

SAVING
LIVES
CHANGING
LIVES

Prioritizing Food Security in Crisis and Conflict-Affected Contexts: "... the best vaccine against chaos"

World Food Programme – Global Office Canada

submission to

**the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs
and International Development**

regarding its

*Study on the vulnerabilities created and exacerbated
by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in
crisis- and conflict-affected situations*

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Canada's global response plan for addressing COVID-19, and developing preventative measures going forward, needs to prioritize food security, especially in crisis and conflict-affected settings.
2. Canada should pay particular attention to the food crises unfolding in Yemen, South Sudan, north-eastern Nigeria and Burkina Faso.

Prioritizing Food Security in Crisis and Conflict-Affected Contexts

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) welcomes the opportunity to submit this written brief which follows the WFP Executive Director, David Beasley's testimony to the Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE) Committee on Thursday November 19, 2020, regarding the Committee's study on the vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in crisis- and conflict-affected situations. WFP is thankful to the Committee for the opportunity to provide further commentary and encourages the Government of Canada to consider the two recommendations proposed below.

CHANGING GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

In January 2019, prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) being declared a pandemic, WFP's Executive Director warned that 2020 was going to be the most challenging year for food security. A few months later, in April, Minister of Foreign Affairs, François-Philippe Champagne, and Minister of International Development, Karina Gould, committed to support international efforts saying, "the COVID-19 pandemic is a global threat that does not recognize borders and can only be overcome through coordinated action all around the world."¹ WFP fully agrees with this sentiment and is actively contributing to the global effort to fight the pandemic and its negative effects, in addition to the pre-existing food insecurity challenges that existed prior to COVID-19.

Now, almost a year later, the devastating impact of COVID-19 is still playing out in terms of rising unemployment, shattered livelihoods and increasing hunger. Families are finding it harder to put healthy food on a plate, child malnutrition is threatening millions, and famine is looming. WFP estimates that 270 million people, in 79 countries where it operates, are acutely food insecure – or directly at-risk of becoming so – due to the aggravating effect the protracted COVID-19 crisis is having in areas affected by conflict, socio-economic downturn, natural hazards, climate change and pests.² This is an increase by 80 percent - from 149 million people pre-COVID-19. How the situation evolves will depend on a number of factors, ranging from potential upticks in conflicts and food prices, to rainfall and harvest outcomes, to the myriad fallouts of the coronavirus and levels of donor funding.³

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME'S EXPERIENCE

WFP is the world's largest humanitarian organization saving lives and changing lives, delivering food assistance in emergencies and working with governments and communities to improve nutrition and build resilience.

¹ Global Affairs Canada - News Release, [Canada's support for international efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic](#), April 5, 2020.

² WFP, [WFP Global Update on COVID-19: November 2020](#), November 2020, pg. 4.

³ FAO and WFP, [FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots](#), July 2020, pg. 9.

Every year WFP works closely with host governments, other UN agencies, national societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local NGOs to deliver programmes. National and local organizations are often the first to respond to crises and remain in the communities they serve, before, after and during emergencies. More than 850 of WFP's 1,000 NGO partners are national. Strengthening their capacity ensures a more sustainable impact of WFP interventions, by empowering communities to address their own food challenges, which is key to achieving sustainable development. For WFP working in partnership is increasingly the way to do business, especially in the expansion of resilience-based approaches, innovation and system-wide changes.

As the pandemic expanded and the economic impacts on the most vulnerable began to appear WFP country offices and partners around the world shifted from adjusting delivery mechanisms to sustain existing programmes to also scaling-up to meet new needs. WFP's Global Response Plan includes three overarching pillars: 1) sustain critical assistance to WFP's pre-COVID targeted beneficiaries; 2) scale-up to assist additional people on the brink of acute food insecurity due to the COVID-19 compounded impacts; and 3) support governments and partners in their COVID-19 response through the provision of technical assistance, tangible assets and services, and complementary support.⁴

Sustaining critical assistance to pre-COVID beneficiaries

Highlights of this pillar of work include:

- Continuation of unconditional food assistance to 61 million people;
- 13 million school children continued to benefit from WFP school-based programmes amidst the closures;
- 61 countries continued to received cash-based transfers.

Scaling up to assist additional people on brink of acute food insecurity

Food assistance is a lifeline for populations facing a multitude of risks now aggravated by the pandemic. Notable components of WFP's direct assistance scale-up in 2020 include:

- Extended reach to assist nearly 97 million people with critical food and nutrition assistance, up from 85 million at the middle of the year;
- Increased real-time monitoring of evolving needs to 39 countries from 15;
- Increased unconditional food assistance to 69 million in the first nine months of 2020;
- Increased cash-based transfers in 6 new countries as of the end of October 2020 (where 75% of food and cash-based assistance is provided through NGO partners);
- Extended food assistance to populations in COVID-19 isolation / quarantine centres, including returning migrants;
- Expanded into urban areas to support the growing number of people in need;
- Scaled-up nutrition programming.

