

COVID-19 RESPONSES FOR EQUITY (CORE) KEY ISSUES GUIDE

A man watches for customers to sell his cereal stock in Bihar, India.

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Equitable support for livelihoods and food

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and policy responses to contain its spread had severe impacts on people's livelihoods and food security. It exposed weaknesses and inequities in social protection systems, food production and distribution, job security, and economic policies, with those already marginalised and vulnerable most affected (Bolton and Georgalakis 2022; Thompson *et al.* 2021; Rohwerder 2020). Lockdowns, the closure of borders, and the shutting or scaling down of businesses and public offices led to economic recessions, loss of livelihoods, and pushed millions of people to the brink of poverty and destitution (Thompson *et al.* 2021). The pandemic majorly impacted on households' production and access to quality, nutritious food due to losses of income combined with increasing food prices and restrictions to movements of people, inputs and products (*ibid.*). Women and those working in informal economies were hardest hit in both rural and urban areas as a result of deep-rooted inequalities (*ibid.*; Bolton and Georgalakis 2022; Juárez Padilla, Machorro and Pira 2021).

These effects continue four years on with the *Global Report on Food Crises 2023* identifying the lingering socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic as one of the key factors in driving up acute food insecurity (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2023). The socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic have negatively affected poor people's resilience, resulting in longer recovery periods and an inability to cope with future shocks (*ibid.*).

Drawing on research supported by the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Programme – which is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – this guide highlights key lessons and priority actions that need to be taken to respond to food and livelihood security challenges for food systems to become equitable and resilient. This includes supporting immediate needs; building flexibility, resilience and inclusion into food systems and social protection, and developing economic policies that are equitable and gender responsive (Bolton and Georgalakis 2022).

Key issues

Food systems and farming were under increased pressure

Production and access to food were affected by the pandemic and the responses to it, resulting in increased pressure for food systems and farming (Salik 2021; HLPE 2021). Overlapping and reinforcing dynamics emerged that affected food systems, food security and nutrition over the course of the pandemic, including 'disruptions to food supply chains; loss of income and livelihoods; a widening of social inequalities; disruptions to social protection programmes; altered food environments; and higher and more uneven food prices' (HLPE 2021: 3). The pandemic exposed the fragilities in the food system, including 'rigid supply chains, a lack of protections and rights of food system workers, a lack of diversity in terms of production, distribution and trade channels, and food system concentration' (*ibid.*: 12).

'As food demand contracted due to declining incomes, food producers' and food systems workers' livelihoods were further affected: six months into the pandemic, food systems were estimated to lose 451 million jobs, or 35 per cent of their formal employment' (HLPE 2021: 5). In Pakistan, smallholder farmers were especially affected by reduced incomes and livelihood assets, and increasing indebtedness, particularly as the costs of seeds, fertiliser and other farm inputs increased (Salik 2021). Traders and exporters were negatively affected due to restricted transport and the lack of labour (Salik 2021). Lack of storage for commodities meant that restrictions on movement were particularly problematic for perishable goods (Salik 2021). In Peru, food market vendors struggled to keep their businesses afloat, while in Tunisia women working in agriculture lost their incomes as they were unable to sell their produce due to the closure of food stalls (Alcázar and Fort 2022; Bajec 2020; Bolton and Georgalakis 2022).

High levels of informality contributed to greater loss of livelihoods and food insecurity

People working in the informal sector were more likely to lose their jobs than those in the formal sector during the pandemic (Rohwerder 2020; FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021). Migrant informal workers experienced even greater restrictions and hardship than local informal workers (Ismail and Valdivia 2021; Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021). A lack of social protection coverage for informal workers increased their poverty and food



Children queue for lunch in the Mathare slum, Nairobi, Kenya. With schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, various charitable organisations have stepped in to supply children with a free lunch.

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insecurity (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021). This was also the case for smallholder farmers and agricultural workers, fishers, and pastoralists in rural areas who tended to have no access to income insurance when their livelihoods were disrupted by lockdowns (Rohwerder 2020).

