

Good Questions 11:

WHERE ARE GOVERNMENTS' PLANS FOR DEALING WITH FOOD SYSTEM DISRUPTIONS?*

ABSTRACT

In April 2020, when most businesses in the United States were shut down because of Covid-19, many people became unemployed and their incomes vanished. They lined up at the charitable food banks in their neighborhoods, but the shelves were quickly emptied. At the same time, many large farms buried their crops because the restaurants and hotels they served had closed. Some news agencies said the obvious solution was for government to organize transport of those farms' produce to food banks or to idle restaurants for distribution to people in need. Only the federal government could make that work at a large scale, perhaps with the help of the National Guard and the U.S. army's logistic capacities. It didn't happen. *Where are governments' plans for dealing with food system disruptions, in the US and throughout the world?*

KEYWORDS: food systems, disasters, planning, hunger, undernutrition, Covid-19, pandemic.

For many low-income countries already suffering from widespread hunger, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a crisis within a crisis (Cantillo 2020; Dahir 2020; FAO 2020a; Human Rights Watch 2020; Lederer 2020; Reguly and York 2020; Yaffe-Bellany and Corkery 2020). The problems have been less intense in middle- and high-income countries, but they too have low income people who were seriously affected, not only by the virus but also by the disruption of their local food systems. Across the United States, crops were not harvested, milk was dumped, restaurants closed, farm workers and meat packing plant workers were infected by the virus (Creed 2020; Grain 2020; Lussenhop 2020), long lines emptied charitable food banks (Burnett 2020; Shikina 2020), and disease patterns worsened (Nestle 2020a; Nestle 2020b).

On the bright side, many people carried food and smiles to their neighbors and to health care workers (Flatt 202); others volunteered at pop-up food banks; and some planted new backyard food gardens (Essoyan 2020). Some food banks were well prepared for the pandemic disaster (Tran 2020). Some sectors of the food industry responded creatively (60 Minutes 2020; Crawford 2020).

In the United States the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly known as the food stamp program—has great potential for serving people who have recently

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become unemployed and suddenly cannot afford food for their families (Bauer 2020; SNAP 2020). At least nineteen of the fifty states have been allowed to operate special programs related to the pandemic (USDA 2020). The federal government could support all of them in setting up such programs.

Similarly, school meals programs can be adapted to deal with sudden disruptions (DeParle 2020). It could be done much quicker if plans for doing that are made in advance.

Many governments have done good things to address the food crises resulting from this pandemic (Hadid and Sattar 2020; Longley 2020; Zane 2020). However, on the whole, there has been a pattern of scattered *ad hoc* responses, helping some groups and missing others. It is difficult to find any national plans made in advance for dealing with such problems. *In the U.S. and throughout the world, where are governments' plans for dealing with food system disruptions?*

UNDERNOURISHMENT IN DISASTERS

Disaster can be defined as “A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.” (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2020). Food system collapse is common in all sorts of disasters, including tsunamis, earthquakes, economic system failures, terrorism, and pandemics. In some cases, the food system itself is the source of disastrous problems (Noble 2020; Shiva 2020).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations says, “Undernourishment is defined as the condition of an individual whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide, on average, the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active, healthy life” (FAO 2020b, 148). Experts distinguish between undernutrition, food insecurity, hunger, starvation, and famine, and use various indicators for them, but for the purpose of this essay, they are lumped together.

Concerns about nutrition commonly focus on ensuring a steady supply of food of adequate quality and diversity for the population as whole and ensuring that the needs of the poor are met, but here the focus is on the need to anticipate sudden large-scale disruptions of food systems (Kent 2016a).

Resilience can be understood as the capacity to make adaptations in social arrangements in response to changes in the physical or economic environment. In some cases, there is a need to adapt to slow and predictable events such as climate change. In disaster planning, however, there is a need to prepare for unanticipated sudden changes.

Usually disaster planning is based on the hope that the impact would be of short duration and it would be possible to return to the normal arrangements existing before the disaster. Disasters can create opportunities to establish a new and better normal. There are some calls for return to an older and better normal when the current disaster ends (De Schutter and Yambi 2020; Shiva 2020).

National governments should lead the effort to ensure that their food systems are resilient, prepared to deal with many different types of disruptions. Measures are likely to focus on local food production, food imports, storage, and distribution arrangements. All of these can be switched from normal to emergency modes of operation, but this will be done quickly and well only if those transitions are planned well in advance.

