



# Migration, Food Systems and Possible Impacts of Covid-19

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# Outline

- (Voluntary) Migration and Modern Food Systems
  - Some (likely) Responses or Policy Challenges
- Migration and Traditional Food Systems
- Involuntary Migration (IDP/Refugee Situations)

# Migration and *Modern* Food Systems

- Migrants play a key role in European, North American food systems
- Food systems are characterized by long value chains, from farm to supermarket, integrated with the world economy
- They work in slaughterhouses, pick some (perishable) crops, as well as in food distribution (especially in food consumed away from home)



# How does COVID 19 potentially affect food systems from a migrant lens? (*Modern*)

- Challenges within value chains
  - Slaughterhouses have been closed for outbreaks in US
  - Leads to low farmgate prices, high prices at supermarkets (or shortages)
  - “The French are bad very bad at picking asparagus,” Annie Guichon, French farmer (quoted in *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2020)
- Massive change in structure of food demand
  - Food away from home big part of food budget in developed countries, substantially changed
  - Likely to be changed for a long time

# Share of Food Budget Spent on Food Away From Home (Great Recession, US)



Source: BLS, Consumer Expenditure Survey

# Some thoughts about potential policy responses

## Modern Food Systems

- Need policies to ensure “guest workers” can enter, etc.
- Keep international agricultural trade moving
- Firms in middle of value chain should be cognizant of risks to workers
  - Packing, distribution



# Migrants help transform *Traditional* Food Systems

- A major reason migrants leave rural areas- wages higher in destination than at source (Harris and Todaro, 1970)
- As migrants move to urban areas (whether domestic or international destinations), urban areas often end up with similar long value chains to modern food systems
- Diets of migrants improve nutritionally (Evidence from Ethiopia, Tanzania)
- Higher incomes in rural areas through remittances also improve diets
  - But may also increase consumption of processed foods



# What is happening with Covid-19?

- No jobs in urban areas-> Harris and Todaro logic breaks down
  - Moreover, no job means it is difficult to acquire food
- Reports of international migrants returning home
  - Ex. Thailand -> **Myanmar**, Laos, Cambodia
- Major concern about food *and nutrition* security among migrants/migrant families



Source: IOM



# Countries with More Traditional Food Systems: Responses

- How many migrants are returning home?
  - Monitoring (phone) surveys can help measure urban-> rural return
  - Requires research *investment*
- Important to make sure financial flows get out to rural areas to keep (nutritious) food being produced
  - Large proportion of rural residents lack bank access, so mobile money for social protection?



# Involuntary Migration



Already an endogenous relationship with food insecurity



May be more difficult to leave/get into IDP/Refugee camps as a result of Covid (plus US government response)



Protracted crises (both “irregular” migration and refugee situations) create another set of challenges

More difficulty integrating IDP or refugee camp residents into local economies...

## And...

- Some camps so crowded density is 4x greater than NYC (Rohingya in Bangladesh)
  - Outbreak could exacerbate any tension with local residents
  - Health worker resources stretched
- Food, sanitation, medical care are all issues difficult to address
  - Important to bring attention to these challenges as they are easy to neglect with “closed” governments, etc.



# Will mobility forever be changed?

- Likely not- when jobs return, migration will follow
  - Some jobs (food away from home, modern food systems) likely to return more slowly than others
- It is more likely to change food demand patterns for a long time to come, and hopefully the global response will not reduce gains in nutrition attained this century



**Thank you!**

Happy to discuss further at [a.debrauw@cgiar.org](mailto:a.debrauw@cgiar.org) or [@adebrauw](https://twitter.com/adebrauw) on  
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