Research in Latin America noted that the high level of informality in Latin American labour markets 'accelerated the shrinkage of household incomes during the pandemic, jeopardising food security for the poor and marginalised' (Thompson *et al.* 2021: 3). More than 80 per cent of workers in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are in the informal sector and highly vulnerable to pandemic-induced shocks, which left them without income or access to social protection (Javed, Ahmed and Cheema 2021).

Marginalised people were hit hardest by the loss of livelihoods and food insecurity

The Covid-19 pandemic hit poor and marginalised people the hardest (Alston 2020; Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021). The economic shocks of the pandemic pushed many more people into poverty and contributed to food insecurity as it led to loss of livelihoods and a sharp reduction in households' capacity to purchase sufficient food, both in terms of quantity and quality (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021; Rohwerder 2020). 'Strategies to reduce Covid-19 transmission upset the production, transport, access and availability of nutritious, fresh and affordable foods, and reduced incomes, forcing millions of vulnerable families to rely on processed foods and nutrient-poor staples' (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021: 24).

Poverty and food insecurity 'affected girls and women disproportionately across the world, as they were hardest hit by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods, income and access to nutritious food' (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2023: 23; Rohwerder 2020). Research across 10 Latin America countries found that the share of households whose income had decreased was highest among women-led households in all countries (Thompson *et al.* 2021). In informal settlements in Nairobi during the first phase of the pandemic, more women reported skipping meals than men (77 per cent versus 68 per cent) (Population Council 2020). Women are more likely to work in the informal economy and be employed in economic sectors most affected by the pandemic, as well as having to take on increased domestic responsibilities, so were more likely to lose their livelihoods and fall into poverty, with knock-on effects on their food security (Thompson *et al.* 2021; FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021; Javed *et al.* 2021; Mutambala 2021; Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021).

Social protection systems struggled to cope

Existing social protection systems did not cover the needs of many of those most affected by the lockdowns and other economic impacts of the pandemic (Al Shami 2021; Rohwerder 2020). The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing weaknesses in social protection systems in all regions (Bolton and Georgalakis 2022; Al Shami 2021). Informal workers were often excluded from social protection systems, and often had little savings to rely on when forced to stay home over lockdowns (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021; Al Shami 2021; Rohwerder 2020; WIEGO 2020). They were the most excluded from the coverage of Covid-19 cash transfer programmes, and the implementation of the fiscal policies that mostly applied to the formal sector (Mutambala 2021).



Rekha collecting scrap metal and other waste items from the city streets to sell to recyclers on the outskirts of Tumkur, Karnataka, India.

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Households engaged in negative coping mechanisms

To compensate for loss of incomes during the pandemic, households adopted coping strategies that could compromise their recovery capacity, such as selling assets or getting into debt (Thompson *et al.* 2021; Alfors, Ismail and Valdivia 2020). Households also reduced their food intake and/or reduced the amount of nutritious food they ate to cope with losses of income and increased food prices, which can have longer-term impacts on their nutritional outcomes (Thompson *et al.* 2021; FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2021; HLPE 2021). The loss of livelihoods, and exhaustion of resources, created conditions for exploitation and abuse such as cases of transactional sex, early marriage, child labour, and human trafficking (Global Protection Cluster 2020).



Market traders wearing face masks offer bananas and other fresh produce in a market in Quito, Ecuador.

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Emerging lessons

Meet immediate food and income security needs during crises

To mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and future crises on livelihoods and food systems, countries must 'meet the immediate food and income security needs of their vulnerable rural and urban populations, keep agricultural markets open and trade flowing, and support smallholder farmers and small and medium enterprises to continue to operate' (Thompson *et al.* 2021: 1). 'Exploring opportunities to strengthen local supply, especially in small towns and cities, may additionally bring gains in improving households' access to affordable and quality food' (*ibid.*: 3). Short-term cash grants and food relief are needed to support marginalised groups in crises, especially female informal workers who lack access to existing social protection (Lakshmi Ratan *et al.* 2021; Rohwerder 2020).