CHRONIC HUNGER

The first chapter of a book on disasters begins by saying:

Disasters, especially those that seem principally to be caused by natural hazards, are not the greatest threat to humanity. Despite the lethal reputation of earthquakes, epidemics and famine, a much greater proportion of the world's population find their lives shortened by events that often go unnoticed: violent conflict, illnesses, and hunger—events that pass for normal existence in less developed countries (LDCs). (Wisner et al. 2004, 3)

More than 820 million people--10.8% of the people in the world--are chronically hungry, which means they are not getting enough calories on a continuous basis. About 20 percent of the population in Africa is hungry, more than in any other region (FAO 2020b, 6). United Nations data show little progress in reducing the widespread chronic hunger in the world. For many people, hunger is normal, something to be accepted. When a magazine suggests that prior to the pandemic the global food supply chain has been “keeping the world fed” they fail to recognize the malnutrition of more than 800 million people as a serious issue (The Economist 2020).

Widespread hunger in the world persists because it is endlessly reproduced in exploitative social systems. The poor feed the rich (Kent 1982; Kent 2011, 56-62). Where is the interest in alternative futures in which there is no systematic production of widespread hunger? Such futures can be imagined (Bigley 2020; Lerner 2020), and they can be found in the past, in many different forms. There are simple safety net ideas such as a guaranteed minimum income (BIEN 2020; Parjis and Yannick 2017), perhaps combined with taxes on wealth (not just income), that could end hunger at relatively little cost (Democracy Now 2020; Piketty 2020). Rethinking the organization of local communities would be another approach (Economics 2020; Kent 2008; Kent 2016b; Kent 2018a; Kent 2018b; Nestle 2020c). Alternative food futures that prevent hunger can be created, if the motivation is there.

Strategies for the management of food disruptions should be linked to strategies for managing chronic hunger. People who are chronically hungry are likely to become extremely hungry when there is a sudden disruption of the local food system (Babic 2020; Cohen 2020; GFRC 2020; Gunia 2020; IPC 2020; Kristof 2020; Taylor 2020). People who live close to the edge all the time are especially vulnerable, the first to go over the edge.

For people with money, a sudden crash of the local food system is likely to be little more than an inconvenience. With money, you can get food delivered to your door or flee to a place where there is food. If you have no money and no home, hunger might be inescapable. Chronic hunger is a major cause of sudden hunger. Sudden hunger due to disruptions of food systems often

occurs on a small scale, as in the case of local tornadoes or cyclones, but it can occur at a large scale as well (UN News 2020).

Unlike sudden hunger, there is no difficulty in “predicting” chronic hunger. It is certain to be there tomorrow, just as it was there yesterday. The absence of serious plans to end chronic hunger in the world shows that it has been accepted as normal, not as something to be vigorously challenged by governments (Kent 2019).

RIGHT TO FOOD

Good Samaritans often help needy people, as in the work of World Central Kitchen led by José Andrés (60 Minutes 2020; Gregory 2020). They deserve our praise. But we should recognize that the need for such services from the private sector indicates failures in the public sector, failures in governance (Poppendieck 1998; Riches and Salvasti 2014; Riches 2018). Food banks don’t prevent the onset of hunger; they make the current political order more tolerable. In exploitative economic systems, charity does not prevent the endless active reproduction of neediness. As the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe put it in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, “While we do our good works let us not forget that the real solution lies in a world in which charity will have become unnecessary” (Achebe 1987, 93). When governments operate in a way that allows persistent and widespread hunger, they are doing something wrong.

Many observers agree that rather than relying on charity to address the hunger problem, people should be recognized as having clear rights relating to food. However, those rights are interpreted in different ways in different countries. In India the right to food is taken to mean the government must provide basic sustenance for a large portion of the population. The unfortunate result is that millions of people make serious efforts to ensure that they are counted as poor. They are rewarded for being in poverty when they really should be rewarded for climbing out of poverty. To end hunger, it would make more sense for the government to create conditions under which all families could provide for themselves, whether by producing their own food or by earning a living wage. Needy people should get a hand up, not a handout. They should live in economic systems that ensure not only their nutrition but also their dignity.

While the right to food is sometimes taken to mean that governments must provide free or highly subsidized food for the poor, a global consensus emerged in the 1990s on a more nuanced understanding, based on widely accepted human rights treaties. In May 1999 the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights issued an authoritative document on the right to food, commonly referred to as General Comment 12 (United Nations Economic and Social Council 1999). Paragraph 6 presents the core definition:

The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman, and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.

