

A farmer and former president of the Drôme Chamber of Agriculture (France), Anne-Claire Vial chairs Arvalis-Institute of Vegetal, an applied research organization dedicated to field crops. She also sits on the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (EESC) and chairs the think tank Land and Civilization. She has been a member of IFGR since 2017 and gives us her analysis of the COVID-19 crisis through the prism of agriculture. Will the health crisis be combined with a food crisis? One fact is already certain for Anne-Claire Vial: this crisis leads us to rediscover the strategic stakes of agriculture and food for our security and sovereignty.



What does this crisis of COVID-19 tell us about the functioning of our agricultural models and our feeding behaviours?

From the very first days of the crisis and the announcement of a lockdown, demand was profoundly transformed and so were consumer demands. We are seeing irrational purchases everywhere for fear of missing out, as well as a change in the consumption. French people buy a lot of rice, pasta, canned food and flour. The consumption of frozen burgers is jumping by 75% while that of meat is falling by 30%; there is a collapse in the consumption of fruit and vegetables as well as cheese, except for the pre-packaged ones.

Very quickly, logistical issues arise. Firstly, because the places of consumption change. A survey in 2018 showed that 18% of European people's meals are eaten away from home. In France, out-of-home catering and canteens, which account for more than 50% of market opportunities, have been closed. According to IRI's analytics, in the six weeks following 16 March, 606 million meals will be carried over to supermarkets (70%) and local food chains (30%). It is clear that the delivery circuits of the out-of-home catering sector are not those of other supply outlets.

In addition, there are also employees who are absent due to illness or who exercise their right to withdraw when the protective measures are lacking. This situation has three harmful effects:

- Empty shelves because they are not restocked, which maintains an unfounded fear of missing,
- Crops abandoned for lack of markets,
- Increased food waste.

Closed borders, including with our neighbours, no longer allow the free circulation of food and people. We then discover that all over the world, agricultural labour is partly outsourced to other regions of the country or abroad.

Finally, leading exporting countries decide to restrict or ban export.



What are the concrete consequences of these changes?

Access to basic foodstuffs is at the heart of concerns as well as the question of their prices at a time of unprecedented economic crisis. A growing number of populations are depleting their food reserves due to containment and the difficulties of local and international trade raise fears of a lack of replenishment.

International organisations were prompt to warn that the epidemic is a threat to food security, while on a global scale, the latest cereal harvest was excellent, exceeding 2 700 million tonnes for the first time. Indeed, even if the world trade is less than 10% of the harvest, it is strategic. According to Arit Husain, Chief Economist of the World Food Programme, *"every year, trade in rice, soybeans, corn and wheat feeds 2.8 billion people around the world, 212 million of whom are chronically food insecure and 95 million of whom are severely insecure"*.

According to the International Trade Center, at the end of April, 88 countries had already implemented food export restrictions. Thus Russia, the world's leading wheat exporter, is limiting its grain exports until 1 July, followed by Ukraine, the world's second largest grain exporter, and then Kazakhstan. Similarly, India, the world's leading rice exporter, and Vietnam have suspended all new export applications since 24 March, followed by Cambodia and Myanmar. According to Sébastien Abis, Director of the think tank Demeter, out of the 50 million tonnes of rice traded worldwide, a third is destined for sub-Saharan Africa, a country where local production does not cover needs. In Latin America, where large exporting countries are present, supplying in the ports is complicated. This is why on 21 April, the G20 Agriculture ministers made a commitment to cooperate.

International organizations are also concerned about the consequences of the hinders cross-border circulation for agricultural workers.

In Europe, border closures have immobilised hundreds of thousands of seasonal workers from the East, who are essential to the harvests in all the countries of the European Union. In France, people were unbelieving when the Minister of Agriculture appealed for a general mobilization during the Covid-19 crisis. More than 250,000 volunteers applied on the platform *"arms for your plate"*. But the difficulty of the tasks and the lack of training do not allow to count on all these volunteers.

In Italy, the second largest producer of fruit and vegetables in the European Union, 50% of the harvest could be abandoned due to a lack of gatherers. At the request of the main agricultural union, supported by the ministers of Home Affairs and Agriculture, 200,000 undocumented migrants workers have been regularized.

