

# Food Security Challenges in Developing Countries during COVID-19 Pandemic



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The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened food security at the global level. Definitions of the concept of food security vary, but are more or less similar to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition, which is to ensure the “ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods” and “ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved worldwide by 2030. SDG 2 states to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. Food security has been a global policy priority before the outbreak of COVID-19 and continues to be so today. FAO (2021) shows that the prevalence of undernourishment increased in Sub-Saharan Africa (18.0% → 21.0%) and Southern Asia (13.3% → 15.8%) from 2019 to 2020 based on projections of the number of undernourished people in 2020. The prevalence rates increased significantly in Africa and Southern Asia compared with the world average, from 8.4 to 9.9 percent.

Several factors deteriorate the food security status in developing countries. Many countries have declared restrictive measures to contain and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Unemployment rapidly increased in the short run as a result of lockdowns and the public health response. India's unemployment rose to 23.5% in April 2020, 8.7% in March. Mahmud and Riley (2021) report a fall in household income and that, because of this, households are purchasing 50% less food per capita due to lockdown in Uganda. In 2020, lower-middle-income countries experienced 11.3 percent losses in working hours relative to Quarter 4 2019, outpacing low-income countries (6.7%), upper-middle-income countries (7.3%), and high-income countries (8.3%) (ILO 2021a). Compared with other categories, the greatest losses in working hours is seen in lower-middle-income countries after the COVID-19 outbreaks (ILO 2021b). The reduction in working hours leads to a decrease in household income, making it difficult to purchase sufficient food.

Rising food prices also deteriorate the food security status in developing countries. The FAO Food Price Index has been in an uptrend since May 2020. The index was 91.1 in May 2020 and 128.1 a year later. This rapid rise is comparable to the world food crisis in 2007-2008 and 2010-2012. In March 2022, the index reached a historical record of 159.3 due to the war in Ukraine. The factors that influence the recent surge in food prices are multiple. Agriculture is a labor-intensive industry that requires a large amount of labor for proper operations. Lockdowns restrict the movements of seasonal workers and decrease labor productivity in the agriculture industry. Disruptions in food processing and logistics also have a negative effect on food supply chains. Since food consumption accounts for a larger share of household expenditure in developing countries, a surge in food price particularly harms the food security status for poor and vulnerable people in developing countries.

The two factors mentioned above affect food security in developed countries as well. However, developed countries have been relatively successful in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on food security through the existing social welfare programs. For example, in the United States, the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) provided an additional \$600 per week to individuals who are eligible for certain unemployment insurance benefits in 2020. Also, all states have used the options that provide emergency supplementary benefits to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households. Such programs help to improve the food security status of those from economically weaker backgrounds. In contrast, social welfare programs are not well structured in developing countries, making it difficult to utilize existing systems to help the low-income households. In addition, developing countries have limited fiscal capacity to support lower-income households. Due to these factors, developing countries have not effectively improved the food security.

How can we respond to the worsening food security in developing countries? We cannot wait until the labor market and food supply chain recover. Although government-level efforts are critical in

resolving the problem, developing countries lack the strength to allocate their economic resources to low-income households. Thus, international cooperation is vital for resolving the food security problem. The short-term solution is for each country to stand for a free trading system. China's ban on fertilizer exports and the war in Ukraine are elevating the global fertilizer price, affecting input costs for farmers. Indonesia's recent ban on exporting palm oil will drive up global food prices. One of the benefits of the free trading system is the ability to import goods and services at low prices, thereby achieving price stability. The heads of the World Bank Group, International Monetary Fund, United Nations World Food Program and World Trade Organization released a joint statement on April 13, 2022, urging to keep trade open and avoiding restrictive measures to address food security on humanitarian grounds. This statement affirms that the free trade system helps to improve food security status in developing countries.

An increase in food prices occurs when demand outstrips supply. Fukase and Martin (2020) show that the rise in per capita consumption in populous middle-income countries is a major driving force to increase food demand, resulting in upward pressure on world food prices by 2050. Considering that food demand is expected to grow, we need to increase agricultural productivity to stabilize food prices. It may be an indirect solution to deal with the recent rise in food insecurity caused by COVID-19, but it is a long-term solution for people in developing countries to improve food accessibility. In this context, the Korean government is sharing smart farm technology with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia to help food security issues in this region. Research on appropriate technology improves agricultural productivity and reduces working hours for local farmers in developing countries. In addition, developed countries should support developing countries in response to climate change that may decrease agricultural productivity.

Although the food security problem has intensified due to COVID-19, it has long been recognized as a problem to be solved at the global level. We should recognize the recent surge in food insecurity as an opportunity to once again highlight the seriousness of the food security problem in developing countries, and strive to solve the problem through global cooperation. **KIEP**

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