

The scarring effect of COVID-19 is not just economic but will also be felt in the bodies of those left destitute by this crisis. Here, the EU has an important role to play because it can inform economic and social protection policies, both of which will be essential to ensuring the impact on COVID-19 on the social determinants of health will be as short-lived as possible.

Many countries have implemented schemes which address some of these issues.⁴ We have seen the generosity of social protection programmes increased so that people can still make ends meet after becoming unemployed. Some governments have agreed to partially cover the salaries of workers in a bid to ensure firms do not shut their doors. Mortgage holidays have been granted and the rules governing evictions have been changed to protect renters during this period of uncertain income. Active labour market measures, which penalize welfare recipients for failing to perform certain tasks, have been lifted. We know that these schemes have not been enough to offset all of the harm created by these shutdowns by the health effects of this crisis in the long-run will be smaller if countries put more of these protections in place, in part because they will help the economic recovery after lockdown has ended. Governments need to do everything they can to ensure this a pause rather than a break in the economy.

But, removing those schemes too early could have negative health consequences, just as relaxing physical distancing could allow the virus to rebound. The EU has a role to play here too. There is already discussion in some quarters of people becoming 'addicted' to this new more generous welfare state, paving the way, it seems, for calls to end the temporary protections governments have offered.⁵ Recession have often led to a resurgence in stigmatizing discourses about those in poverty and there are some early indications that this will happen during this crisis too.⁶ These narratives simply ignore the challenges facing those who are now out-of-work or whose incomes have fallen. Ending the protections offered by government too quickly will leave many facing real economic hardship and this could negatively affect health for years to come.

During the last economic crisis, there was a moment when governments committed themselves to collectively acting to save the economy, but this was followed by years of austerity that has taken its toll in terms of health.^{7,8} There is a risk that an EU public

health policy which does not address the long-term scarring effects of this crisis on the social determinants of health and which fails to counteract those voices actively encouraging a new round of austerity measures will only harm well-being and widen inequalities.

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Is the COVID-19 pandemic turning into a European food crisis?

Italy was the first and hardest-hit Western nation by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). The identification of the first case, on 20th February, created widespread panic as residents in Italy began stockpiling food. Social media posts pictured near empty supermarket aisles. Soon after, this rush to hoard food spread across many other European nations. But those rushing to the supermarkets were the fortunate ones who could afford to do so. On 30th March, Pope Francis noted: 'We're beginning to see people who are hungry because they can't work',¹ and pleaded for help.

COVID-19 and the lockdown have placed the global economy under tremendous strain but are also increasing the threat of longer term food insecurity. Notwithstanding problems of cross-national data comparability, it is clear that food insecurity is already widespread in many high-income countries.² In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, an estimated 13.5 million European households were tipped into food insecurity,³ while the current recession is already much deeper and is expected to last longer.^{4,5,6}

There are two interlinked threats to food security. The first is food shortage, triggering price rises, and the second is an inequitable distribution of the food that is available. An early warning sign of both problems is the rising numbers of people turning to emergency foodbanks. In late March, the European Food Banks Federation asked its 29 country-members about how they were coping. Over 80% reported an increase in numbers seeking emergency food-assistance⁷ alongside diminishing supplies of long shelf-life food being donated.⁷

Turning to the first threat, food production is being slowed and, in some cases, halted altogether. In Italy, for example, >25% of food production relies on ~370 000 regular seasonal workers from abroad. Border closures and the consequent halt in the movement of people pose the real threat that crops may be left to rot in the fields.⁸ The Agricultural Association Secretary for Veneto said 'If we do not collect today, ...the entire food-supply will come to a standstill'.⁸ German, French and Dutch farmers are experiencing the same problems. This is happening at a time when the agricultural

workforce is declining across Europe, with those that remain ageing rapidly. Currently, only 11% of farmers in the EU are under 40.⁹

The resulting shortages in raw agricultural goods can hamper production by those food companies that process and manufacture the food products that dominate supermarket shelves. The problem is compounded by measures adopted by some countries to safeguard domestic food supplies, limiting their exports,¹⁰ placing even greater strain on countries which depend on food importation.

Prices of some staples, such as wheat and rice, the raw materials used to produce long-life products like pasta, have already increased by, respectively, about 15% and 17% since the beginning of 2020. This will raise prices faced by consumers who are already struggling to make ends meet from, as a result of the economic crisis. Recent years have seen a growing disconnect between rising food prices and stagnating wages, leading to a significant increase in food deprivation in Europe,¹¹ with the poor hardest hit.¹¹

Second, we face a medium-term challenge arising from how many people's food habits have evolved during the pandemic, shifting production and consumption back into homes. For years, the food sector has been geared to producing food for large-scale catering, restaurants, schools and similar venues. Now, as people shift to home cooking, the market is transforming with customers seeking long-life products, rather than the fresh food.¹⁰ In some countries, the market for fresh fish, with its limited shelf life, has almost collapsed. Meanwhile, food processors are having to redesign their production lines, with millers, for example, unable to meet demand for small bags of flour for home breadmaking. Survey data suggest that, even when the pandemic is over, many people will be reluctant to go to crowded restaurants.¹²

This change in eating patterns in many countries is likely to be prolonged and will take time for the food-production system to adapt.

We can identify two broad issues that policymakers must address. First, food policies must focus on producing quality food, improving diets and shortening supply-chains. On the one hand, short food chains reduce dependency from international trade, now recognized as being vulnerable to disruption in a crisis; on the other hand, short food chains can increase the quality and safety of the product, moving away from industrial scale production and from ultra-processed food.

Second, we need to rethink the agricultural workforce. Western Europe's agricultural system relies heavily on Eastern European seasonal workers, who work for low wages. The pandemic is forcing employers to ask whether this is sustainable, and whether they should not look instead to local workers. This will be difficult, requiring an acceptance that wages and working conditions will have to improve, with consequent increases in food prices. A possible solution, to avoid such a price hike, is to designate domestic farmers as essential frontline workers with preferential tax relief or subsidizing their work, which in turn will lead to an increase in their salaries without increasing the final price of food. It will also be necessary to find ways to adapt to the seasonal nature of the food, so increasing the resilience of local and national food systems to global shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to rethink the agricultural system in Europe and, especially, the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy that underpins it. It is an opportunity that must not be missed.

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