

SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD DURING PANDEMICS AND EMERGENCIES: LESSONS FROM COVID-19

ISSUE BRIEF



This issue brief was developed in the framework of the project *Strengthening the Legal Environment for Food Security and Nutrition of Vulnerable Groups as part of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery*, implemented jointly by the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The project aimed to support decision-makers at global and national levels to comply with the progressive realization of the right to adequate food as part of the COVID-19 response and recovery plans. The project was implemented at global level and in two pilot countries: Honduras and Uganda.



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IDLO and FAO. 2024. *Safeguarding the Right to Adequate Food during Pandemics and Emergencies - Lessons from COVID-19*. Issue brief. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0764en>

ISBN 9788896155516

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and nutrition continues to constitute a global emergency.¹ Global food commodity prices reached a ten-year high as a result of the pandemic, gravely exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and negatively impacting food security and nutrition on a large scale, particularly affecting vulnerable people and communities.²

Conflict is still the biggest driver of hunger, with 70 percent of the world's hungry people living in areas afflicted by war and violence.³ The effects of the war in Ukraine, including higher natural gas prices, have further disrupted global fertilizer production and exports – reducing supplies, raising prices, and threatening to reduce harvests. The climate crisis is another leading cause of the global hunger increase, with climate shocks destroying lives, crops and livelihoods, and undermining people's ability to feed themselves.⁴

According to The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023, between 691 and 783 million people in the world faced hunger in 2022. Considering the midrange (about 735 million), 122 million more people faced hunger in 2022 than in 2019, before the global pandemic. It is

projected that almost 600 million people will be chronically undernourished in 2030.⁵

Worldwide, food insecurity disproportionately affects women and people living in rural areas. The gender gap in food insecurity at the global level, which had widened in the wake of the pandemic, narrowed from 3.8 percentage points in 2021 to 2.4 percentage points in 2022. More than 3.1 billion people in the world – or 42 percent – were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2021. This represents an overall increase of 134 million people compared to 2019, before the pandemic.⁶

The current global food security situation, compounded by different shocks to agrifood systems among which pandemics, conflicts, and climate change, represents a great challenge to the safeguarding of the rule of law and human rights, including the realization of the right to adequate food.

BACKGROUND

This issue brief draws on the main findings of research conducted by IDLO and FAO on safeguarding the right to adequate food in the context of COVID-19, analyzing case studies from 40 countries⁷ and the European Union to highlight innovative legislative and regulatory trends that could be used as best practices to promote reforms. Building on key findings of IDLO-FAO joint research, this issue brief provides five recommendations for decision-makers on the rule of law and a human rights-based approach needed to mitigate the negative impact of emergency situations on the right to adequate food at the national level, namely:

1. Guarantee legal and constitutional protection for the right to adequate food.
2. Support transparent and accountable institutions to ensure access to justice for people claiming their right to adequate food.
3. Ensure that emergency responses in support of food security comply with human rights standards and protect civic space.
4. Eliminate discriminatory laws and adopt gender-responsive measures that empower women and girls in all their diversity to claim their rights and participate fully in emergency decision-making and implementation at all levels.
5. Ensure that legal measures adopted during emergencies are conducive to inclusive, equitable and resilient agrifood systems.

Distinguishing between food security and the right to adequate food

Food security “exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.⁸ It has lately been identified with six key dimensions: the *availability* of food; the economic and physical access to food; food *utilisation*, which determines people’s nutritional status; the stability of the other three dimensions over time; *agency*, or the capacity of people to act independently and make choices within their own food system; and *sustainability*, which means that food systems should ensure the food needs of the present population are met without compromising those of future generations.⁹

The **right to adequate food** is the right of all human beings to live in dignity and free from hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition.¹⁰ It is recognised in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;¹¹ and guaranteed in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights¹² as well as in relevant provisions of several other international and regional human rights instruments. The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognised that the right to adequate food is indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and is indispensable for the fulfilment of other human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights,¹³ and that it “is inseparable from social justice, requiring the adoption of appropriate economic, environmental, and social policies, at both the national and international levels, oriented to the eradication of poverty and the fulfilment of all human rights for all”.¹⁴