⁴ WFP, WFP Global Update on COVID-19: November 2020, pg. 10.

Support to governments and partners with Global Common Logistics Services⁵

In the early months of the pandemic severe impacts were felt across global supply chains and transport markets, impeding the ability of the health and humanitarian community to respond not only to the pandemic but also existing humanitarian crises. To ensure humanitarian workers and cargo could continue to get where they were most needed, WFP leveraged its logistics capacity and expertise to fill gaps created by a reduction in commercial capacity, standing up passenger and cargo movement services to destinations around the world. These common services have seen WFP reach 171 countries with assistance, transporting over 95,000 m³ of cargo and over 25,000 passengers to support ongoing humanitarian operations and the global pandemic response.

While the virus continues to pose challenges, and second and third waves are now taking hold around the world, supply chains and logistics operations are showing positive signs of improvement. WFP continues to support partners, adjusting its operations to reflect the changing circumstances while maintaining the infrastructure to step up if and when required.

COUNTRIES OF CONCERN

From our experience on the ground, extreme hunger is a major concern and millions of people are facing the threat of famine in places like Burkina Faso in the Sahel region of West Africa, north-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. It's in these places where the COVID-19 pandemic coincides with and compounds conflict and climate shocks, the key drivers of hunger. Urgent and large-scale humanitarian action is required alongside increased access to vulnerable populations. Stronger advocacy is needed to hold to account those responsible for creating famine conditions and subjecting communities to starvation.

Burkina Faso: In Burkina Faso, conflict, adverse weather, and COVID-19's economic fallout have conspired to nearly triple the numbers of desperately hungry people compared to 2019 and more than 11,000 people already in catastrophic conditions. WFP reaches more than 600,000 people with food, cash and nutritional assistance including displaced people, host families and malnourished children.⁶ Despite insecurity affecting humanitarian access as well as the mobility and security of refugees, WFP, and other actors present in the camps, continue to assist refugees with in-kind food assistance. Specific crisis response has targeted children aged 6-59 months and pregnant and lactating women to receive assistance for the prevention of acute malnutrition⁷. Other activities include general food distribution, emergency school feeding activities, cash-based assistance, and nutrition supports to internally displaced peoples, refugees and host families.⁸

North-eastern Nigeria: The decade-long Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria continues to cause widespread insecurity and displacement throughout the Lake Chad Basin and has

⁵ WFP, [WFP Common Services - Situation Report #6](#), November 15, 2020.

⁶ FAO and WFP, FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots, July 2020, pg. 15.

⁷ 'Acute malnutrition': inadequate nutrition resulting in rapid weight loss or a failure to gain weight. Wasting is an indicator of acute malnutrition.

⁸ WFP, [WFP Central Sahel Situation Report](#), June 2020.

severely affected the northern states of the country, particularly impacting women. The situation appears to be getting worse as non-state armed groups grow stronger across the region. Climate change and population growth are fuelling land disputes and increasing tensions and violence between pastoralists and farmers, causing the loss of harvests and productive assets. The number of people in need of urgent assistance in north-east Nigeria rose from 7.7 million at the beginning of 2020 to 10.6 million after the outbreak of COVID-19. In Nigeria, WFP delivers food, cash and nutritional assistance including to 189,820 children, pregnant and lactating women and girls with specialized nutritious food integrated into WFP food assistance in northeastern Borno, Yobe and Adamawa; states hardest hit by the economic and security crises. Another example is a new livelihood activity that engages 400 Internally Displaced men and women who are learning to produce cloth facemasks which they will sell for a small profit.

South Sudan: South Sudan remains in the grip of a serious humanitarian crisis due to the cumulative effects of years of conflict, which have destroyed people’s livelihoods and assets. Disruption to economic and social services and flooding have led to alarmingly high levels of acute food insecurity and malnutrition⁹, particularly for women and children. Even before the pandemic, 7 million people were estimated to be food insecure.¹⁰ The South Sudanese economy has been severely disrupted since the outbreak of COVID-19. Food prices in the main markets soared between March and June 2020, reaching their highest levels in the last ten years mainly due to a combination of macroeconomic factors and supply disruptions. WFP expects to assist roughly 5 million people in 2020 - the majority of hungry people in the country - through cash-transfers, school meals and nutrition programs for children and pregnant and lactating women. WFP is collaborating with UNICEF to provide support to over 1,000 schools which are jointly targeted by both agencies. WFP is working on resumption of school feeding while UNICEF is distributing assorted water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and education items.¹¹

Yemen: COVID-19 presents a particularly grave risk for Yemen, as the country continues to struggle in the face of almost six years of ongoing conflict, which has led to a near collapse of essential public health services, severe economic decline and widespread displacement. Food insecurity in Yemen is mainly being driven by rising food prices, a deterioration in incomes and livelihoods and increasing conflict, as well as a reduction in humanitarian assistance, which started in April in areas under the control of the Sana’a-based authorities.¹² 1.7 million children, under the age of 5 are currently suffering from moderate acute malnutrition and 360,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition.¹³ WFP expects to reach some 13 million people with emergency food assistance in 2020, another 1.7 million children and

⁹ ‘Malnutrition’: When nutrient and energy intake does not meet an individual’s requirements.

