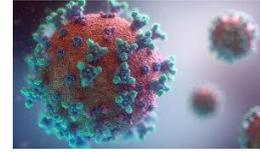


HUNGER AMID PLENTY: HOW TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORLD'S MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE



INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past few months, countries and governments have been up against a high impact catastrophe of global proportions. Covid-19 has proven to be a 'black swan' threatening to undo the gains from the longest period of economic expansion in history, including the gains of our democracy and freedom. In the same vein, Covid-19 has revealed that the challenges before 1994 are still with us and that we are a society defined by poverty, hunger, inequality and other social ills

DISCUSSION

Amid much terrible news tied to Covid-19 comes one positive forecast: World agricultural commodity prices are stable and expected to remain so in 2020, as production levels and stocks of most staple foods are at or near record highs.

The World Bank's Commodity Markets Outlook comes with large conditions or limitations, including uncertainty over the pandemic's duration and severity; the direction of energy and fertilizer prices; currency movements; changes to trade, domestic support policies; and possible disruptions in global supply chains. At a regional level, the worst locust outbreak in decades has hit 23 countries in Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia, devastating crops on which millions depend. Mitigating these risks requires concerted action.

It remains crucial to be vigilant, which is why the World Bank joined G20 agricultural ministers and policy makers to refrain from imposing export restrictions. The message is resonating with countries of the G20, Latin America and the Caribbean, African Union and ASEAN, all signalling their positive intentions. The world is facing unprecedented challenges today that require urgent, country-specific responses.

"According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, 820 million people were already undernourished before today's crisis, -including 135 million people experiencing acute food insecurity."

According to Statistics South Africa, 6.8 million South Africans experienced hunger in 2017.

Hunger has remained shockingly prevalent in recent years. Whilst South Africa is food secure at national level, food inadequacy and hunger remain a challenge at the level of households. These households are constrained by the inability to secure employment to generate income. Poor households are also typically characterised by few income-earners and many dependents, and are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. Food security is a complex challenge as it sits amid a myriad of social problems that need to be addressed in our country. Poverty and unemployment are two leading factors and they are both complex to unpack and understand. This is further affected by housing/land issues, quality of education and social problems that



are not being addressed comprehensively and require various stakeholders to address.

The impact of the pandemic on people already distressed by social ills has been devastating. This wave of malnutrition and extreme poverty will have long-lasting impacts on human capital, especially for children. The Statistics South Africa report on Early Childhood Development in South Africa (2016), found that a third of children in Gauteng and Free State were stunted as a result of chronic malnutrition

There are plenty of new obstacles to food production, transport and consumption. Pests and disease outbreaks such as African swine fever as well as droughts compound the Covid-19 challenge, prompting the World Food Programme to predict a doubling of acute food insecurity by the end of 2020. To understand the magnitude of the challenge, we need to look at the food-supply chain and assess constraints at all levels of our country during the period of the pandemic. Farmers must be able to plant and harvest. They need access to and financing for inputs like fertilizer and seeds. Measures to stop the spread of coronavirus are impeding the movement of farm workers in many countries.

Allowing farm-worker movement, enforcing new safety protocols, and supplying workers with adequate protection will be critical in the months ahead. This is important in developing countries where agricultural production is more labour intensive. Morbidity and movement restrictions can have unforeseen severe impact.

Produce needs to reach the market. Food and related inputs and services need to be defined as essential goods so transport is prioritised to overcome the restrictions of lockdowns. Truckers need more than a green light to keep working. They need mechanics and related services to keep delivering food to markets. The continued flow of seeds, fertilizers and mechanical parts, often across borders will be crucial in the next months.

“The World Bank estimates that 40 to 60 million more people will be living in poverty in coming months, depending on the scale of the economic shock”

It is important to not only ensure people access basic food supplies, but also that they have money to purchase them. On average, food accounts for up to 60 percent of household expenditures in low income countries and 40 percent in emerging and development market economies. Economic recession and loss of livelihoods quickly erode the food security of millions of people-especially if food prices increase.

Social safety nets, such as social grants, food relief programmes amongst others for the poor and vulnerable are of utmost importance and are needed as part of the immediate and next phase of Covid-19 emergency assistance. Many countries are using social safety nets to respond. However, much more needs to be done in the long term to compensate income losses and support business and the most vulnerable and promote economic resilience. In poorer countries, social safety nets and inclusion programmes remain limited in budget, coverage, benefit levels and flexibility, and need to be significantly scaled up to respond to a crisis of this magnitude



As a department that is tasked with a huge responsibility of protecting the most vulnerable, it is going to be crucial that financial support for struggling, unsustainable development projects are reviewed to ensure their relevance and impact in changing the lives of the most vulnerable. Furthermore there is a need to adapt to the 'new normal', which will require changes from all of us. We need to encourage innovation and learn from best practices and doing more with less. It makes sense to focus more on skills development and linking the poor and vulnerable social grant beneficiaries (especially young people who exit the foster care grant system) with economic opportunities.

The pandemic has created a window of opportunity to rethink and redesign the way we do business, in order to enhance the mandate of the department and by so doing changing the lives of the most vulnerable. The need to work in an integrated and coordinated manner with various partners, including business and civil society has never been this important. Some of our current strategies, operating models and performance targets have become obsolete.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has forced us to look head-on, on poverty, inequality and destitution, things previously pushed aside into our peripheral vision. What we do about the challenges compounded by Covid-19 will define our relevance and future as a department.

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