



# TWO PANDEMICS

*Fighting COVID-19 and food insecurity requires new ideas, robust political will*

QU DONGYU

GLOBAL HUNGER HAS been on a regrettable rise in recent years, and despite Asia's economic clout, the continent — home to more than half of the world's undernourished — has not been spared. Now, COVID-19 is leading to a slowdown of regional economic growth and further threatening food security.

Southern Asia is particularly vulnerable, with the number of chronically-underfed people projected to rise by almost a third to 330 million by 2030. It is also the only subregion in the world where more than half the children from the poorest fifth of society are stunted — a condition that prejudices their futures. There are challenges all around: The Pacific island states have the world's highest child wasting rates, and East Asia has the world's highest absolute costs for a healthy diet — one that goes beyond mere calorie counts to offer balanced nutrition. On top of that, Asia and the Pacific are regions where obesity and being overweight, among children and adults, is growing faster than anywhere else.

We are facing two pandemics. COVID-19, which beyond its health toll, is crushing livelihoods, and hunger, a scourge the international community had pledged to eradicate by the end of this decade — the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2. Tackling them will require new ideas and a more robust political will. Past progress was sustained by the benign trickle-down effects of strong economies. This is not the case anymore. The facts have changed, and so must our minds.

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ing new marketing channels (like e-commerce), increasing efficiency to reduce losses, and improving the quality of products available and storage facilities, which are critical to flows of healthy foods and income to those who produce them. Inclusive access to finance to strengthen and expand rural supply chains is also crucial.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has recently launched a new comprehensive COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme to provide an agile and coordinated global response aimed at ensuring access to nutritious food for everyone by mobilising all forms of resources and partnerships at the country, regional and global level. In line with the UN agenda to "build back better", and in pursuit of the SDGs, the new programme aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic while strengthening the longer-term resilience of food systems and livelihoods.

So we are making headway, but we must, as a priority, attend to the most urgent issues at the very source by enabling farmers to be more dynamic, entrepreneurial and competitive through continual innovation. We need smallholder farmers to produce nutritious foods, without fear of crop failures, and we also need to get those foods to the mouths of the hungry across the region and beyond. To do this, smallholders desperately need access to financial resources, technology and innovation.

The Asia-Pacific region is as dynamic as it is large. It has some of the best agricultural scientists, institutions and innovative ideas. From

Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific to China, India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and virtually every country in between, innovators are proving that everyone can benefit from new technologies and science.

Examples range from deploying drones to monitor flood and pest risks, smartphone apps that can identify plant diseases, advanced genetics that build on crop and livestock breeding, precision agriculture and aquaculture systems that conserve natural resources such as water, indoor farming and consumer tools for nutrition monitoring and smart purchasing.

There is no time to waste. Everyone needs to lend a hand: Governments, academia, the private sector, UN agencies, civil society organisations, international financial institutions and the people who bring us the food we eat — the smallholders. We need to be working in unison to overcome pandemics that by definition affect and involve everyone.

The FAO has rolled out the Hand-in-Hand initiative to tackle these collective challenges, and the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, which will be virtually hosted by Bhutan, is the perfect opportunity for the 46 members and other partners to forge ways to expedite action and leverage resources. By working together, learning and contributing together, we can overcome both pandemics and transform the agri-food system.

*The writer is Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations*