



INTERNATIONAL UNION of FOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

*Strengthening Global Food Science and Technology for Humanity*

### **IUFOST Scientific Roundtable (SRD4)**

#### **COVID-19 Crisis: Implications for Food Systems in Developing Economies (Focus on Africa)**

News Release - The critical importance of ensuring that developing economies are supported by the international community as they prepare to contain the spread of COVID-19 was highlighted in a Scientific Roundtable organized and coordinated by the International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFOST) on April 17, 2020. **COVID-19 Crisis: Implications for Food Systems in Developing Economies (Focus on Africa)** brought together internationally renowned experts in food science looking at nutrition, agriculture, regulation, epidemiology, and industry to address challenges specific to Africa and Lebanon related to the impact of COVID-19.

The Scientific Roundtable was co-chaired by **John McDermott**, Director, CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), and **Ruth Oniang'o**, Chair of Sasakawa Africa Association, Founder Rural Outreach Africa. Presentations were made by **Catherine Bertini**, World Food Prize Laureate, Former UN Under Secretary and Executive Director of the World Food Programme; **Cheikh Ndiaye**, Executive Director, African Food and Agriculture Skills Development Centre, Senegal; **Samuel Godefroy**, Senior Food Regulatory Expert, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation (SAFE); **Lara Hanna Wakim**, Vice Director of Higher Center for Research, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanon; **Theo Knight-Jones**, Senior Scientist Epidemiology, Animal and Human Health, International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI); and **Silnia Badenhorst**, Group Food Safety Manager (SME) Massmart/Walmart.

Speakers raised warnings about the potential impact of measures taken to contain the virus that could result in a food crisis with dire implications beyond those of the virus itself unless solutions matching the African reality are developed and implemented now. The expectation is that COVID-19 will move 80 million Africans into extreme poverty. While each expert presented a different aspect of COVID-19, key concerns identified were the critical need for financial support for African government measures in fighting virus spread; the importance of communication of factual information; ensuring the integrity of both informal and formal food supply and distribution; and accurate definition of essential goods and services to include all activities and processes which support the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste disposal of food in the system.

**“While there will be some challenges in global food supply chains, most disruptions in food production, supply chains, markets and services will come from domestic circumstances and livelihood shocks.”**  
(John McDermott)

Ruth Oniang'o compared the COVID-19 pandemic to a conflict, with major disruptions in people's lives impacting food production for a majority of smallholder farmers and the food supply chain. With the world predicting the worst for Africa's 54 sovereign states, countries with very weak economies have been forced to get ready, despite the fact that these governments do not have social safety net programs to cushion the impact on their populations. They have no reserves and have coped with their periodic food crises through donors who now have to mobilize all resources to help themselves.

Following on this theme, Cheikh Ndiaye stressed that the strategy of everyone solving their own problems is unsustainable and counterproductive. The globally accepted practice of closing down cities and businesses is difficult to implement in the African context without food shortages, price increases and starvation in vulnerable populations. Efforts should be made to assist workers in all sectors of food systems impacted in the hope that with support from the international community it may be possible to mitigate some of the foreseeable negative impacts.

**“Guidance needs to be provided for practices of sanitation, but also how to protect workers’ health and conditions in order to make sure that they continue to operate.”** (Sam Godefroy)

Regulators must continue to play an important role in limiting supply disruption and maintaining operations through communication of scientifically credible information, especially with regard to transmission of the virus; including providing guidance to food and agri-food producers in sanitation and worker protection standards, amongst other things; and ensuring that no new threats or hazards are introduced, including food fraud and prevention of dumping to avoid shortages. Sam Godefroy noted that guidance must be adapted to African food production sector and supply chain realities, including how to practice social distancing in the context of farmers markets and small farmer production.

**“From villages to nations, leaders must be nimble and must quickly fix disruptions in the food chains.”** (Catherine Bertini).

