social distancing while managing family care without the usual support systems. For hundreds of millions of others, it means facing the loss of their livelihoods, and continued challenges accessing secure housing, sanitation, and other basic needs, including food (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

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Food security is intricately tied to poverty, and is dependent on basic social determinants of health, like empowerment for women and girls, and access to safe water, sanitation, and housing (Smith & Haddad, 2015; Sriram & Tarasuk, 2016). The pandemic is another reminder that having enough food in a food system does not protect people from hunger. Indeed, industrialized societies are currently seeing tremendous food waste, while governments are paying farmers for products they cannot sell, and unprecedented numbers of people are forced to rely on emergency food relief. The single biggest non-health impact of the pandemic has been on access to food, tied to slashed incomes, rapid shifts in demand, tightened borders, and business and market closures. Rates of food insecurity have increased as a result: the latest estimates are that the pandemic could cause undernourishment for an additional 83 to 132 million people in 2020, depending on the severity of the expected economic recession (FAO et al., 2020). This has happened without any significant change to the amount of food produced as of yet, although future supplies are likely to be affected.

The pandemic is also drawing attention to the health inequities associated with food insecurity. The increased incidence of underlying conditions like respiratory disease, diabetes, and obesity for food insecure individuals adds another layer of vulnerability for those already experiencing hardship (Gucciardi et al., 2014; Laraia, 2013; Tarasuk, Mitchell, McLaren, & McIntyre, 2013). Some of these conditions can be attributed to globalization, and dietary shifts linked to decreasing poverty and increased availability of processed foods, as well as the erosion of traditional diets (Development Initiatives, 2017). Food insecurity in a world with abundant food is a marker of systemic inequity and injustice: we know that in North America, food insecurity is disproportionately an experience faced by Black and Indigenous communities and people of color (FNIICC, 2018; PROOF & FoodShare, 2019), and these same communities have seen disproportionately high incidences of hospitalization and death from COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). Because of the co-occurrence of food insecurity with other damaging health conditions, those who are food insecure appear to be at a higher risk of developing more severe symptoms of the virus (Cavendish, 2020; Jordan, Adab, & Cheng, 2020). This disease is a concrete demonstration of how vulnerabilities from social and health inequities reinforce one another and undermine the safety of entire communities.

2. Food workers are essential, yet treated as sacrificial

In the wake of the economic downturn and increased pressure to continue producing and distributing food, some food workers received a warranted boost in public support. Yet this sentiment belies a persistent reality that predates this pandemic, and that is shared by many farm, warehouse, restaurant, grocery, meat packing, and delivery workers: precarity, inadequate remuneration, and stifled bargaining power. Food workers are on the front lines because they cannot afford *not* to work, despite unsafe working conditions.

Some employers have increased wages and benefits to match food workers' essential status in an effort to maintain productivity (e.g. UFCW, 2020). However, many workers have experienced either continued disadvantage or further deterioration of workplace conditions. In many food production and processing sectors, workplace improvements are left up to employers, and workers are prevented from organizing collectively to better protect their rights. Many front-line food and farm workers lack access to personal protective equipment, or the paid sick leave that would enable them to stay home if they develop symptoms of COVID-19 (ILO, 2020). Moreover, many of the benefits offered by employers have been temporary, or contingent on attendance, and prioritize short-term profit at the expense of worker wellbeing and safety.

Government and employer policies create vulnerabilities for food workers by limiting their access to livable wages, social protections and workplace democracy. Many were already experiencing poverty before the pandemic, with deeper inequities experienced by women and racialized communities (Sachs, Allen, Terman, Hayden, & Hatcher, 2014). Permanent structural changes are needed to improve the quality, desirability and sustainability of food and farm employment. Scholarship about job quality and decent work, including work to identify disparities in occupational health protections and benefits, can offer valuable lessons to sustainable food systems and development research (e.g. Harrison & Getz, 2015). Until we address the chronic inequities faced by these workers, it's not only our food system that will be at risk, but the overall functioning and wellbeing of societies.

3. Racialized migrant food workers face unique forms of inequity

Borders emerge from complex histories, often consolidating political power while disrupting ecosystems, watersheds, human and animal migration, and cultural groups. States use borders to define citizenship and, increasingly, to restrict non-citizens' mobility and access to legal rights (Jones, 2016). Despite the risks involved, there were 164 million migrant workers globally in 2017—fully 4.7% of all workers (ILO, 2018).

