



JULY 8, 2020

FOOD AND FAITH RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS: DIRECTIONS AHEAD?

OVERVIEW

An hour-long webinar on “[Food and Faith Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Directions Ahead?](#)” was hosted by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University on July 8, 2020, co-organized with the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. Three development practitioners and leaders who focus on food security were invited to **explore how the COVID-19 pandemic intersects with long-standing food security and nutrition issues, especially in East Africa.**

Panelists were Rev. Nicta Lubaale, secretary general of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC); Lister Nyang’anyi, director of development services at the Anglican Diocese in Dodoma, Tanzania; and Asma Lateef, director of Bread for the World Institute and interim executive director of Alliance to End Hunger. Katherine Marshall, senior fellow at the Berkley Center and executive director of WFDD, moderated the discussion. The webinar was the eighth in a [series of conversations](#) focused on faith engagement in the COVID-19 crisis and response, organized by the “[Religious Responses to COVID-19](#)” project. A video recording is available on the [Berkley Center website](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Acting on hunger globally is urgent, with 135 million people now in food crisis and that number possibly doubling by the end of 2020.
- The crisis of hunger during the COVID-19 emergency highlights complex interconnectedness among health, agriculture, livelihood, and other issues. It highlights inequalities between and within societies and the scandal and shame that in today's world, there is not only occasional food insecurity but acute hunger and starvation.
- The COVID-19 emergency exposes vulnerabilities in food systems and highlights intricate linkages that make supplies and access vulnerable to disruption.
- Malnutrition is growing and needs to be part of responses by governments, the international community, and religious entities. People in informal settlements already faced undernutrition and precarity, which are worsened by the crisis.
- Coronavirus-linked strategies and programs focus too much on the crisis as a public health issue. Other livelihood dimensions, especially food, need equal attention. Pandemic messaging focuses only on public health and on big business, neglecting smallholder farmers.
- Agriculture, especially smallholder agriculture, needs to be at the center of policy and action, especially in Africa where small farmers produce some 70% of food. That includes advancing with climate smart agriculture and addressing losses from poor crop storage. There is solid experience here to build on.
- In the crisis, an assumption is that farmers need no support because their lives are not disrupted. However, the impact of COVID on them is large, disrupting access to inputs and creating anxiety that prevents people from getting out to work.
- Planting season in East Africa started around March, and disruptions in supplies and movement linked to the COVID-19 emergency mean that harvests will be disappointing and farmers are suffering.
- Important gender dimensions include disruptions in extension services and women's lesser access to cell phones.
- People are alive because they are remarkably resilient. Faith communities can help re-energize hope and convince people they are in charge.

HUNGER AND COVID-19: GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

People at risk: Some 820 million people were hungry before the COVID-19 crisis, with alarm growing on the topic. The COVID-19 emergency is worsening the situation with an estimated 135 million people right now in food crisis. If we don't act now, that number could double by the end of the year. ([World Food Programme](#))

Hunger and malnutrition: Hunger and malnutrition were serious problems before the COVID-19 emergency, and the signs that they are worsening are clear. Planting is disrupted, which means crops will be poor. With rising food prices and desperation of farmers and those in informal settlements, food insecurity is widespread. People including farmers eat anything that is available just to fill stomachs. This is rarely a nutritious and balanced diet. This in turn links to health, as with malnutrition comes lowered immunity and greater health risks, including vulnerability to COVID-19.

Domestic, global perspectives: In the United States, most focus, among advocacy groups especially, is on domestic hunger needs. Where global issues are the focus, most attention goes to the health response, with food security and hunger essentially an afterthought. The U.S. advocacy community, however, is now working to raise awareness about how the disruptions visible in the United States are amplified all over the world, as lockdowns and shutdowns are having deep effects on access to nutrition and food.

U.S. food production: Food production is deemed essential in the United States, and the people who work in the food system are essential workers, but they are not afforded the protections they need to stay safe in this crisis. This is true also in other world regions.

Food priorities: Priorities include ensuring that in the crisis response foods that are being delivered through emergency humanitarian assistance give priority to nutrition. Guarding against disruptions in health systems as the COVID crisis takes



up resources is important to ensure routine preventative and primary health care.

A wake-up call: This should be a wake-up call, and I think it is. UN organizations were raising the alarm about rising hunger before the COVID-19 crisis, and so were we in this space, but I think COVID has gotten the attention. We cannot waste this moment, where every single person in the world is going through this experience together. We have all recognized that our fates are joined and that the systems that we rely on, are really fragile. We must really think about how to strengthen those systems together, as a global community. We've got 10 years left to achieve the SDGs and to end hunger. Every single dollar we invest needs to be contributing to human health, improving our access to nutritious healthy diets, and making sure that we don't do all of this at the expense of the planet. There are strong economic arguments to be made for this, but these are huge moral arguments as well. (Asma Lateef)

Panelists discuss faith and food security in East Africa via webinar. Top (L-R): Katherine Marshall, Asma Lateef. Bottom (L-R): Rev. Nicta Lubaale, Lister Nyang'anyi.



Farmers working in Turkana County, Kenya, 2018. Photo credit of John Wambugu/Africa Lead via Flickr user USAID in Africa.

EAST AFRICA: DISRUPTIONS TO DAILY LIFE

Religious rituals: In Tanzania, religious entities face major disruptions as people cannot attend services, offerings are down, rites such as confirmations are delayed, and clerics and congregations face stress and tensions.

School closings: School closings affect poor communities deeply, with lost time, insufficient funds to pay school fees, loss of teaching staff, and dimmed future prospects.

Budget cuts: Cuts in budgets for development programs including smallholder agriculture have delayed work on important projects such as those addressing climate change.

EAST AFRICA: BUILDING ON EXISTING AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS

Congregation as center: New visions need not be the priority, as many solid strategies and programs were well defined before

the COVID-19 crisis. Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) has worked from a clear vision for the future, turning around the congregation as a center of support for production, post-harvest management, organizing cooperatives, and engaging local and national governments. OAIC works with research institutions, targeting specific crops that have minerals like zinc and iron, meeting needs of pregnant mothers and lactating mothers. Approaches need to look beyond carbohydrates; in crises, people turn to carbohydrates, so there is a need to supply seeds for protein, vegetables, and fruits, to address nutrition gaps.

Climate smart agriculture: Climate smart agriculture is a priority given prolonged droughts in the region. There are promising starts to programs adapted to address these forms of agriculture.

Rising food prices: Food prices are rising during COVID-19 emergency. Better crop storage is a priority, to limit losses, ensure food is available during hungry seasons, and allow farmers to sell when prices are optimal.

Off-farm activities: Off-farm activities like small businesses need to be promoted as part of development strategies including disaster preparedness and diversifying sources of income and food. Promising efforts include promoting savings, so farmers come together with accumulated savings, allowing them to borrow and invest in small businesses.

Interfaith action: Organizations like OAIC are working with interreligious councils in Africa to amplify messages and advocate with governments for action to respond to the COVID-19 emergency in effective ways and to refocus attention on smallholders and those in informal settlements.

AREAS OF VULNERABILITY

Different vulnerabilities: Numerous areas of vulnerability affect different communities differently. Smallholders with small plots face immediate problems with food availability. People in informal settlements lose jobs and cash to buy food. Pastoralists are cut off from other communities. Droughts and changing climate increase vulnerabilities. Supply chains for food and seeds are disrupted.

Gendered effects: Women are affected differently from men. For example, many women have less access to cell phones, which tend to be dominated by men and boys in the households. Energy supplies are disrupted, which also impedes cell phone use.

Refugees: Refugee communities are among the worst and earliest affected, for example South Sudanese refugees in Uganda.

People with disabilities: An example of special vulnerabilities is deaf people. The Anglican Diocese of Central Tanganyika has reached out to deaf people so they receive adapted messages on COVID-19. Blind people and Albinos are especially vulnerable. Some faith communities have schools and skills to help these groups.

Clergy: Clergy are vulnerable as they visit people. They need knowledge and protection.

Challenges of nutrition: Assuring dietary diversity has critical importance to ensure that this short-term health crisis does not lead to long-term legacies. This is especially important for infants and children, especially in the critical thousand-day window. Hunger and malnutrition at

this stage will have lifelong consequences for physical and cognitive development, affecting their health, earning ability, and educational ability down the road.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

Addressing the infodemic: Misinformation and deliberately false information are serious problems, as are important information gaps. Faith communities can work with governments to ensure clear, appropriate, and positive messages and address false information, especially coming from faith communities. In Tanzania, faith groups work well with the Ministry of Health in this area.

Political engagement: Politics and political agendas are important, but farmers too often have been divided by their political leaders. There is a shared objective of human flourishing and ecological harmony, and an appreciation that flourishing should not be the detriment of ecological harmony. However, food security will not simply come from farmers working harder. Farmer engagement on political agendas is needed.