The **right to adequate food** encompasses four key elements,¹⁵ namely:

- **Availability:** Food should be obtainable from natural resources, either through the production of food, by cultivating land or animal husbandry, or through other ways like fishing, hunting, gathering, markets, or shops.
- **Accessibility:** Individuals should be able to have an adequate diet without compromising on other basic needs. Food should be accessible to the physically vulnerable and must also be available to people in remote areas, to victims of armed conflicts or natural disasters, and to prisoners.
- **Adequacy:** Food must satisfy dietary needs, considering a person’s age, living conditions, health, occupation, sex, etc. Food should be safe for human consumption and free from adverse substances.
- **Sustainability:** Food should be accessible for both present and future generations.

The right to adequate food is safeguarded by the **rule of law**, a principle of governance in which all people and institutions, including the State and private actors, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, independently adjudicated, and consistent with **international human rights** principles.

KEY FINDINGS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of States declared a state of emergency and notified derogations under various human rights treaties.¹⁶ In several countries, laws and regulations curtailed individual rights, in some cases beyond the emergency period. Overall, the world experienced a **general decline in rule of law** indicators. The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index showed a 2021-22 decline in 61 per cent of the 140 countries analysed, marking reduced protection of civic space, delays in civil justice and criminal justice and administrative proceedings, and rising discrimination, often resulting from laws and regulations introduced in response to the public health emergency.¹⁷

The IDLO-FAO research also identified positive trends in the adoption of national laws and regulations protecting the right to adequate food during the pandemic. However, challenges remain, notably on the implementation of a human rights-based approach. Those most vulnerable to food insecurity are often those least able to access justice or make their voices heard in the governance of agrifood systems, and those most likely to experience exclusion and marginalisation in general. Realising the right to adequate food would benefit from transformative action based on the rule of law to tackle intrinsic inequalities among people and support marginalised and excluded constituencies to claim their rights and contribute to policymaking.

Defining Civic Space

Civic space refers to the environment that enables people to mobilize for collective action and contribute to policymaking that affects their everyday lives, including by accessing information, engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent or disagreement, and joining together to express their views.¹⁸ Violations of civic space include arbitrary or excessive restrictions on freedoms of association, expression, and assembly, such as crackdowns on human rights defenders and curtailment of online speech. Strengthening a legal and regulatory enabling environment for civil society action in line with international standards and protecting human rights defenders and journalists under threat, can preserve and expand civic space.



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The IDLO-FAO research presents **four key findings** on safeguarding the right to adequate food in times of emergency:

1. Countries with pre-existing legal protection of the right to adequate food enacted stronger measures to ensure food availability and accessibility during the pandemic

The right to adequate food is enshrined in numerous constitutions¹⁹ and can be invoked by individuals or groups before domestic courts or independent authorities. The IDLO-FAO research found

that the EU and the 40 countries analysed, which introduced progressive measures protecting the right to food during the pandemic, frequently had pre-existing laws or constitutions guaranteeing the right to food either explicitly or implicitly through related rights (such as the right to health or the right to a living wage, inter alia). Having existing legal frameworks that included the right to food provided the basis to act swiftly to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 related measures on the realization of the right to food especially for vulnerable groups.