Around the world, food and agricultural systems *depend* on migration. This dependence rests both on the role of a “flexible” labor force, and on the importance of remittances to rural communities whose economies have been undermined by trade liberalization, dispossession, and structural adjustment programs. The position of migrant food workers epitomizes the precarity of much food-related work (Preibisch & Otero, 2014). Even when migrant workers have legal rights to enter a country, many so-called “temporary” migrant worker programs function by curbing migrant workers' practical access to basic employment standards, inviting a range of labor and human rights violations (McLaughlin & Weiler, 2017).

While many migrant agricultural workers were exempted from COVID-19 travel restrictions (for example, in Germany and Canada), receiving countries did little to guarantee workers' health and safety upon arrival. At the same time as experts warned that compliance with the weak regulations to protect workers from COVID-19 would be poor (Weiler, McLaughlin, Caxaj, & Cole, 2020), the first reports broke of severe outbreaks among migrant workers on farms and in food processing facilities. Indeed, migrant food workers are dying preventable deaths from COVID-19 because of work-related exposure, and some of the biggest epicenters of illness and death in North America have been in meat processing plants that employ predominantly racialized immigrant and migrant workers (Bianco, 2020; Douglas, 2020).

While the safety of migrant workers is sacrificed to keep the food system running, other migrant workers have been unable to work due to border and business closures. For some countries, income from foreign remittances is a significant contribution to GDP (e.g. 21% for El Salvador and 30.7% for Haiti). Remittances from migrant agricultural workers have been shown to provide a lifeline to recipient communities (Wells, McLaughlin, Lyn, & Mendiburo, 2014). The economic shut-down prompted by COVID-19 has decimated this source of income, with a 20% decline estimated in 2020 alone, the sharpest drop in recent history (World Bank, 2020).

For many, migrating for work is a livelihood strategy to cope with unequal access to opportunity in their country of citizenship. While the hardening of borders is not new, its acute acceleration in response to this crisis has underscored the injustices migrants face in their quest to gain an economic foothold in an unequal world

through movement across borders. Disturbingly, many food systems around the world have grown dependent on migrant workers' disenfranchised status and willingness to risk their lives. The pandemic is forcing societies to reckon with the ethical and economic cost of food systems in which blatant disregard for the human rights of migrant workers has become normal.

4. Recommendations

The pandemic has created an extraordinary situation, in which the interconnected weaknesses of our food, social and economic systems have been cast into sharp relief. Governments have an obligation to protect human rights, and to redress the systemic inequities reflected in the uneven burden of food insecurity, the chronic undervaluing of food system workers, and the limited rights and freedoms of racialized migrant food workers. These actions are not only what is just, they are what is necessary to promote resilience to future system shocks.

While researchers will pore over the data to make sense of patterns for years to come, the shape of what the pandemic has shown us can already be elucidated. COVID-19 is an opening to think about how we as societies might center justice and equity in efforts to build back better. While the food system is our entry point for analysis, solutions cannot be confined to food systems alone. To this end, the authors recommend urgent policy action to implement:

1. Significantly improved social safety nets and income floors, including consideration of comprehensive policies such as a Universal Basic Income, and public programs modeled on principles of wealth redistribution (Ferguson, 2015);
2. Rights-based approaches to food security and nutrition, including implementing the Right to Food, and protecting access to food during the deep economic recession predicted for 2020 and 2021 (IMF, 2020; Sampson et al., 2020);
3. The strengthening of workers' rights, including protections and benefits for all essential services workers, in particular farm and food workers (Freudenberg, Silver, Hirsch, & Cohen, 2016; IUF, 2020);
4. The extension of workers' rights and employment benefits to all, regardless of citizenship (FAO, 2020a; Faraday, 2012); and
5. Comprehensive immigration reform, including regularized status and access to permanent residency for all migrants (FAO, 2020a; Network, 2020)

Around the world, governments have provided an unprecedented level of funding to support people who have lost their livelihoods due to the economic response to the pandemic (Gentilini, Almenfi, & Orton, 2020). This is important and encouraging. But this is not the last global pandemic, and there are always other shocks to manage, such as the locusts that are devastating crops in East Africa and West Asia (FAO, 2020b), and the intensifying effects of climate change. To better prepare for future crises, governments should take this opportunity to invest in structural changes to reduce persistent inequities in food access due to poverty, health outcomes, decent work and overall wellbeing, especially for racialized communities and migrants. Recovery from the pandemic cannot be just about restoring the status quo. Public investments must focus on re-building systems to uphold human rights and better protect people living in precarity.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Susanna Klassen: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Sophia Murphy:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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