COVID-19: a humanitarian crisis affecting millions of hungry people

COVID-19 makes WFP’s work more urgent than ever. WFP is mobilising to meet the food needs of 140 million people, but tackling the rising tide of hunger requires the biggest humanitarian response in WFP’s history. The pandemic could almost double the number of people suffering from acute hunger, while creating additional logistics challenges.

Thanks to several years of investment in innovation, technology and digital transformation, WFP has been able to maintain existing operations and start ramping up the COVID-19 response. As the logistics backbone for global humanitarian assistance, WFP is delivering vital food and medical supplies to the most-affected communities despite unprecedented restrictions on movement. There’s a lot more to be done and we’ll need more help to do it, but thanks to some great partners and donors, we’ve made a good start.
Seamless support for the Global Humanitarian Response Plan

The Emergency Service Marketplace is an integrated one-stop-shop offering WFP partners a range of free-to-user logistic services, with simple online access. This enables the secure delivery of vital health and humanitarian cargo via a global network of strategic hubs. It is powering the humanitarian community towards meeting the needs of the most vulnerable during the Covid-19 crises and beyond; saving time and money when we can least afford to waste either.

Enabling real time, evidence-based decisions

Within days of the pandemic being declared, WFP was using real time monitoring systems and predictive data analytics to track the impact of COVID-19, food and health supplies and prices.

WFP's Hunger Monitoring Unit is expanding its fully automated, near real-time monitoring systems across up to 40 countries to respond to COVID-19, with data collected, analysed and visualised daily.

This near real-time data is made available through WFP's HungerMap, which has been upgraded to track the evolution of hunger and COVID-19 outbreaks in countries where WFP operates, and in most low and lower-middle income countries. A range of recurring Hunger and COVID-19 Snapshots can also be downloaded through the HungerMap, which provide insights and an overview of the food security situation across global, national and urban levels.

The DataViz Hunger Analytics Hub is tracking COVID-19 globally, bringing a range of data streams together to facilitate faster analyses and comprehensive assessments.

The School Feeding Map is showing COVID-19's impact on school meal programmes around the world. WFP is identifying alternative solutions to continue supporting schoolchildren, such as take-home rations and door-to-door meal deliveries.

Innovative solutions to limit the spread of COVID-19

As well as using innovation and technology to track and resolve COVID-19 issues, WFP is also using them to limit the pandemic's spread and protect beneficiaries, staff and partners, and to get ahead of the food security issues being created around the world.

The WFP-led Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) is helping reach communities early with consistent and culturally appropriate health information, countering misinformation and building trust. This includes a national COVID-19 hotline with chatbot support being developed in Central African Republic, Libya and Iraq.

WFP's E-shop app is used by 46,000 people in Somalia to redeem assistance online while maintaining social distancing. The app allows them to shop online at local grocery stores contracted by WFP and have products delivered within 3–7 days, keeping beneficiaries safe and supporting local businesses.

WFP is using blockchain technology and QR codes to help maintain social distancing at Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, home to the world's largest refugee camp. A code scan for vehicles has cut the clearance time for vehicles entering the camp from up to 15 minutes to as little as 15 seconds. While swapping fingerprint authentication for QR codes is giving people a single, secure, contactless access point for assistance from multiple humanitarian agencies.

The WFP Innovation Accelerator has already reviewed its innovation portfolio to identify and prioritize projects that could pivot quickly to help address COVID-19. For example, extra support will be given to accelerate FoodATM and GrainATM, early-stage projects developing automated food distribution machines, which would allow beneficiaries to collect food assistance without any in-person interaction.
Going digital: taking WFP remote

While most WFP staff are still working in the field, business continuity planning enabled thousands of staff to switch seamlessly to working remotely, including most of WFP’s headquarters-based staff in Rome and many regional and country offices.

As well as sharing its own knowledge and expertise, WFP is also benefitting from the experience of a wide range of private sector partners who specialize in innovation, technology and digital transformation. This covers everything from unearthing, incubating and piloting new ideas through hackathons and startup mentoring, to scaling up solutions with leading experts in data management or telecommunications.

WFP’s Innovation Accelerator program is now fully virtual. After the first virtual innovation bootcamp for the UN Digital Solutions Centre, the Accelerator is hosting bootcamps for UNFPA; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and USAID with a specific COVID-19 focus.

A global community coming together

WFP’s fundraising app, ShareTheMeal reached its first emergency fundraising goal in just 10 days – thanks to over 2 million donors worldwide - and has now launched a second campaign highlighting WFP’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. You can share the meal here.

For more information: global.innovation@wfp.org