Food system reforms must build greater resilience and empower marginalised groups

The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN) note that food systems need to be transformed, with a move from 'a singular focus on increasing food supply through specialized production and export to making fundamental changes that diversify food systems, empower vulnerable and marginalised groups and promote sustainability across all aspects of food supply chains, from production to consumption' (HLPE 2021: 12).

Community-based kitchens emerged during the pandemic and provided affordable and subsidised food in poor urban neighbourhoods (IDRC 2022; Alcázar and Fort 2022). In Lima, Peru, support for these community-based kitchens has developed into a national zero-hunger strategy and efforts to improve the functioning of traditional food systems (IDRC 2022; Alcázar and Fort 2022; Fort and Gatellier 2022).

Social protection systems must become more inclusive and flexible

'Adaptive social protection measures can build the resilience of both rural and urban households to the impacts of large natural and human-driven shocks, such as pandemics, but structural inequalities must be addressed to ensure these reach the poorest and most vulnerable populations' (Thompson *et al.* 2021: 1). 'Investment in social protection programmes including universal cash transfers, targeted transfers to youth and elderly, tax reliefs, and rebates [is needed] to mitigate the challenges of Covid-19' (*ibid.*: 2). 'Increasing coverage in social protections systems requires injecting more



Temporary workers from the southern regions of Mexico harvest beans in the fields around Ejido El Melon, Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico.

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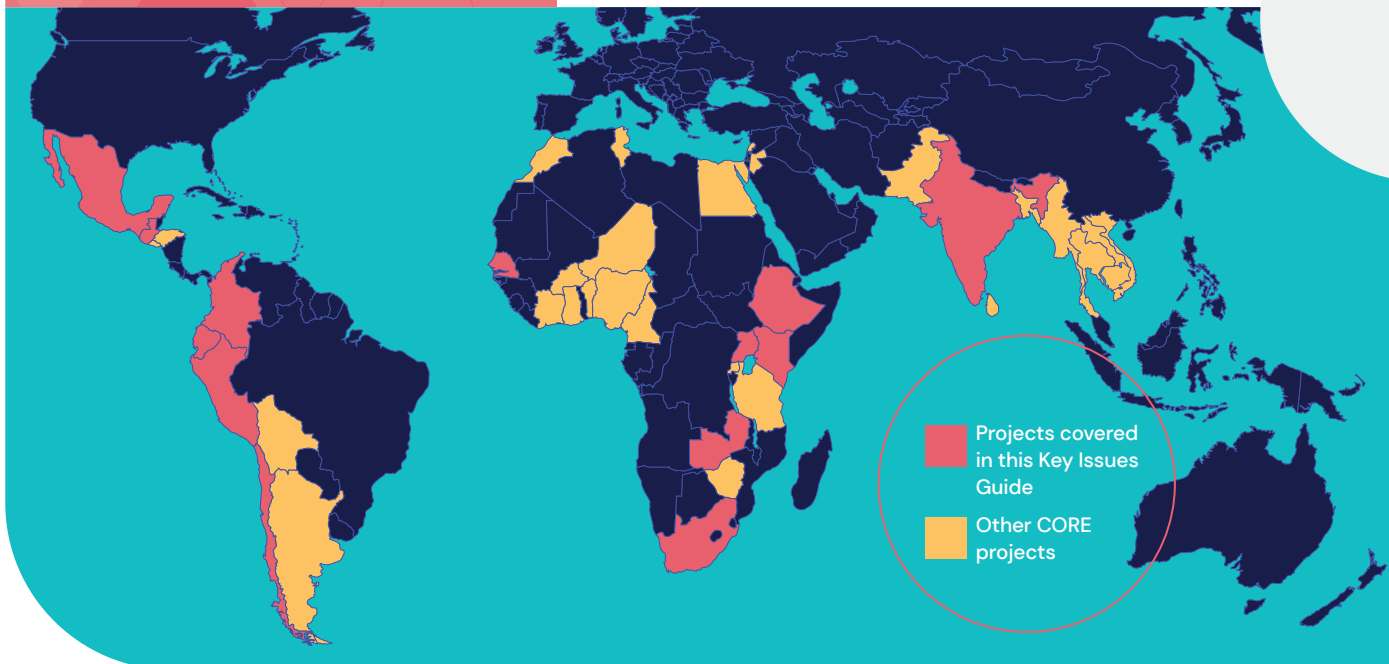
resources to expand assistance' (Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021: 15). Particular attention must be paid to supporting vulnerable groups, including 'women and young people, who are more likely to work in the informal sector, have lower incomes and often play a central role in household reproduction and the care economy' (Thompson *et al.* 2021: 1; Javed *et al.* 2021; Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021; Rohwerder 2020).

