

In collaboration with:

Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

# Food systems: Lessons from the Pandemic

Briefing & Learning Note  
Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2020



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*Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim at bringing together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the **Live Learning Experience on Food Systems**, held on Thursday, 2nd of July, was devoted to enable a conversation on **how to manage and strengthen food systems and improve access to quality and healthy options during the pandemic and beyond.***

## **Healthy food systems during the outbreak and in the aftermath**

Local and Regional Governments have to ensure the well-being of its populations and the access to essential products and services in face of exacerbated inequalities, particularly during the COVID-19 outbreak. These inequalities are also strongly observed at the territorial level. The pandemic has primarily affected large cities, due to their density levels, but its effects are felt across all territories. Particularly in the rural world, territorial inequalities added to persistent social inequalities of our production models have confirmed we are still far from placing communities' needs at the centre.

Vulnerabilities increase in the cascade of economic and social crises. Due to augmented unemployment and the cutback of incomes that followed the outbreak, people look up to local and regional governments to attain social protection and subsistence, including access to food. During this unique LLE, cities, regions and expert organizations shared new and existing actions that contributed to the maintenance of food systems and the assistance to the most vulnerable population and most affected by the pandemic.

At a time when people had to stay confined and borders had to be closed, the pandemic has turned the spotlight to the economies of proximity. The importance of





producing and consuming local food has sparked, stirring up the awareness of communities on their food choices, as well as the interconnection of sectors, with the nature and neighbor cities that compose our food systems. With the lockdown measures, many people had limited access to fresh and quality food, challenging local governments to facilitate transportation, distribution and market options in close coordination with civil society organizations, local producers and the private sector.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for public policies to promote the right to adequate, nutritious and quality food. The importance of adopting a food democracy approach is vital if we consider, for example, the proliferation of monocultures in our territories, which seek economic benefit over the well-being of the population. It unveils the necessary and urgent transformation of our agricultural structure and food systems, as a measure to tackle inequalities, improve the health of communities and enhance the resilience to future shocks. The fight against hunger needs to be at the core of our agenda and recovery efforts through a food-democracy approach that envisages human dignity. This is a task that all levels of government must adopt, since there can be no prosperous territories and cities if the right to food is not guaranteed for millions of people without proper access.

It is time to address the urban-rural continuum in a comprehensive manner in order to enhance the livelihoods and health of our communities. It is also essential that local and regional governments have the capacity to influence the decisions on what and how we eat, allowing them to face market dynamics, securing people's needs and access to inclusive, responsible and ecological food systems.

## **Live Consultation: challenges and responses in the aftermath of the crisis.**

The meeting was introduced through a live consultation that aimed to find out the challenges and the immediate responses to the pandemic, to ensure everybody's access to food during the outbreak and in the aftermath.







General of UCLG, **Emilia Saiz** highlighted how cities and regions were called by the circumstances to respond to peoples' food needs.

**Joan Ribó**, Mayor of Valencia, addressed the importance of local and regional governments being involved in food governance, being key actors in the food supply of many vulnerable people. Among the examples of policies carried out by the city council, the mayor highlighted modalities of cash transfers and the distribution of food, together with sanitary kits, to allow proper access to vulnerable families during the confinement, particularly children that used to count with school meals. These initiatives were combined with education and awareness campaigns, for example through guides and materials focused on creating healthier food habits and reducing food waste.

*"Food should no longer be exclusively an issue of supermarkets, but rather an issue that is addressed with people at the centre. Eating is a cultural process, which we must develop by being aware of and strengthening the bond with our producers"* said **Joan Ribó**, Mayor of Valencia.

Throughout the session, cities and region shared their role to ensure safety measures and to coordinate with civil society organizations, schools, parents, volunteers and others to distribute food and support communities in need. **Remy Sietchiping**, Head of Policy, Law and Urban Governance, UN-HABITAT, stressed the need to incorporate solidarity into the way we look at food systems so that no one and no territory is left behind.

Enlightening communities on the processes and social segments that compose food systems, we can generate mindful food choices and create awareness and ownership of urban communities towards their rural surroundings.

## **Guaranteeing access to food, the first necessity during the outbreak.**

Throughout the session, a great focus was given to the urgency in ensuring food supply to citizens, and in particular to vulnerable populations such as school children, health workers, and people working in the informal sector, particularly by the





representatives of the cities of Pariaman (Indonesia), Kazan (Russia), Milan (Italy) and the province of Azuay (Ecuador).

In summary, participants shared different approaches to coordinate and facilitate food distribution, by organizing food markets, online door-to-door delivery services, and managing transportation and mobility properly despite the lockdowns. Safeguarding frontline workers and supporting rural and family producers, cities and regions can strengthen food systems and support communities.

Mayor of Pariaman, **Genius Umar** laid out the strategy of food production in the region, by ensuring that farmers could safely go back to work during the lockdown. Enhancing the productivity levels and of agricultural land and the relationship between the city and producers, he argued, is critical to secure food access. With that in mind, Pariaman kept municipal stocks of rice and other products to avoid food shortage and to react to the spike of food prices. At the same time, the city provided machinery, equipment, quality seeds and capacity building opportunities to empower local producers.

**Rima Mukhamedshina**, Director General of the Department for Food and Social Nutrition of Kazan, highlighted how the city of Kazan endeavored to provide 70,000 daily portions of food to students entitled to social benefits during the quarantine, including through door-to-door or distribution centers, also providing meals and safety conditions to the workers in the frontline.

**Patricio Abad**, Director of Economic Development of Azuay, showcased the “solidarity baskets” distributed by the provincial government. The links with the civil society and the local communities of Azuay, he argued, have allowed Azuay to successfully carry out this policy aimed at reducing inequalities. Through a public-private mixed company, *AgroKawsay*, the province organized mobile fairs and markets of ecological food, bringing healthier choices to the people and helping local producers to maintain subsistence.

**Andrea Magarini**, coordinator of food policy in Milan, pointed out how the city centralized a food aid system, mapping public and civil society initiatives to increase efficiency. The city government also provided food vouchers, shopping cards and online markets to increase access to local products and to change food habits. For that, he stressed the importance of local data and municipal coordination, and how





the pandemic demands greater digital infrastructure, in response to increased ecommerce and online food delivery.

## “Food justice” and relationship with communities in the reconstruction

Beyond the immediate response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the session also identified a key opportunity to place food systems at the core of a green, inclusive and resilient recovery. Policies for food accessibility, promoting women empowerment and local production, as well as the attention to vulnerable populations, should permeate the long-term efforts of cities and regions, transforming food-systems for present and future generations.

**Farissa Bensalem**, Chief of Staff of the Mayor's Office of Gennevilliers, addressed the issue of "food justice" in her city by implementing measures such as a food ticket for modest families, and trying to ensure access to quality food for families without resources. This focus on food justice has been the starting point for a “social supermarket” that strengthens the links between communities and local producers.

**Maite Rodríguez**, Coordinator of the Latin American and Caribbean Women and Habitat Network, pointed out that food systems must also be integrated into women rights to the city. As large micro-producers, a gender perspective is fundamental to target issues of land tenure and can only result in more inclusive and efficient food systems. The recognition of women's work, and the allocation of resources to women’s initiatives is key to building resilience.

**Marcela Villarreal**, Director of Partnerships, Advocacy, and Capacity development at FAO called for promoting inclusivity, ensuring access to food for all. The lack of inclusion and persistent inequalities, she argued, is part of our structural weaknesses that ultimately affects production and consumption. Multi-level and multi-stakeholder approaches are required to generate food hubs, to boost monitoring and coordination, finally attaining preparedness to periods of distress

**Kobie Brand**, Director of ICLEI Africa, presented the "AfricanCITYFOOD month” an initiative in conjunction with FAO and the RUF (Global Partnership on Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Food Systems), which promotes enhanced food systems as a





necessary step to regenerate nature, mitigate the climate emergency, and end injustices.

**Vicente Domingo**, Director, Valencia World Centre for Sustainable Urban Food, reminded that food is also a political option. In this regard, he emphasized the important role of local and regional governments educating people about food systems. Recalling that we are experiencing the hardest crisis of the 21st century in times of peace, he underscored that good nutrition is an act of responsibility not only to oneself, but to the communities around us and around our cities.

## What has the pandemic taught us about our food systems?

### 1. Local and regional governments are critical to foster equal access

Participants throughout the session emphasized that local and regional governments had to carry out inclusive policies to ensure access to safe and nutritious food for their populations, especially for those with less resources. Local and regional governments should enhance the links between communities and producers, generating jobs and incomes to rural families and women, ensuring no one is left behind in the access to food, as well as building resilience and preparedness to similar situations in the future.

### 2. A holistic approach to food is necessary to renew the food systems

Addressing food security implies not only addressing the supply chain, but also how the production and consumption of food fits into our global patterns and local habits. Participants in the session underlined the need a holistic approach to food, that addresses urban-rural linkages, health, food waste and economies of proximity, mobility, transportation, online infrastructure, education and more. In the framework of developing a new relationship with nature, the ecological transition is a task that all levels of government must adopt, a change of mindset that pervades an ecosystem of integrated cities and regions.

### 3. Gender equality is key for the resilience of our food systems





Participants in the session reminded that the pandemic exposed our structural inequalities and weaknesses. Throughout the session, participants underscored the vulnerabilities of women in accessing food and the urgent gender response during the pandemic, either by their work in the frontline or because they are more vulnerable to job losses. Building women's rights and supporting their leadership throughout food systems will be critical to foster resilience and to attain equality.

#### **4. Eating is a political act**

Participants also highlighted that people's "liberty" to choose what they eat is often not that clear-cut. During the pandemic, many cities have seen an increase in sales of fresh and local products, showcasing that our modern lifestyles often prevent us from making healthy choices. The impact of the market and international commerce in regards to food options was also addressed, as speakers called for the need to co-create, between governments at all levels and citizens, tools to raise awareness, to educate on healthier and responsible food habits, and finally to enhance consumers' power to decide on food choices.

## **Resources**

The Durban Political Declaration:

[https://www.durban2019.uclg.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/UCLG\\_TheDurbanPoliticalDeclaration\\_EN\\_.pdf](https://www.durban2019.uclg.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/UCLG_TheDurbanPoliticalDeclaration_EN_.pdf)

UCLG Community of Practice on Food Security <http://regions-france.org/agir-pour-la-transition-agricole-et-alimentaire/>

Regions de France study, with RESOLIS, on the food and agriculture transition <http://regions-france.org/agir-pour-la-transition-agricole-et-alimentaire/>

FAO dedicated page on the COVID-19, with different resources <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/en/>





Azuay's AgroKawsay, public-private company that plays a key role bringing together local producers and consumers in agroecological markets.  
<http://www.agrokawsay.ec/>,

UCLG's Decalogue for the aftermath <https://www.uclg.org/en/node/31076>

Latin America Women and Habitat Network <https://www.redmujer.org.ar/the-network>

#AfricanCITYFOODMonth, promoted by ICLEI Africa City Food Network  
<https://africa.iclei.org/cityfood/>

