



# Preventing the Global Food Crisis - protecting the rights & livelihoods of the workers who feed the world

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In June 2020, the United Nations warned that we are facing the worst global food crisis in 50 years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected food supply in every country, with restrictions on the movement of people, disruption to transportation and distribution, and the closure of borders causing shortages and rising prices. While food prices are rising in cities, the pandemic is driving vulnerable rural communities deeper into poverty and debt.

The disruption of transportation and distribution affects both inputs into agriculture and the sale of crops, creating shortages in cities and surplus produce on farms. Surplus agricultural produce is dumped and destroyed in massive quantities while millions of people go hungry. Tens of millions of informal sector street vendors and home-based food workers across the region have lost their livelihoods. Seasonal and migrant workers face restrictions on movement, generating shortages of labour in fields, farms, and plantations. This life-threatening loss of wages and livelihoods for workers and their families exposes them to even greater risks in an escalating pandemic.

In this escalating pandemic workers in the food processing, meat processing and beverage manufacturing industries were declared essential workers – feeding populations in lockdown. Workers in an essential industry, but not essential workers. Denied recognition and respect, their contribution was undervalued or ignored. In the pandemic most employers moved quickly to limit reputational damage and protect brand image; while moving slowly to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect workers.

Even as insecure jobs undermined workers' protection and exposed them to even greater risk, outsourcing and casualization increased. As the meat processing industry showed the world: workers' vulnerability is profitable; workers' safety is not. Even as outbreaks in food and beverage factories increased, governments and employers in several countries attacked unions and took every opportunity to punish workers for being union members. Unions fighting for the right to a safe workplace, while their members are feeding the world

In response to this growing crisis, the global agri-food corporations that dominate the world food system are trying to restore international trade and regain their profits. The system they seek to restore is one based on high value brands and commodity prices; low incomes and rural impoverishment; high productivity and toxic pesticides; unsustainable industrial agriculture and environmental destruction. It is a system that causes three million cases of pesticide poisoning every year, resulting in more than 250,000 deaths. A system in which 820 million people were already living in hunger before the pandemic, facing what is called "chronic food insecurity". Agricultural workers, marginal farmers and their communities are

among those suffering chronic food insecurity. Feeding the world, but unable to feed themselves.

The world food system was in crisis before the pandemic. It is a system in which the biggest tea brands in the world can promise a great cup of tea while denying tea plantation workers the basic human right to water and sanitation. A system in which supermarkets grab more than half the value of bananas at discount prices while banana plantation workers are poisoned with pesticides and brutally punished for organizing unions. A system in which the world's supply of seafood is dependent on massive over-fishing and the decimation of any ocean life that gets in the way; while relying on a brutal regime of trafficked and forced labour on fishing vessels; and insecure, unsafe work in seafood processing factories.

The world food system is a system that relies on rural poverty to exploit 98 million children in fields, farms and plantations, while piece-rate wage regimes compel children to work alongside their parents to earn enough to survive. A surviving wage, not a living wage. A system built on patriarchy and the institutionalized vulnerability of women, with sexual harassment and violence so prevalent it is called 'culture' rather than the outrageous crime that it is. A system discriminating against and marginalizing women who - as a *majority* - exert their energy ten-fold to feed the world. A system that was clearly broken before the pandemic. It is a system that does not need to be fixed. It must be replaced.

In all the chaos of policy advice, government action plans, and promises of vaccines, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) published a report in April 2020, explaining that this pandemic was caused by us. And if we do not change how we farm and feed the world, we will create the next pandemic too.

The UNEP report explains the human actions that drive the emergence and spread of diseases like the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. These "disease drivers" include climate change, environmental destruction, industrialized agriculture, the demand for animal protein, and our food supply. In other words, the world food system helped to create this pandemic. In all its worst aspects, it is a disease driver.

To prevent the next pandemic *and* prevent the global food crisis, we must not rebuild the world food system, but create the environmentally and socially sustainable food systems we *need*.

We need a system sustainable, equitable, and resilient enough to eliminate the widespread violence, vulnerability, and exclusion that women face.

We need sustainable food systems based on social protection and comprehensive *rights*, starting with the universal right to food and nutrition.

We need food systems that sustain and are sustained by the fragile natural ecology and climate in which we live.

We must secure respect for food and beverage workers' rights by:  
Protecting jobs at work.

Ensuring safety at work.  
Promoting gender equality at work.  
Respecting collective bargaining at work.  
Paying fair wages at work.

To prevent the global food crisis,  
We must end child labour in farms, fields and plantations.  
We must end forced labour in farms, fields and plantations.  
We must end violence against women in farms, fields and plantations.  
We must end the use of harmful pesticides in farms, fields and plantations.  
We must end environmental destruction in farms, fields and plantations.

To prevent the global food crisis,  
Workers in farms, fields and plantations must have the right to food and nutrition.  
Workers in farms, fields and plantations must have the right to land and housing.  
Workers in farms, fields and plantations must have the right to fair wages.  
Workers in farms, fields and plantations must have the right to join a union.

To prevent the global food crisis,  
Fisheries workers must have the right to join a union.  
Fisheries workers must have the right to social protection.  
Fisheries workers must have the right to safe work.  
Fisheries workers must have the right to a living wage.  
Fisheries workers must have sustainable fisheries.

To prevent the global food crisis,  
Marginal farmers and farm workers need social protection.  
Marginal farmers and farm workers need livelihood protection.  
Marginal farmers and farm workers need environmental protection.  
Marginal farmers and farm workers need climate action.

To prevent the global food crisis, we must take collective action to build the rights-based, sustainable world food system we need.