¹⁰ IOM and WFP, [Populations at Risk: Implications of COVID-19 for Hunger, Malnutrition and Displacement](#), p.43.

¹¹ WFP, [WFP - South Sudan Situation Report](#), October 2020.

¹² IOM and WFP, “Populations at Risk: Implications of COVID-19 for Hunger, Malnutrition and Displacement,” p.33.

¹³ Nutrition Cluster and UNICEF, [Yemen: Nutrition Cluster Dashboard](#), October 2020.

WFP is responsible for the treatment of moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) while; UNICEF (or UNHCR) is; responsible for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition (SAM)

mothers with malnutrition treatment and prevention initiatives, and 950,000 school children with school feeding programmes.

The *Early Warning Analysis of Acute Food Insecurity Hotspots* published jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization and WFP (November 2020) identifies 20 countries, including those mentioned above, that are likely to face potential spikes in high acute food insecurity¹⁴ in the next three to six months due to expanded conflict, macroeconomic crises exacerbated by COVID-19 measures, weather extremes caused by the ongoing La Nina event, and desert locusts.

Recommendations

The WFP encourages Canada to continue to prioritize crisis- and conflict-affected situations, as we know that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing increased vulnerabilities in these areas. Specifically, WFP proposes the following two recommendations for consideration:

- 1. Canada's global response plan for addressing COVID-19, and developing preventative measures going forward, needs to prioritize food security, especially in crisis and conflict-affected settings.***

Food security is likely to deteriorate over the next three to six months due to different, and often simultaneous, drivers including conflict, climate hazards, economic shocks and the compounding socio-economic effects of COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions.¹⁵ "Until we have a vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos," shared WFP's Executive Director, David Beasley.¹⁶ Access to food and the maintenance of an adequate nutritional status are critical determinants of people's survival in a disaster.¹⁷

- 2. Canada should pay particular attention to the food crises unfolding in Yemen, South Sudan, north-eastern Nigeria and Burkina Faso.***

In Burkina Faso, north-east Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen – parts of the population are facing a risk of famine. While these areas differ in context, they are marked by the expansion of conflict, rising food prices, flooding, challenges for populations to access basic services and assistance, and insufficient humanitarian funding to respond to and mitigate a hunger catastrophe in 2021. We do not use the term "famine" lightly. A famine can be declared only when certain measures of mortality, malnutrition and hunger are met. They are: at least 20 per cent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 per

¹⁴ 'Acute Food Insecurity': Food deprivation that threatens lives or livelihoods, regardless of the causes, context or duration, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. www.ipcinfo.org

¹⁵ FAO and WFP, "FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots," July 2020, pg. 20.

¹⁶ WFP, "[No end to world hunger without an end to conflict - WFP warns](#)," September 21, 2020.

¹⁷ Sphere Standards, 2010

cent; and the death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000 persons. This definition is a collaborative effort through the Famine Early Warning System Network. As Canada focuses on the crises and conflict affected situations, these regions are where the most vulnerable will be.

Conclusion

If current trends continue, the number of hungry people will reach 840 million by 2030.¹⁸ Covid-19 is disrupting the world as we knew it, with a heavy toll on human lives and economic activities, especially in areas of crisis and conflict. Its rapid global spread is threatening to affect millions of people already made vulnerable by food insecurity, malnutrition and the effects of conflict and other disasters.

As Minister Gould said in her recent address to the Canadian International Council, “COVID-19 has shown that no matter how much we may try to insulate ourselves from the world, we are intimately and intricately connected.”¹⁹ Both collective and truly global-scale action is required to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Close partnerships with governments, private sector, local organizations, and citizens will be essential to prevent and mitigate poverty and hunger, which in turn can undermine efforts to contain the already ongoing second wave.

By responding to the recommendations proposed in this brief Canada stands to make the greatest gains and ensure that we mitigate further negative effects of the virus.

The United Nations World Food Programme is the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. WFP was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict. WFP is the world’s largest humanitarian organization, saving lives in emergencies and using food assistance to build a pathway to peace, stability and prosperity for people recovering from conflict, disasters and the impact of climate change.

¹⁸ WFP, [Hunger Map](#).

¹⁹ Global Affairs Canada - Speech, [Address by Minister Gould to Canadian International Council](#), November 9, 2020.