

COVID-19 exposes violence at the heart of food insecurity

Pax Christi International, 29 April 2020

Violence is a cause and consequence of food insecurity

Even before the emergence of the coronavirus, 135 million people were “marching toward the brink of starvation.”¹ A careful reading of the *2020 Global Report on Food Crises*,² written largely before the pandemic, reveals that violent conflict, war and forced displacement are by far the most frequent causes of food insecurity.

Now, COVID-19 is effectively exposing the extremely heavy price of structural and systemic violence in the fabric of socioeconomic and political systems with global reach, and in the structures that impact daily life at a national and local level. This violence is evident even in the wealthiest countries. In the U.S., for example, racism and poverty leave African Americans and indigenous peoples more vulnerable to COVID-19 impacts, including food insecurity.³ While natural events (swarming of locusts, floods, droughts etc.) are devastating, poverty, marginalization, lack of political power and environmental destruction and climate change exacerbate vulnerabilities. The exclusion and unjust treatment of migrants and refugees, racism, lack of access to land and water, unjust trade agreements, the manipulation of commodities markets, lack of access to health care, poor quality or no education – all of the ways that people, communities and whole countries are *made poor or kept poor* have created the heartbreaking context for famine. Poor people in countries impoverished by war are the most at risk.

The coronavirus is poised to further devastate communities already on the brink of a global humanitarian crisis.⁴ Loss of livelihoods, a sharp drop in remittances, little or no tourism, collapsing oil prices, transport barriers, supply chain disruptions, commodity shortages, lockdowns will all contribute to the pending catastrophe. By the end of 2020, 265 million people could be facing starvation.⁵

Participation and option for the poor

A critical long term challenge is to address the systemic and structural violences that perpetuate poverty, leaving whole countries and huge segments of the global population extremely vulnerable in the current pandemic. A more immediate challenge is to ensure that measures aimed at controlling the coronavirus do not worsen the food insecurity of poor and marginalized communities or lead to more violence.

In the altiplano of Peru,⁶ thanks to the historical violence of racism and exclusion, already vulnerable populations are food insecure. Efforts to limit the spread of the coronavirus have been designed without taking into account the traditional wisdom and practices of indigenous peoples that could ensure the harvest while also protecting the community from COVID-19.

In Africa,⁷ including in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda, lockdowns threaten to exacerbate hunger and violence.⁸ Lockdown-related shootings have occurred in several countries. Pax Christi colleagues in South Africa report that food insecurity has worsened conflict between the local poor people and refugees or migrants. In some situations, people in queues for aid were divided on grounds of

nationality and locals were given preferential treatment. Where equal treatment was offered, resentment and violence ensued when resources dried up.

In Lebanon, despite surging prices for basic food and hygiene products, only one out of 198 Syrian refugees and Syrian-Palestinians who participated in a recent survey conducted by Refugee Protection Watch,⁹ reported having received any aid in the form of food rations or cleaning materials.¹⁰ High food prices due to Lebanon's pre-COVID-19 financial crisis are likely to worsen as the coronavirus spreads.

In Asia-Pacific, a statement on the impact of COVID-19 by numerous civil society organisations called on Southeast Asian states to heed the call for a global ceasefire and ensure conflict sensitivity and human rights in responding to the COVID-19 crisis.¹¹

We judge this catastrophe in light of our call as people of faith and conscience to respond to every crushing form of violence with the power of nonviolent love. The universal ethic of active nonviolence¹² demands that we challenge the violence of hunger, food insecurity and the global, interlocking systems of structural violence that have created this crisis, with powerful and effective strategies that remove barriers to food for all, support local engagement, and mobilize the world to respond to these needs in a spirit of solidarity and shared sacrifice.

A *Laudato Si* future that is nonviolent and reflects the values of Catholic social teaching can be built during and following this global crisis if we apply tested strategies of active nonviolence to reshaping our broken, hungry world.

¹ David Beasley, UN World Food Programme Executive Director to UNSC 21 April 2020 <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council>

² 2020 Global Report on Food Crises Chapter 4. acute food insecurity and malnutrition forecasts for 2020 <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2020-global-report-food-crises>

³ Bread for the World series on "Race, Hunger and COVID-19 Impact" in the U.S. www.bread.org

⁴ David Beasley, UN World Food Programme Executive Director to UNSC 21 April 2020 <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council>

⁵ 2020 Global Report on Food Crises <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2020-global-report-food-crises>

⁶ Derechos Humanos y Medio Ambiente, *Danos Hoy Nuestro Pan De Cada Día, Resumen Situacional Del Coronavirus en El Perú, por El Día Mundial De La Tierra, 22 De Abril De 2020.* https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2826784797389740&id=211419462259633

⁷ W. Gyude Moore, "Curfews Are a Safer Plan than Total Lockdowns," Quartz Africa <https://qz.com/africa/1836458/curfews-not-lockdowns-will-slow-covid-19-spread-in-africa/>

⁸ Danielle Resnick, COVID-19 Lockdowns Threaten Africa's Vital Informal Urban Food Trade," <https://www.theafricareport.com/26003/covid-19-lockdowns-threaten-africas-vital-informal-urban-food-trade/amp/>

⁹ Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition is an initiative of Basmeh and Zeitooneh, ALEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11. and Upinion

¹⁰ Refugee Protection Watch, COVID-19 in Lebanon: Impact on Refugees and Host Communities <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/covid-19-in-lebanon-impact-on-refugees-and-host-communities>

¹¹ Civil Society Statement: *Southeast Asian States should heed call for global ceasefire, ensure conflict sensitivity and human rights in responding to COVID19 crisis* https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/eng_joint-statement-asean-asean-urged-to-heed-un-sec-gen-call-for-global-ceasefire-ensure-human-rights-amid-covid19.pdf

¹² Bishop Robert McElroy: "We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic." Statement, "Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace," symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican City, April 4-5, 2019.