NEPAL

In Nepal, the Supreme Court issued several orders to protect the right to food, in specific contexts such as prisons, health care facilities and hospitals where food was inadequate during the pandemic. The Court also intervened through specific orders mandating the protection of the right to food of migrants, workers living on daily wages, and greater transparency during the distribution of food as part of emergency measures. It mandated the government to issue new legislation to respond to the pandemic, considering that the infectious disease legislation dated back to the 1960s and that several petitions complaining about the inadequacy of the measures were filed with the Court.²⁰

2.Safeguarding access to justice and the functioning of the justice system during emergencies is essential to ensure the realization of the right to food

Access to justice is key to ensuring fulfilment of the right to adequate food. Without access to justice, people are unable to exercise their rights, challenge discrimination, seek redress for grievances, or hold decision-makers accountable.²¹

Measures and restrictions adopted in response to emergencies “must be clearly defined in national law and in line with international human rights standards without ambiguity or misinterpretation by officials enforcing the law, in order to prevent the arbitrary or excessive use of power.”²² It is vital that civic space remains open for human rights defenders and civil society organizations to advocate on behalf of those people and communities most affected by food security crises.

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa sought to maintain access to complaints mechanisms during the pandemic in relation to price gouging, regulating excessive pricing and unfair, unreasonable, unjust or unconscionable charges. It established that prices can be determined prima facie on the basis of, for example, a price increase not corresponding with an increase in the cost of providing a good or service, while also placing obligations on suppliers to ensure that essential goods are equitably distributed.²³ This regulation was complemented by an April 2020 regulatory act, which stipulates that the Competition Tribunal can urgently hear complaints regarding excessive pricing during COVID-19 to ensure that businesses or individuals engaged in price gouging face an immediate penalty for their actions.²⁴

UGANDA

In Uganda, a public interest case was filed by the Centre for Food and Adequate Living Rights. It appealed a case in which the formal courts did not recognize any violation of the right to adequate food by the government in its failure to establish food reserves in the country during the pandemic. The case was dismissed; however, the court recognized the right to adequate food was an implied right under the constitutional right to livelihood. It also noted that the Constitution recognizes the right to adequate food and other economic, social, and cultural rights.

3. Gender-responsive legislation and inclusive processes provide better protection for women and girls

In 2021, 31.9 per cent of women were moderately or severely food insecure compared to 27.6 per cent of men—a gap of more than 4 percentage points, and an increase over 2019.²⁵ Despite this huge gap, ensuring women’s equal right to food continues to be subject to significant challenges worldwide, among them: the absence of gender-responsive laws and policies; the lack of a holistic, participatory and intersectional approach to issues of gender equality and food security; insufficient resources allocated to the collection and analysis of reliable data and information concerning women’s food security; and the failure by States

and other duty bearers to take steps to address common manifestations of gender discrimination, such as gender-based violence against women as well as the unequal burden of women’s unpaid care and domestic work. Furthermore, failing to take gender-responsive legal and other appropriate interventions to mitigate the risks and impacts of emergencies, such as climate change and associated disasters, are also factors that disproportionately affect women’s right to food and resilience to numerous shocks.²⁶

To effectively tackle food insecurity, it is necessary to address gender inequality more broadly, particularly the discriminatory policies, laws and social norms that prevent women and girls from participating in society on an equal basis.



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At the same time, targeted interventions that examine inequalities within all elements of agrifood systems – production, processing, and consumption – are essential to ensure that everyone has sustainable access to adequate food and nutrition. Gendered inequalities in access to land and resources constitute violations of women’s human rights and also reinforce their poverty and food insecurity. Control over land and other productive assets enables women’s access to a range of income-earning and livelihood opportunities as well as food security.²⁷

Overall, the legislative instruments for COVID-19 response analysed by IDLO and FAO were largely gender-neutral, and those which sought to offset the pandemic’s impact on women and girls tended to do so indirectly.

Gender neutrality fails to recognize and address inequalities rooted in gendered imbalances of power and social relations.²⁸ Gender-neutral legislation can give rise to indirect discrimination and may prove to be more harmful for women than men. For instance, the lack of exemptions from emergency restrictions to informal livelihoods, where women constitute the majority of workers,²⁹ impacts women’s longer-term economic security and livelihoods.³⁰ The gender-responsive legal and other measures enacted during the pandemic that took into account women’s roles and realities, including that of discrimination and exclusion, as well as their diversity, e.g. as heads of households or as workers in the informal sector, are more able to support women and girls during emergencies and foster their resilience.