The document’s core assumption is that in well-functioning societies, individuals, working in the context of their families and communities, will provide adequate food for themselves. The government’s primary task is not to feed people, but to make sure that people live in circumstances in which people can provide for themselves.

There are situations in which people are not able to provide for themselves and help is needed. The document explains that the obligations of governments can be divided into four broad categories: *respect*, *protect*, *facilitate*, and *provide*.

First, governments should *respect* people's efforts to feed themselves, and not interfere with their efforts to do so. In some cases, governments fail to show this respect by taking away (or allowing others to take away) land some groups had historically used to produce their own food, or by blocking their access to that land.

Second, governments should *protect* people's efforts to feed themselves. The need for protection comes up when, say, marauders steal farmers' crops before they can be harvested.

Third, governments should *facilitate* people's efforts to feed themselves. Governments can provide extension services, sound currencies, market information, and a variety of other services that make it easier for people to feed themselves. Governments can help to improve the number and quality of employment opportunities, and thus indirectly help people to provide food for themselves.

Fourth, in some circumstances, governments should *provide* for people's needs by supplying food directly, through programs such as school meals, emergency shelters, and subsidized staple foods. Providing is required when respecting, protecting, and facilitating prove inadequate. If providing is needed for anything more than a very short period, governance has failed. This is what happens when governments don't care enough about hunger (Kent 2016b).

Summarizing:

1. *Respect* means do no harm to others.
2. *Protect* means prevent harm to others by third parties.
3. *Facilitate* means help others to meet their own needs.
4. *Provide* means meet others' needs when they cannot do that themselves.

If adequate food is a human right, then respecting, protecting facilitating and, under some conditions, providing, are not optional. These are the key duties of governments to ensure that no one goes hungry.

Countries that sign and ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commit themselves to carrying out those obligations. The United States and a few other countries have not ratified that treaty (Kent 2005; Kent 2011). The basic principles should be applied everywhere, regardless of whether the country has ratified the relevant human rights treaties and regardless of whether or not it has incorporated those principles into its national law. The right to food applies to every individual, all the time, even during disruptions of food systems or other kinds of disasters. The moral imperative is clear, even if the law is not.

WHERE ARE THE PLANS?

Some discussions of the future of food systems are more concerned about their effectiveness in producing incomes than in improving public health and give little attention to possible disruptions in food systems (NASEM 2020). There is a need for well-coordinated action to deal with hunger, with all levels of governance working with each other and also with nongovernmental organizations (Collins 2020). The work should be coordinated by national governments, the major duty bearers, working together with UN Agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme. This requires serious planning in advance of disruptive events, all while giving serious attention to chronic hunger.

Few relevant government agencies have planned for sudden disruptions of the food system. To illustrate, where I live, the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency advises, “Stock your emergency preparedness kit with enough food and water for at least 14 days” (HEMA 2020). That is all the advice it offers. The state’s Basic Plan for emergencies recognizes Hawaii’s vulnerability to interruptions in the shipping of food to the state but does not say what should be done about that, whether to prevent it from happening or to cope with it if it does happen. It does not discuss other kinds of food system disruptions that might be encountered. What would happen if the bees stop doing their work? I have heard that Hawaii has stored a two-week supply of military-style Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) but they are not mentioned on the HEMA website, and there is no evidence of a plan for when and how to use them. There is little point in warehousing MREs if there is no guidance on how that resource is to be made available when and where it is needed.

In any setting, an afternoon of brainstorming among local leaders could produce a list of ways in which the local food system could go wrong, some obvious, some unlikely. Apparently, few governments have made serious preparations for any of the possibilities. There is no easy way to find government plans for coping with food system disruptions. This means there is no good way to compare them or learn from them. That is unwise. While other needs can be met over longer periods of time, the need for food is urgent.

Preparation for disasters of any kind is best done by working out a clear division of roles and coordination between different levels of governance. It should function through a nested system with various layers such as neighborhood boards, counties, states, national governments, and global agencies. The response should involve both governmental and nongovernmental agencies. They should work together to prevent food disasters and to overcome them when they occur.

Potential food system disruptions have been discussed in bits and pieces in various contexts, but it is difficult to find serious efforts to plan for local food system disruptions anywhere in the world. Sound planning to deal with the problem will not happen until leaders recognize the need and devote resources to the effort.

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