European Parliament

How the coronavirus pandemic shook up our relationship with food

First there was panic-buying. There were concerns over safety: could one be infected by food? Realisation of the efforts of supermarket staff, truck drivers and warehouse staff to keep food coming to customers. Spring amidst closed borders awakened us to how much we depend on foreign farm workers to pick fruit and vegetables. There were campaigns for furloughed employees to go and work on farms. Then came news about the conditions endured by some foreign workers in the food-processing industry. The rollercoaster of the coronavirus crisis has changed our relationship with food, but whether just temporarily or for good, remains to be seen.

Panic-buying and border closures

In March 2020, the world as we know it came to a halt. Lockdowns to slow down the spread of the new coronavirus drove many people to panic buying and stockpiling. The reintroduction of border controls resulted in blocked transport routes and long queues at border posts. Sights of empty supermarket shelves created even more anxiety – even if the reason was just that the personnel could not keep up with the pace of people emptying their shops. Panic buyers caused unprecedented strain on supermarket firms around the world. At times, shops had to limit the amount of a certain product any one shopper could buy at one time. Some supermarkets dedicated early shopping hours to senior citizens and healthcare workers, to give them a better chance to access food. Online delivery services were unable to cope with demand.

With restaurants and catering services closed and people teleworking, home cooking became a necessity – with the exception of an occasional take-away or home delivery. Shelves emptied of flour as people took to – or at least planned to take up – home baking. Sales of long-life products and frozen foods shot up. Some differences between EU countries became evident: while Italians went for packaged mandarins, dried legumes and rabbit meat, the French chose poultry sausage, pasta and rice, whereas people in the United Kingdom most increased their purchases of canned meats, vitamins and soup. As restaurants closed, markets shrunk for some commodities, such as seafood and fries, both often consumed in restaurants. Demand shifted away from higher value items towards staple and ready-to-eat foods that can be stored.

As the schools shut, children were left without school meals. Furloughed employees, people made redundant, the self-employed and people working with zero-hour contracts suddenly found themselves in food insecurity, and food banks struggled with increasing numbers of customers.

On the other hand, there was solidarity and creativity: when the bars and restaurants closed, some of their kitchens started cooking for healthcare workers or for homeless people; donating to food banks; coffees and meals were given free to healthcare workers. People started looking after their neighbours, volunteering to shop for the elderly and vulnerable living nearby. There were campaigns to recruit people made unemployed by the crisis to work on local farms to help bring food to peoples' tables. Schemes opened where consumers could support local restaurants or breweries during the lockdown by buying meals or drinks in advance, with the promise of free food and beer when the doors reopened.

Food safety concerns dismissed

Safety concerns concerning transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes coronavirus disease (Covid-19) by food were quickly determined to be minimal. Although the virus can remain on packaging for some hours or even days, depending on the type of material and environmental conditions, a virus needs a living host (human or animal) to multiply. The risk of infection from food products or packages is thought to be very low compared to person-to-person transmission, as the number of virus particles coming out of a person's mouth or nose is far greater than a few virus particles remaining on foods or packaging. Even if an infected person coughs or sneezes on the surface of food or its packaging, outside a body viruses gradually become weaker and lose the ability to actively infect. Currently, there is no evidence

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that the virus that causes Covid-19 spreads to people through food. In any case, as always, it is recommended to wash or disinfect hands after shopping, handling of food packages, and before preparing or eating food.

The uncertainties surrounding the new virus did, however, cause some trade disruption, and still in June, for example, China halted imports of European salmon for a short while after reports that the virus was discovered on equipment used for handling fish at a Beijing market.

Awareness of working conditions of some workers in the food chain

Measures put in place to slow the spread of Covid-19 also disrupted the functioning of food supply chains. Grounding of airlines caused problems for the export of higher value perishable food products, including seafood, fruit and vegetables. Close working conditions in packing and processing facilities put the workforce at risk of contracting Covid-19. Social distancing requirements also reduced the numbers of import and export inspectors at borders. Platform workers, such as people working through food delivery apps, kept working through the crisis, delivering food and goods to the homes of those in quarantine or self-isolation. The crisis highlighted how these kinds of atypical workers lack basic social protection such as paid sick leave.

Other uneasy aspects of our current food system also became apparent, such as our dependence on seasonal farm workers to come from abroad to harvest much of our berries, fruit and vegetables. An estimated 800 000 to 1 million seasonal workers are hired in the EU each year, mainly in the agri-food sector. Not only that, there are countless undocumented migrants working 14 or 15-hour days on farms for as little as three or four euros an hour. Without contracts, they have no access to health care. In their camps, they rarely have reliable supplies of drinking water and live packed together.

In many countries, meat processing plants saw a high number of their employees becoming infected with coronavirus. This highlighted the working conditions in these establishments, with people working shoulder to shoulder without social distancing, and the cool and humid conditions favourable for the persistence of the virus. In addition, such work is often done by a low-paid migrant workforce brought in by subcontractors, and under pressure to continue working even when displaying symptoms.

What have we already learnt?

If anything, the very start of the crisis showed that people can still change overnight into unpredictable, panicked individuals. The daily availability of food in the supermarket was no longer the certainty it used to be. The pandemic provides an opportunity to learn more about vulnerabilities in the food system, in order to identify necessary investments and reforms that would further strengthen its resilience. In its new Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Commission announced in May 2020 that it will propose a 'food contingency plan' in 2021, with the aim of ensuring food supply and food security in the EU. At an informal meeting of EU agriculture ministers in Koblenz in September 2020, the ministers discussed lessons from the coronavirus pandemic to sustainably strengthen European supply chains, and to make the food and agricultural sectors even more resilient to crises. For example, the EU is highly dependent on imports from third countries of protein feed and certain active substances for veterinary medicinal products. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre has launched a survey to monitor the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the EU's agricultural-food supply chain.

In light of the ongoing pandemic and in anticipation of future ones, researchers are stressing the importance of thinking about what is needed to ensure resilient food systems. Reliance on long and complex supply chains and 'just-in-time' delivery needs rethinking. Increasing resilience could, for example, require enriching the current food system with shorter supply chains creating a richer ecosystem of foods. Local provision of 'critical' products might include not only medical supplies and healthcare equipment, but also basic food – which could have important implications for the costs of food. Instead of seeing shocks as an abnormal thing, we are now moving to thinking that shocks will be a regular occurrence and we need food systems that will be able to deal with those shocks when they arrive. The European Commission has also announced in its 'Farm to Fork' strategy that it will make a proposal for a 'legislative framework for sustainable food systems' in 2023.