CHILE

In Chile, the legislation on Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia (IFE) and its implementation guarantee economic aid for households with a minimum formal or informal income that cannot meet their basic needs as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. IFE recognized that households headed by women were among the most affected by the pandemic and as such it prioritized cash transfers to those households, which represented approximately 60 per cent of its beneficiaries.³¹ This programme illustrates how legislation designed and implemented in a gender-sensitive manner can strengthen food security and nutrition for women, especially within vulnerable groups.

TOGO

Togo introduced via presidential decree a new, integrated six-month mobile cash transfer scheme, as well as electricity and water subsidies for informal workers, reaching nearly 575,000 people, 65 per cent of whom were women. In a gender-sensitive effort to mitigate the burden of care resulting from the pandemic, women also received the largest cash transfers in recognition of their roles as both workers and managers of household needs.³²

4. The right to food is enhanced by legislation and regulations expanding social protection schemes and supporting smallholder farmers and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

The designation of the agriculture sector as 'essential' during the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing exemptions to restrictions to ensure local markets remained accessible, allowed agrifood systems to continue functioning, notably through smallholder producers and agri-SMEs. This approach contributed to sustain the livelihoods and income of

employees as well as other food supply chain stakeholders (such as suppliers, producers, farmers, etc.) through job retention schemes, financial support measures, including deferrals of payments (such as tax deferrals), support for innovation or other structural support measures. In addition, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on food availability and accessibility, several States implemented policies and adopted legislation to increase agricultural production through, but not limited to, urban farming, access to food reserves or seeds in stock, and support to trade.



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PHILIPPINES

The Philippines supported smallholder and family farmers by improving individual land tenure security, introducing an administrative order to simplify and streamline the relevant administrative process.³³ The measure aimed to accelerate land registration by clarifying the competent institutions for different activities, setting out a maximum timeframe for the completion of administrative processes, and outlining forms to be filled out for different activity types.³⁴

TAJIKISTAN

In Tajikistan, a Presidential Decree allocated preferential credit funds to companies producing food, especially to those led by women entrepreneurs.³⁵

ZAMBIA

In Zambia, the Food Reserve Bill 2020 allows the Food Reserve Agency to redefine and extend its social functions to ensure adequate grain reserves and by purchasing designated agricultural commodities from the domestic market.³⁶

A major focus of pre COVID-19 social protection regulations was school feeding. In response to school closures during the pandemic, different modalities were utilized to substitute the daily meals that children previously received at school. These alternatives included take-home rations, cash transfers, and other ways of providing hot meals. In countries where school feeding is recognized as a legal right and civil society has an active role, participation and accountability mechanisms helped to ensure that

school feeding adaptation-measures maintained pre-pandemic quality and quantity standards. Adaptation regulatory measures sought mainly to amend school feeding programmes' functioning, increase their budget, and foster greater administrative flexibility to increase eligibility conditions for beneficiaries. Some countries adopted specific measures to extend coverage to other selected groups who did not normally benefit from school feeding programmes (mainly through food vouchers).



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PORTUGAL

In Portugal, students who benefited from free school meals continued to receive them during the pandemic while families had the possibility to pick up their children's meals outside school gates.³⁷

PARAGUAY

In Paraguay, Law No. 6603 was enacted to allow the government to purchase nutritious food for distribution to 'popular pot' (kitchen soup) sites.³⁸ The list of beneficiaries as well as programme's administrators had to be published monthly, and a mechanism was established to deal with complaints regarding irregularities in the implementation.³⁹

TUNISIA

In Tunisia, a small-scale cash transfer programme was implemented as a substitute to school feeding.⁴⁰

Innovative social protection measures were introduced to extend benefits to informal workers, contributing to strengthen their right to adequate food. Many States also modified existing job retention schemes or introduced new

ones to support firms and their workers facing extensive and unexpected decline in business productivity resulting from restrictions to contain the spread of the virus.

PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, in the province of Sindh, under the COVID-19 Emergency Relief Act 2020, no employee could have their contract terminated or be removed from work, and employers had to pay employees' salaries. Employees with salaries below \$ 300 were entitled to their full salary. A scale of permissible deductions was provided for those earning above \$ 300, with the percentage of deduction beginning at 5 per cent and increasing steadily depending on how much the employee was paid.⁴¹

VANUATU

In Vanuatu, a Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) was announced as part of a second economic stimulus package put forth by the Finance and Treasury Department. The WSS aimed to provide income support to employees, to stabilize employment and to alleviate businesses cash flow issues. Under this scheme, the government would pay businesses meeting certain eligibility criteria 50 per cent of the monthly wages of each employee registered with the Vanuatu National Provident Fund, up to a specific cap.⁴²

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IDLO and FAO's joint research on legislative and regulatory measures to strengthen food security and nutrition during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that, when such measures are adopted in line with the rule of law and a human rights-based approach, they have the potential to mitigate the negative impact of emergencies on the realization of the right to adequate food, especially for vulnerable populations.

Drawing on the research key findings, the following recommendations are proposed to decision-makers to safeguard the right to adequate food in times of emergency:

1. **Guarantee legal and constitutional protection for the right to adequate food**, in particular for vulnerable people and communities, and ensure the availability of and access to remedies in case of breach.⁴³
2. **Support transparent and accountable institutions to ensure access to justice for people claiming their right to adequate food.** Laws or restrictions introduced in response to emergencies should ensure access to justice and possibly refrain from closing courts and tribunals and other legal services that may increase people's awareness of their rights, including their right to adequate food. It is critical that individuals, groups, and vulnerable segments of the population, can challenge laws introduced during

emergencies threatening their right to adequate food. Consolidating their skills to strategically engage with customary and informal justice (CIJ) mechanisms, incorporating human rights and gender equality standards and practices, should be promoted.

3. **Ensure that emergency responses in support of food security comply with human rights standards and principles and preserve civic space.** Ensure continuity of legal safeguards and oversight mechanisms, such as national human rights institutions or ombudspersons, to guarantee that any derogation, restriction, and measure enacted protect and ensure justice, human dignity, and rights.
4. **Eliminate discriminatory laws and adopt gender-responsive measures to empower women and girls in all their diversity to claim their rights and participate fully in emergency policy decision-making and implementation at all levels.** Legal and policy measures should aim at eliminating direct and indirect legal discrimination against women not only in food legislation and policies, but also across different sectoral areas of specific relevance, such as in agriculture, land and natural resources, family law, and access to justice. Even in times of emergencies, laws, policies and programs should be developed with the full and meaningful

participation of diverse groups of women and girls. They should be designed and implemented based on a gender assessment of laws and on gender-disaggregated data and analysis. Tailored provisions across food supply chains and measures that facilitate access to employment and social protection, especially for women working in the informal sector, rural women, and female heads of households, can have a significant impact to women's right to food. Ensuring adequate resources and gender budgeting has proven effective in building inclusive legal and policy frameworks in times of crises.⁴⁴

Laws and policies should also ensure the effectiveness, availability and accessibility of mechanisms for complaints and remedies. It is important to provide capacity building programs to women and girls, and civil society organisations that support them, to improve knowledge of their rights as enshrined in key legal instruments, as well as the pathways to claim them.

- 5. Ensure that legal measures adopted during emergencies are conducive to inclusive, equitable and resilient agrifood systems.** States must carefully consider the effects of emergency measures on food security and design or improve social protection interventions to counterbalance their impact, particularly for those most at risk. Well-functioning institutions are needed to deliver essential services across food systems; set in place transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms, including reporting on

the right to adequate food; and lay the foundations for recovery in the event of shocks. The institutional framework must be cohesive, with coordination among relevant duty-bearers.

The extension and adaptation of social protection programmes to cover informal workers, those who may be sick, unemployed, managing an increased care burden (which particularly affected women) or out of school, is essential to promote agency and protect vulnerable groups' right to adequate food.

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