The inevitable rise in demand for food and the need for innovation on how food can be safely sold and distributed rules for acceptable sales and distribution to avoid wasting food also was a key issue. Catherine Bertini advocated against knee-jerk political decisions, such as closing borders, that negatively impact consumers, farmers, and processors and strongly supported finding creative approaches for delivery of food and food aid including sufficient production of special food for children from birth to two years of age to avoid the potential creation of a generation of stunted children during a food shortage.

**“Continuous tracking of operations within the value chain will be necessary. A disruption of activities at any single point in the value chain will have knock-on implications for others. Furthermore, problems with cross-cutting services, such as transportation of employees and goods, could impact at multiple nodes simultaneously. In this regard, the importance of logistical services within the chain, to ensure efficient movement of both products, services and labour, cannot be overemphasised.”** (Silnia Badenhurst).

With regard to food access, the focus was on the importance of a number of measures, including promotion of school feeding at home; establishment of food banks; compelling food-producing companies and food retail stores to recycle consumable foodstuffs and make it available to the most vulnerable; establishing humanitarian food reserves; ensuring emergency foodstuffs are mobilised; and scaling up nutritional support and feeding schemes. The informal sector plays an essential part of the ‘business as usual’ food system, as it supplies a variety of essential food and related services to the poor and vulnerable groups, Silnia Badenhurst emphasized.

**“This global health crisis is not an ordinary shock to supply and demand or access to food; it is a shock to the world as a whole. It is a human crisis.”** (Lara Hanna Wakim)

The specific issue is the access to inputs in time for the agricultural planting season, as delays due to transport and market disruptions may affect yields and income. A declining demand due to a decline in

purchasing power will in turn affect the ability and willingness of farmers and producers to invest and adopt adequate technology and will consequently further shrink food production and availability. Thus the COVID-19 pandemic creates a spike in demand, due to panic buying and hoarding of food by consumers, which is increasing food demand in the short-term, primarily among those who have the means to over-buy food for storage in their homes. There is an urgent need to raise awareness among people to reduce food waste, and to better look after the categories of food they are buying in terms of nutrition facts. Therefore, in the absence of responsive social safety nets and robust income assistance, the working poor will see their ability to access nutritious food decline in many situations, pointed out Lara Hanna-Wakim.

John McDermott requested panelists to provide advice as to what IUFoST might do in the COVID-19 response and recovery phases. Advice included:

1. Engage with government policy makers and community leaders
2. Compile food lessons from other epidemics (Ebola in West Africa) and the 2007-9 food price crisis
3. Look beyond the urgent response to continue to build food science and regulatory capacity
4. Engage IUFoST Adhering Bodies in workshops on food science and food safety
5. Monitoring and rapid learning of changing food supply chains
6. IUFoST to support resources for food scientists and for food supply practitioners.

Relative to the challenge of COVID-19 in Africa, Ruth Oniang'o closed by saying:

***“We have a chance to actually begin to find local solutions, to begin to see how further engagements with other partners can emerge in a way that is completely different.”***

*A full summary of this IUFoST Scientific Roundtable, Speakers' Biographical details and other reference materials may be obtained through [secretariat@iufost.org](mailto:secretariat@iufost.org).*

*This information is available to all with notification to the IUFoST Secretariat [secretariat@iufost.org](mailto:secretariat@iufost.org) and recognition of source. Thank you.*

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The International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST) stimulates the ongoing exchange of knowledge in those scientific disciplines and technologies relating to the expansion, improvement, distribution and conservation of the world's food supply. The international food science and technology scientific community works within the Union to exchange ideas and develop strategies to meet the vision and mission of IUFoST.

The Union works with other international organizations such as FAO, WHO and UNIDO to fulfill its mission. It is the elected global representative of Food Science and Technology in the International Science Council (ISC). IUFoST's vision is to **Strengthen Global Food Science and Technology for Humanity**.

IUFoST's mission is to: (a) Promote international co-operation and information exchange. (b) Provide education and training to food scientists and technologists around the world. (c) promote professionalism and profession organization among food scientists and technologists.

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