

Global cooperation is the only way to cope with the crisis

In a large number of countries, the impacts of the Corona pandemic are not only going to dramatically worsen the health and food supply situation but will also result in severe income and job losses. In particular, the huge amount of people working in informal or precarious employment relationships will be affected. In addition to swift support in containing and mitigating the crisis, it is all the more important to make the agriculture and food sector more resilient in the long run. And this requires a joint effort, our author maintains.



By Gunther Beger

Life has undergone fundamental changes since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. This applies to all of us, throughout the world, although the pandemic is going to have the most severe impact on those countries and people that are already faced with poverty, hunger and poor governance.

In the densely populated neighbourhoods of our partner countries, it is hardly possible to enforce social distancing regulations, and especially in rural regions, even in normal times, millions of people have no access to clean drinking water, not to mention disinfectants. Health systems are fragile, while protective clothing, respiratory equipment and skilled staff are lacking.

However, focusing solely on the health sector means ignoring other crucial aspects. In most African countries, COVID-19 is not merely going to trigger a health crisis, which would be dramatic enough, but it will lead to a combined health and food crisis that will be significantly aggravated by losses of income and employment. In some African countries, fruit and vegetable prices have already risen sharply.

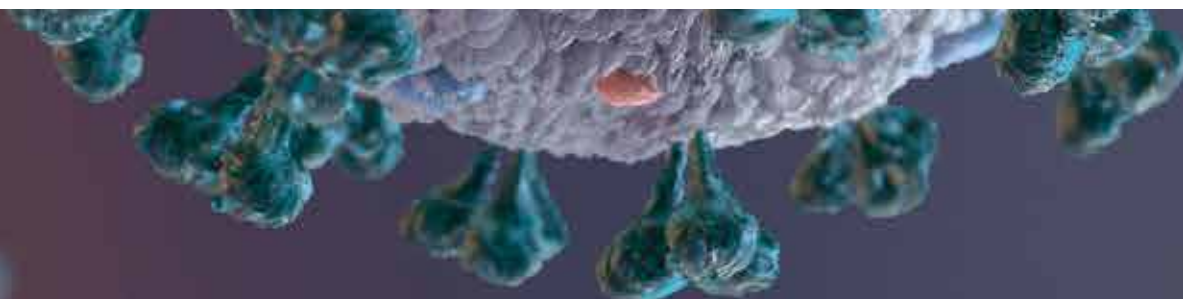
Such price hikes hit the poor groups of the population especially hard. Already before the pandemic, they had to spend most of their income on food. The large numbers of people working in the informal sector in Africa, Asia and Latin America are particularly severely affected. Alone in the first month after the crisis had started, more than 80 per cent of income was often lost. There are fears that owing to the limited availability of healthy and nutritious food such as fruit and vegetables on the one hand and a lack of purchasing power on the other, under-nutrition and malnutrition will increase markedly, especially among children.

From our partners across the world, we get reports giving accounts of the negative impacts that the pandemic is having on agricultural production and food security as well as of huge income and job losses. In many countries, the considerable restrictions on freedom of movement are leading to labour shortages and problems with logistics and transportation. The lack of rural workers is going to result in severe harvest losses, especially where labour-intensive products such as fruit and vegetables are concerned. Normally, in many

areas, the planting season started in May. Now it is acutely threatened – and without sowing, there will be no harvest. At the same time, curfews are causing severe income losses, with whole families struggling for their livelihoods. The economic crisis has also raised the threat of casual and unprotected employment becoming established on a long-term basis. A major share of people in Africa are still working in informal and precarious employment relationships, without contracts and social security.

The pandemic has caused disruptions in supply chains of inputs such as seed, fertiliser and animal feed because of borders being closed and travel restrictions within individual countries. Further processing, transportation to local markets and access to export markets are severely restricted, too. Smallholder farms depending on functioning supply and value chains to secure their livelihood threaten to slide into the subsistence economy, with drastic income losses.

In Kenya, for example, owing to the lockdown prescribed by the government, only the most important markets continue to operate. Supply



chains to and from remote regions are disrupted. Milk now seldom arrives at the collecting points. Most micro-farms are starting to consume their own milk again or are selling it in small quantities, e.g. to neighbours. However, without storage, transportation or cooling facilities, this is only possible to a very limited extent. Most of the milk goes bad, meaning that the prime source of income is lost. At the same time, supplies for the urban population are also lacking.

Like in past times of crisis, one can see countries beginning to resort to protectionist measures. For example, in late March, the government of Kazakhstan imposed an export ban on a selection of food products, including wheat flour, sunflower oil, sugar, potatoes and various types of vegetables. The government of Vietnam, which is normally an important rice exporter to Africa, initially entered no new contracts for rice exports, concentrating on first building up local rice stocks in order to secure supplies for its own population.

Past experience has shown us that such trade restriction measures have a negative impact on all sides involved. Overnight, they threaten supply chains which it has taken a long time and a considerable effort to establish, and whose actors depend on one another, and thus they upset the market's balance. So it is all the more important to maintain global trade in food and get rid of the recently introduced export restrictions. This can prevent food shortages in various places and help achieve price stability on the world market.

So also, and particularly, for the trade sector, it is true that we will only be able to cope with this crisis through global cooperation, and not through isolation. The pandemic has shown us how closely everything is linked. No country is going to win the battle against the virus on its own. This is now the time of international solidarity with developing countries!

Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is therefore financing a global corona emergency programme with seven focal areas:

1. Strengthening health and combating pandemics.
2. Food security, ensuring staple food supplies to avoid famine.
3. Stabilising refugee and crisis regions.
4. Social security, safeguarding jobs in global supply chains.
5. Safeguarding enterprises in key sectors such as textiles and tourism.
6. Securing the liquidity of governments.
7. Strengthening international cooperation.

Furthermore, in order to contain and mitigate the effects of the pandemic in the developing countries, we will provide immediate support, precisely because we are also partners in the long run. This applies in particular to the food and agriculture sector. The networks created by the initiative "One World – no hunger" launched by the BMZ are of particular value in this context. We are making use of the Green Innovation Centres operating in 14 African countries and in India and now reaching deep into rural areas with a network of tens of thousands of smallholders, small enterprises, farmers' organisations and federations as a basis for support tailored to each country and its current needs.

In Ethiopia and Benin, we are providing our partners with seed and small-scale machinery to ward off threats to planting, and we are also covering higher delivery costs. In Burkina Faso, we are helping to sensitise people towards COVID-19 via a radio programme. There, as well as in Malawi and Ghana, we are financing hygiene protection articles for our partners in production. In India, we are providing animal feed. In Tunisia, we are seeing to hygiene measures in the milk marketing sector and have supplied protective clothing to 1,500 harvest hands.

All these examples are a response to the highly individual needs of our partners in the respective countries. Direct support goes without saying when you have been working together closely with people and institutions for years. At the same time, it helps to make European solidarity with Africa more than just empty words, for a friend in need is a friend indeed.

However, to me, consistently orienting our policy on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and coherent, cross-sector intermeshing is also important. These global objectives are reflected in many instances, from the Paris Climate Agreement through the European Green Deal to our efforts to achieve more social and ecological sustainability in global supply chains. We must not question these political goals, as is already happening among those pursuing certain interests, but instead have to work towards them with even more determination.

Then there is the aspect that, despite its dramatic proportions, the crisis is also offering opportunities to change the world in a positive way. Not only is digitisation being accelerated in an unprecedented way. This also includes a timely discussing of how we can make agriculture more resilient towards future crises. How can we reshape value adding at local level, e.g. through more local processing of goods? How can we create broad access to training and further training measures by developing information and communications technologies in rural areas, in particular for young entrepreneurs? How can we counter the economic impact of the crisis and generate employment? What role can agroecology play? How can we improve the focusing of agricultural research e.g. in order to gain a better understanding of zoonoses?

This may be difficult to imagine today, for we are still at the very beginning of coping with this epochal crisis. Nevertheless, the clouds could have a silver lining in that we will be stronger and more united when we emerge from the crisis in a globalised world. That has to stay our goal.

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