
Are we brave enough to fix the broken food system?

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If we don't fix agricultural supply chains, the world will continue to fail on tackling climate change, alleviating poverty, safeguarding human rights, argue Oxfam's Fatema Z. Sumar and Mars' Barry Parkin

Our global food system has long been in peril, threatened by climate change, inadequate social protection and procurement practices that serve the interest of business, not farmers or farmworkers. The Covid-19 pandemic makes the situation worse, demonstrating how unprepared we are for global shocks to the system.

To address this crisis - and inevitable future crises - we must fix what is broken about global agricultural supply chains. If we don't, the people working across these supply chains will continue to be vulnerable to poverty and human rights risks, and the planet we share will remain in peril.

For decades, our food system has overemphasised producing commodities with maximum efficiency and productivity, often at the expense of building supply chain resilience and equity. When systems lack resilience



the biggest burden is almost always felt by the weakest link in the chain, threatening already vulnerable populations.

The hard truth is that farmers, especially smallholder farmers and women, reap far too little of the value from their work, while facing some of the most challenging working conditions. Instead, our economic system maximises value for large, downstream companies with inequitable distribution of profits throughout the value chain. More than one billion people around the world work in agriculture, yet many of them are struggling in poverty.

To make things worse, the **COVID-19 pandemic has caused food shortages and increased food prices**, while forcing farmers and workers to choose between making a living or protecting themselves from the virus; **121 million more people could be pushed to the brink of starvation this year** as a result of the social and economic fallout from the pandemic. In many rural communities, the precautions we all try to take to avoid the coronavirus, like social distancing and frequent handwashing, are impossible to achieve with no running water, weak health systems, and work that requires close proximity.

Millions of women workers in informal and precarious conditions have suffered major economic fallout due to the pandemic. Women are also **less likely to benefit from recovery and stabilisation efforts**, as gender is often prohibitive to economic opportunity and access to financial resources.

Now more than ever, we must do more to invest in local food systems, not just export commodities, to protect the health and well-being of farmers and workers, while reducing the risk of lost income. This pandemic does not recognise borders - we're united in an interconnected crisis.



Many emphasise the importance of collaboration in building back better. While collaboration is critical, it also presents a convenient rhetorical excuse to avoid the direct action that is necessary from individual actors across the food system. The diverse array of actors and influencers in food value chains all have a responsibility to ensure that work empowers people, that wages and incomes are adequate for a decent standard of living, and that agricultural practices do not further imperil the planet.

For real and meaningful change, stepped-up action is required from business, government and civil society.

Business must clean up supply chains for all, not just those who invest in specific commodities or certified materials. Among other commitments, that means agreeing to stop deforestation in threatened areas, implementing and promoting living wages and incomes, and committing to gender equity. Companies across the value chain must know where their materials come from down to the individual farmer and under what conditions they are produced by embracing robust human rights due diligence. For food companies and retailers with a direct connection to consumers, there is a responsibility to ensure sustainable products are promoted prominently.

Governments must expand the focus on social protection, including strengthening enforcement of labor laws and deepening provisions for healthcare. For their part, businesses must recognise that their taxes support the funding of these essential programs and act accordingly. We also need governments to remove gender barriers, enabling women to have access to land and opportunities to utilize the same investments as men, while having decision-making roles on their farms and in their cooperatives.

Civil society must step up to support farmers, workers and women. Together, we must ask the right questions, create solutions, hold each other accountable and inspire action. Collaboratives like the **Farmer Income Lab**,



where Oxfam and Mars partner, are trying to do just this. The Lab is an incubator for insights on farmer income and poverty that can be put into practice in sourcing agricultural goods.

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rebuild our economies with a focus on the wellbeing of both people and the environment. Billions of dollars are being invested around the world to rebuild communities and food systems. It's imperative that these investments recognise that human health, food security, social justice and climate change are all interconnected. There will be no lasting economic stability if we fail to recognise those interconnections and take swift action to put people, especially the most vulnerable, at the center of our plans for recovery and resilience.

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