

# Covid-19 and the future of food systems

Blog post by Senior Associate Mollie Brennan, 4 February 2021

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Policy addressing health, climate, and poverty has often occurred in silos. Covid-19 has emphasised the interconnected nature of each of these areas, and particularly in how they relate to food systems. Global Counsel Chairman, Peter Mandelson recently discussed these issues with Special Envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organization, David Nabarro, where they looked at how joining the dots across the food supply chain can have a positive impact on health, climate and poverty reduction.

Policy is most likely to change in three areas: protection of forests and habitats, food safety risks and antibiotic use in livestock farming, and greater safeguards for shift workers/day labourers. The way that these policy changes are implemented will have varying impacts for corporates and investors.

When natural ecosystems like forests remain intact, interactions between human populations and wild host species are more limited, and viruses can circulate without crossing over into humans, or domesticated animals and livestock. The frequency of zoonotic disease outbreaks has more than tripled in the last decade, driven by more frequent contact between wildlife and humans due to increasing encroachment into ecosystems. Protection of forests and habitat was already high on the policy agenda for climate and biodiversity reasons but will now receive even greater priority as a means of reducing the spread of disease. Key multilateral events this year - COP26, UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and UN Food Systems Summit - will increase pressure on governments to enact stricter protections for existing forests and habitat, and initiate programs that foster 'rewilding' or habitat restoration and direct funding to rural areas. For corporates and investors, stricter due diligence requirements on deforestation in supply chains can be expected in the UK and EU later this year.

A new focus on pandemic preparedness has raised the profile of drug-resistant infection and food safety threats. Resistance to antibiotics (driven, among others, through overuse, incorrect use and lack of new antibiotics) is quickly being recognised as global health security challenge. Intensified farming practices have facilitated the rapid spread of disease among animals due to their close proximity, increasing the threat of food safety issues and reliance on antibiotics. Renewed attention has in part been driven by covid-19, which has demonstrated how a disease outbreak can disrupt health systems and livelihoods, with a particularly devastating impact on the most vulnerable. Covid-19 has increased public and media sentiment on zoonosis, with the ability for corporates and investors to respond and manage new threats critical for their survival. Past food safety threats including Avian influenza (bird flu) and BSE, have demonstrated the critical reputational and supply issues food safety issues presents. Policy in this area will increasingly look to minimise the usage of critical antibiotics in livestock farming, provide incentives for more extensive livestock systems, and enhance tracking and reporting of disease outbreaks.

Covid-19 has highlighted the lack of safeguards for the most vulnerable. Lower-income communities are more likely to work in temporary or shift work without safeguards to both protect against loss of income, or to protect against the spread of disease. One of the areas where this has been most prevalent has been in the food sector. Outbreaks of covid-19 have been widespread in food processing plants and slaughterhouses, increasing pressure to introduce stricter health and safety measures and better labour rights. Calls for greater transparency on worker rights and safety are increasing from both policymakers and investors. Earlier this month, Dutch pension provider, APG, and the New York Comptroller's office [called on Amazon](#) to release details of their efforts to protect workers' health and safety in the pandemic. The UK's recent decision to enact penalising measures for those for failing to meet transparency requirements on human rights demonstrates a growing willingness for a more hard-nosed approach on these issues.

The crisis has revealed new vulnerabilities for people, supply chains and countries. Governments are in the process of attempting to address these vulnerabilities through policy and regulation. Corporates and investors should be prepared to engage in stricter due diligence and be aware of shifting requirements related in particular to deforestation/habitat protection, the use of antibiotics, and safeguards for workers.

*You can watch the full event with David Nabarro [here](#).*