Why healthy food and its local production should be part of the Covid-19 response

By Jules Siedenburg and John Paul Cauchi   26 Jan 2021

When a pandemic hits, questions that immediately arise include what impact there will be on public health, the economy and other aspects of society. Another set of questions involves response priorities for governments and households.

Fruit and vegetables at a market in Kenya. The WHO is pushing for consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, fish and unsaturated fats. Shutterstock

Food is central to both sets of questions. On the one hand, access to sufficient, nutritious food is threatened. On the other, focusing on food offers promising pandemic response options.

Reports from various countries highlight concerns about the impact of Covid-19 and pandemic response measures on food supplies, whether due to shortages, price rises or cash constraints. Even in rich countries, anxiety about possible shortages has led to stockpiling, while large-scale job losses are leaving many worried about their capacity to afford food.

In some developing countries, the spectre of hunger looms. In July 2020, Oxfam reported that COVID-19 was deepening hunger in existing hotspots while creating new hotspots. It also suggested the pandemic could be "the final straw" for many. Those in the informal economy are among the hardest hit, particularly people living in urban areas who use most of their daily income to buy food.

A recent World Food Programme report suggested Covid-19 is deepening global food insecurity, as the pandemic's economic impact adds to pre-existing food security challenges. It estimated 272 million people are food insecure due to the aggravating effects of the pandemic. In a subsequent interview, the WFP director voiced fears that millions were "marching towards starvation", citing the pandemic as a key cause.

Over the past few years, we have been engaged in research on food security, agriculture, public health and the environment in the global South. Our insights lead us to believe that while a pandemic can clearly threaten access to food, focusing on food also offers two distinct ways to lessen the risks faced by households and countries.

Dietary change as a response option

Dietary change may offer scope to improve people's capacity to cope with COVID-19, since the potential of nutrition to support immune resistance to viruses is well-established. One review of clinical trials underlined the scope for nutrition to prevent or manage viral infections and recommended using it to limit the impact of Covif-19. Another review paper echoed this call.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has sought to harness this potential by issuing dietary guidelines for the Covid-19 pandemic. These stress the importance of eating certain foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, fish and unsaturated fats. They also urge reducing consumption of others, such as processed foods, salt, sugar, and saturated fats like those found in fatty meats or butter.

Two years ago the Lancet Commission – a high-level body of experts from 16 countries – recommended a similar diet which they called the "healthy reference diet".

This diet was devised based on rigorous analysis of available evidence as a means to address current problems with poor nutrition and unsustainable agricultural production. This analysis suggested changes to diet and production could create "win-win" outcomes for both human and planetary health.

The dietary changes suggested by the WHO and the Lancet Commission would require major shifts in dietary habits in most countries, raising questions about the accessibility of their target foods. Worryingly, one study suggests that such a diet could be unaffordable to many of the world's poor. One solution would be to enhance access to a healthy diet by fostering local production of target foods.

Covid-19 creates an opportunity to redesign farming systems to deliver both a range of healthy foods and resilient, sustainable production. The pandemic creates space for such shifts, between the emergency spending it necessitates and the recognition it brings of the need for change.

Redesigning farming systems

Changes that could help deliver both health and sustainability include integrated, species diverse farming systems and reduced use of agro-chemicals. Governments could support such a shift via smart subsidies to steer production towards sustainable practices and healthy foods. This could also help ensure these foods are available and affordable.

One promising approach that is a growing trend is producing food in urban and semi-urban areas as a coping strategy. This has been found to have huge potential benefits as a food source for communities hit by the pandemic while also delivering other important benefits like lower food miles and creating employment, notably for the poor.

Policy can provide an enabling environment to scale up such practices.

Some pertinent questions about how food is produced aren't addressed in the recommendations of either the WHO or the Lancet Commission. These include:

• Do foods produced using technologies like genetically modified organisms and growth hormones pose risks to health?

• Do organic foods offer healthier alternatives?

• Do more natural production practices promise greater sustainability and resilience to climate change?

These questions bear asking given the mounting evidence on adverse effects of conventional input-intensive farming, for example on insect populations.

Food and pandemic resilience

The approval of several vaccines has raised hopes that the Covid-19 pandemic can be arrested. Yet vaccination will take time. Notably, the head of the UN humanitarian agency has predicted poorer countries are unlikely to make major progress on vaccination before 2022. Meanwhile, the recent emergence of mutant variants raises difficult questions, such as how the efficacy of vaccines might be affected.

Given this reality, ensuring good immune system function is critical. This underlines the need for schemes to foster healthy eating. For now, however, food insecurity tragically remains an issue for many, and access to healthy foods is a particular problem.

Schemes to foster local production of nutritious foods are therefore also needed. Any initiatives on diet or local production could have relevance beyond the Covid-19 pandemic via boosting the health and resilience of communities.

Such measures would be particularly relevant for Sub-Saharan Africa, where food insecurity is a major threat, Covid-19 cases continue to rise, and access to healthcare is limited.

Dietary change and local production offer hopeful responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The available evidence suggests these measures could bolster people's health and well-being while also building their resilience to pandemics. They could therefore complement public health and medical measures like social distancing and vaccination, and merit greater attention.

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