Finally, according to the World Bank on 22 April, developing countries will have to bear the cut of remittances from migrants to their countries of origin estimated at 554 billion dollars in 2019.

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Behind this visible part, let us not forget that there are farmers whose activity is at stake. A few examples: the disorganization of the dairy markets due to a change in demand is keeping the sector in crisis in all the major world production basins with a sharp drop in prices. Sometimes farmers have no other option than throw away the milk they have produced. With the closures of the catering, the poultry and duck sectors with a quality label lose about 40 to 80% of their outlets. In the USA, millions of pigs, cattle or chickens would be killed by their producers, due to a lack of processing capacity in the 2,700 slaughterhouses following the contamination of their employees by Covid-19 and their closure.

As for India, there is evidence of crop losses as farm workers have returned for confinement to their home villages. In agricultural territories such as Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, there is a labour shortage. And where there is subsistence agriculture farming, it is the lack of access to seeds and markets or the weather conditions that jeopardizes agricultural activity.

What are the first lessons of this crisis?

Overnight, this crisis shows us how the fine mechanics of a globalized food supply are being blocked. We are interdependent for better or worse and this interdependence is ultimately poorly managed. **Food sovereignty must be a top priority. Many had forgotten it or instrumentalized it as a lock-in, which it is not.**



Global food supply chains are complex and include, for example, these cabbage growers in Uganda.
Credit: FAO

The answer lies in a territorialization of the act of production. Agricultural policies must be built in all regions of the world to maintain farmers and enable them to make a living from their work. The first beneficiary of these policies is always, in the end, the consumer, who thus has access to quality food in proximity! Wherever the climate permits, local agriculture must be diversified.

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Anything that can be produced locally must be produced locally. In fact, in this period of confinement, convenience stores, drive-in stores, farmers' markets, farm shops and farm sales are exploding. E-commerce for food is also booming. This trend of buying locally is creating a virtuous and attractive system in terms of the social link between producers and consumers. But according to Bruno Parmentier, economist, they will not be enough to feed large cities that require highly structured organizations. Thus, quotes the researcher, in order to feed the 12 million inhabitants of Ile de France (i.e. the urban area of Paris), nearly 20,000 tons of food must be brought in every day, and for example 8 million eggs per day. Consequently, supply channels must remain diversified and thus satisfy all types of consumers. Local organisations which can manage the food resilience of territories are needed.

This locavore (*the term for someone who exclusively or at least primarily eats local foods*) trend should not make us forget that certain regions of the world remain deficient in essential products. We must also secure multilateral trade. Thus the pact signed on March 26 by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Burma, Brunei and Singapore aimed at facilitating the flow of essential goods. This is why Sébastien Abis pleads for food sovereignty based on solidarity: *“Mediterranean and African countries need to find seeds, cereals and milk on international markets”*.

Finally, Pascale Hebel, director of Credoc's consumer division, has already alerted us to the potential drop in purchasing power due to the crisis. In fact, the right to food for all must be reassessed, even in our societies with higher purchasing power which do not prevent those left behind from existing. The French Ministry of

Solidarity and Health is currently forecasting a jump of 45% in the number of food aid recipients.

Nothing of what has just been said was ignored before the crisis, but deliberately buried in favor of other issues deemed much more "innovative"!

What can change today is the approach to the topic and the appropriation of it by all. First of all, this crisis shows us the inventiveness and adaptation of individuals, associations and local actors to face the gaps and challenges. The mobilization of citizens around the world can locally move the lines. Finally, in the agricultural field, we must move away from a utopian vision of nature and build a pragmatic agroecology. The WHO's multisectoral approach "*One World, One Health*" takes on its full meaning with this pandemic. The FAO had rightly predicted that 2020 would be the year of vegetal health. Public health outcomes depend on the fight against zoonoses, food safety and the fight against antibiotic resistance. They require coordinated and transversal policies, research and legislation.

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We may be living the end of hyper-globalization. We can hope to enter a more responsible phase. The food challenge is both local and global. This crisis is a dramatic reminder of this, as well as of the interdependence of all the dimensions of sustainable development: health, economic, social and environmental. Its resolution will also be a way of living the planet and being together in the future.



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