



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 9

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Food insecurity in Africa at the time of covid-19

Food security, according to the *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, exists when people are able to lead healthy and active lives through the availability and accessibility of sufficient quantity and quality food, and that this food meets their energy needs and adapts to their cultural preferences.

Since the second half of the 20th century the world food production per capita has increased by 25%. According to the *FAO*, despite the improvement in relative numbers, there are still two billion people in the world, 26.4% of the population, who suffer from food insecurity. Of these, 17.2% experience moderate food insecurity, i.e., they do not have regular access to sufficient and nutritious food; and 9.2% suffer from severe food insecurity, i.e., access to food is so reduced that they experience periods of hunger (FAO, 2019). The following figure shows the percentage distribution of moderate and severe food insecurity in different regions of the world.

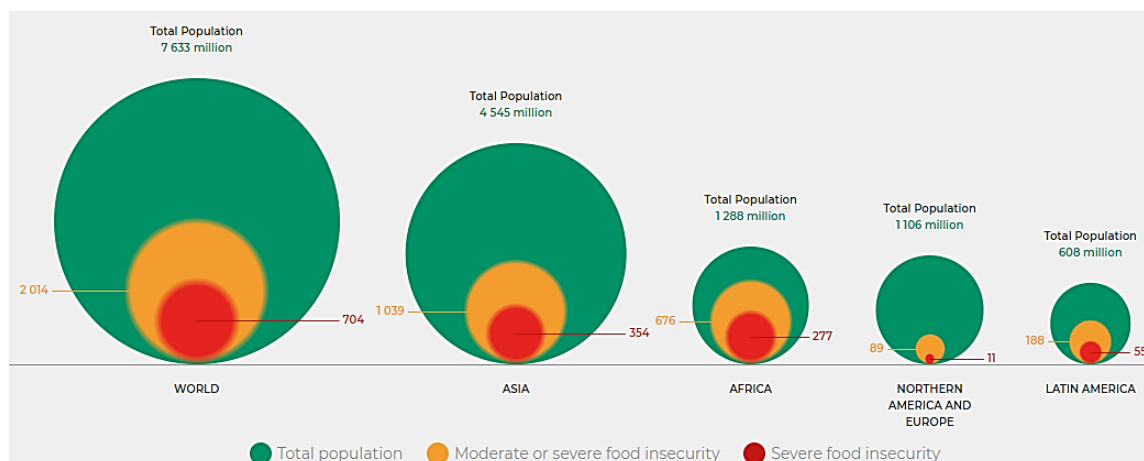


Figure 1. Moderate and Severe Food Insecurity in Percentage to Different Regions Source: FAO, 2019

As it can see, although in absolute numbers Asia is the most moderately and severely food insecure region, in relative numbers, the African continent has the largest share of food insecure population.

Food insecurity leads to both malnutrition and undernutrition. Malnutrition is an imbalance in the diet, where nutrients are missing or in excess. In the first case it implies diseases caused by the lack of essential components in the diet and in the second case it implies overweight or obesity. Undernutrition, on the other hand, is a deficiency in the intake of calories and proteins. The *FAO* estimates that 23% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa and 11.5% of the population of South Asia are undernourished, and that 45% of child deaths in these regions are due to undernutrition (FAO, 2019). In this report we focus on the increase of food insecurity in the African continent and different measures taken to mitigate it.

Over the past decades, Africa has been confronted with different economic, political, environmental and health crises that have increased food insecurity in the region. This growth results in an increase in malnutrition and undernutrition of the population and consequently greater morbidity and risk of suffering from major diseases such as complications from the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

To control covid-19, African countries have taken different measures of mobility reduction and confinement. These have been especially problematic for people working in the informal economy, 85.5% of the population in the region, who have not been able to work or buy goods in the markets. In order to mitigate the impacts of a stagnant economy and paralysis in trade as well as the decreasing purchasing power of families, several governments have taken special measures.

For example, the President of São Tomé and Príncipe, taking into account the country's dependence on foreign food imports, in mid-April started a campaign where he encouraged his citizens to grow products for their own supply. Also, the President of Uganda stressed the importance of decreasing the dependence on foreign products, such as refined sugar used to manufacture carbonized drinks in the country, and encouraged farmers to grow it. Similarly, since the end of May he has been distributing maize seeds to all farmers in the North and East part of the country to ensure the supply of these cereals in the country.

Furthermore, there have been governments acting on an assistance basis delivering food and minimizing the costs of living to their population. Some examples are Togo, Senegal, Gabon, and Mauritania. The government of Togo has paid for electricity for 350,000 vulnerable households. Similarly, the government of Senegal has subsidized for 2 months the electricity and water bills of vulnerable households and has also invested money on providing with basic foods such as rice, oil and milk to all the citizens. The government of Gabon, at the beginning of the confinement ensured that electricity and water bills would be free for all and everyone would receive basic food aid. According to the newspaper *Jornal du Gabon*, these promises are being fulfilled little by little and certain sectors of the population are complaining about it. Also the government of Gabon has committed to pay the rent for those families who request it and demonstrate that they have lost their incomes due to the confinement. Finally Mauritania, according to the *Information Agency of Mauritania*, has made donations of fish to all the population.

Other measures taken by African governments are fixing the price of commodities such as fish, cereals and oil. Since the beginning of the pandemic the governments of Mauritania and Chad have applied this measure.

At the regional level, in order to ensure the entry and exit of products, the countries of the East African Community (EAC) have developed an agreement where cross-border truck drivers can freely transport essential goods and not be stopped at each border to be tested or forced into quarantine for 14 days. Although trade between these countries is plentiful (in fact most of the fruit and vegetables consumed in Kenya come from Tanzania), drivers during the first months of the pandemic suffered some tensions while crossing borders, especially between Kenya and Uganda and between Tanzania and Kenya.

Finally, an example of food insecurity accumulated through years is Malawi. Malawi, has suffered in the last decades several natural disasters such as floods, droughts, disease outbreaks and pests that have greatly weakened the food security of the population. In fact, 80% of the population survives of subsistence agriculture and recent climate changes have decreased and worsened their harvest. It is estimated that only 8% of children under five consume the necessary nutrients and many end up in hospital receiving high-calorie supplements. In addition, 71% of the country's agricultural exports are based on tobacco, and its consumption has declined since the beginning of the pandemic. This food insecurity is coupled with high morbidity in the population and weak under-equipped health systems. A large part of Malawi's population is currently dependent on international aid and is highly vulnerable to increased food insecurity.

Food insecurity can be caused by different factors. In this report we have limited ourselves to present how restrictions on movement and confinement have increased the risk of developing food insecurity and some mitigation actions taken by African governments. However, it is important to remember that there are many other factors beyond environmental or pandemic factors that influence the levels of food insecurity. These factors include persistent inequalities within and between countries.

References:

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The State of food insecurity in the World. 2019. Available: <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/en/>

The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>