Need for change: Food security is the main issue here (in Tanzania). I see a bright future despite COVID if we play our part as faith-based organizations. But we as organizations and farmers have got to change, both behaviors and farming practices. As a faith-based organization, we can promote conservation agriculture and better storage, build capacity, serve the especially vulnerable, and call governments to account. (Lister Nyang'anyi)

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Finding solutions: There is a need to stop talking about hunger as a looming catastrophe, in prophetic language, and to concentrate on finding solutions.

Leaping forward: Notwithstanding talk about “building back better,” “back” was not good enough, especially in terms of nutrition and health. The food system was clearly broken before COVID-19. The need is to leap forward better. Now is the time for advocates to start thinking about the recovery plans. Waiting for the end of the COVID-19 emergency is a bad approach. There is now an opportunity to put in place strategies and programs that address the vulnerabilities that are clearly defined. Building back should put people’s health and the planet at the center of the food system.

UN engagement: The UN Secretary General will host the “[Food Systems Summit](#)” next year, offering an opportunity for all, all over the world, to engage with policymakers and governments. They should make the case that the food system needs to be delivering far better, and addressing some of the

weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and inequities that the COVID-19 crisis has made so starkly visible.

Scandal of leadership: Africa’s hunger and poverty is a scandal. It is hunger and poverty in the midst of plenty. That is a scandal of political and religious leadership. And Africa’s hunger and poverty is not a shame to the poor and the hungry. It’s a shame to us, the leaders. If we look at it that way, we shall be able to grow. It is important for us to know that it’s possible to end hunger and start from such a vision: Rather than talking about what we don’t want, we are saying it is possible. (Rev. Nicta Lubaale)

Prophetic engagement: Faith communities will have to be much more prophetic in engagement, so that we go beyond caring, reconciling, healing what has been broken, so that we move to the dismantling of the foundations on which hunger, poverty, and inequality are built. And we need to identify this stone and the concrete that form what hunger and poverty is, and begin to dismantle them. (Rev. Nicta Lubaale)

Religious Responses to COVID-19 Project

The “Food and Faith Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Directions Forward?” event was sponsored by the “[Religious Responses to COVID-19](#)” project. The project, launched in March 2020 as a collaborative effort between the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, the World Faiths Development Dialogue, and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, explores the responses of religious actors to the COVID-19 pandemic and organizes information so that it can be quickly found and used by development policymakers and practitioners and religious actors who seek to work together in the COVID-19 response. Through a series of events, publications, and the establishment of an evolving [online resource repository](#), the project draws upon the experience and insights of experts on global health and formal and informal religious leaders as the foundation for further strategic reflections towards a positive path ahead.

BOX

EVENT PARTICIPANTS



Asma Lateef is director of Bread for the World Institute and interim executive director of the Alliance to End Hunger. Lateef was previously director of policy and programs at Citizens for Global Solutions, and she currently serves on the steering committee of the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement's Civil Society Network.



Katherine Marshall is a senior fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, where she leads the center's work on religion and global development, and a professor of the practice of development, conflict, and religion in the Walsh School of Foreign Service. She helped to create and now serves as the executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue.



Rev. Nicta Lubaale is the general secretary of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC). His career has focused on action programs and reforms that enable smallholder farmers to achieve what has long been recognized as their potential for self-reliance and robust farming systems.



Lister Nyang'anyi is director of development services at the Anglican Diocese of Central Tanganyika, Dodoma, Tanzania. He has training in agriculture and a decade of experience working on development and food security projects.

BERKLEY CENTER
for Religion, Peace & World Affairs
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University is

dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center's work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE *on*
FAITH & LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) is an international collaboration

and knowledge platform on evidence for faith groups' activities and contributions to local development and humanitarian challenges. JLI brings together international humanitarian and development organizations, UN agencies, academic institutions, and faith-based organizations and religious bodies for joint learning and collaboration.



WORLD FAITHS
**DEVELOPMENT
DIALOGUE**

The World Faiths Development Dialogue

(WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, DC, WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

About this Brief

This brief highlights contributions to a July 8, 2020 Berkley Center webinar on "Food and Faith Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Directions Ahead?" drawing on the insights of development practitioners and leaders who focus on food security. The goal is to guide future humanitarian action on food insecurity in East Africa and around the world.

For additional event content, see <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events>.