Equitable economic policies are central to a more effective pandemic response

The pandemic provided an opportunity for fundamental reform and for creating more just and sustainable livelihoods and food futures (Thompson *et al.* 2021). This involves committing to address inequality and poverty and generating a more inclusive growth pattern, such as a 'commitment to design and implement measures that benefit the poor directly, and removing the belief in an inevitable trade-off between efficiency (growth) and equity (poverty reduction)' (*ibid.*: 2).

Economic recovery policies/programmes need to be gender-sensitive and address issues such as women's unpaid care burdens (Cochran *et al.* 2020). A gender-inclusive regulatory framework to support informal sector women workers to create secure livelihoods and generate employment opportunities should be developed, as well as investment in the care economy (health and education) where women are heavily represented in the workforce (Wandera *et al.* 2021; Javed *et al.* 2021; UN 2020). Greater efforts for the creation of improved, formal livelihood opportunities should be at the core of reconstruction strategies, as well as support for small and medium enterprises (Thompson *et al.* 2021; Javed *et al.* 2021; Mutambala 2021; Juárez Padilla *et al.* 2021).

Highlighted projects



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Livelihoods in Africa

This project focuses on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods in selected African countries, with special emphasis on vulnerable groups. Specifically, the project will evaluate the macroeconomic consequences of the pandemic (including the impact on food security, malnutrition, and hunger) and the gendered socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. It will further aim to use the evidence to build the capacity of researchers and institutions in target countries and build a network of stakeholders that can continue to track the pandemic's impacts and design practical and gender transformative solutions.

COUNTRIES

• Ethiopia • Kenya • Senegal • South Africa • Zambia

RESEARCH PARTNERS

• African Economic Research Consortium (AERC)

Sowing Development: Small Scale Agriculture and Food Security Resilient to Covid-19

This project will generate evidence and promote changes to agri-food systems in the aftermath of the pandemic. It will contribute to mitigating the impact on the food security and consumption of the most vulnerable, with particular emphasis on women. It will promote small- and medium-scale farming, and promote more sustainable, gender sensitive, and inclusive agri-food systems that are more resilient to shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

COUNTRIES

• Chile • Colombia • Ecuador • Guatemala • Mexico

RESEARCH PARTNERS

• Latin American Center for Rural Development (RIMISP)

Building Back Better: Using a Disruptive Crisis to Achieve Sustainable and Gender Inclusive Improvements in Food Security, Labour Markets and Social Protection

What cost-effective policy options and, crucially, what unforeseen opportunities exist for Latin America and the Global South to reduce the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, promote a more equitable recovery and lay the foundations for a new, more inclusive architecture of social protection? The project will focus specifically on the fields of food systems, labour markets and social protection. In addition, and considering that the crisis is expected to disproportionately affected women, research will explicitly seek to identify policy alternatives that promote gender equitable results.

COUNTRIES

• Ecuador • Peru

RESEARCH PARTNERS

• Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE)

REBUILD: Covid-19 and Women in the Informal Economy in Kenya, Uganda and India

This project focuses on urban informal economic activities across three countries (India, Kenya, and Uganda), where the researchers will provide critical insights into the resilience of and challenges faced by women and their broader social 'ecosystem'. The ultimate goal of the research is to inform policies and strategies that ensure vulnerable populations, such as female workers in urban informal economies affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, can recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

COUNTRIES

• India • Kenya • Uganda

RESEARCH PARTNERS

• International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

Further reading and references

Further reading

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