

Towards a Just Recovery from the Covid-19 Crisis:

The urgent struggle for food sovereignty in North Africa

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‘Bread and olives make a house solid’

Egyptian proverb

‘Bread and water eliminate a heart’s sorrow’

Moroccan proverb

‘To be your own master, you must eat what your pickaxe produces’

Statement by a Tunisian farmer to the
Working Group for Food Sovereignty (Tunisia)



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Preface

The health and economic crisis, exacerbated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, has not spared North Africa. Economic lockdowns and emergency public health measures were implemented across the region in 2020 and 2021. The direct consequences of these were especially dire for small-scale food producers, agricultural labourers, fisher folk and small-scale pastoralists. Market closures prevented people from selling products and buying necessary production inputs, driving down their incomes. At the same time, major agribusiness corporations benefited from state measures including injections of public funds in the form of tax breaks, fiscal incentives, technical support, and direct financial aid.

Interrupted or decreased income for food producers impacted the food system of millions of labourers in North Africa, as it did other parts of the world, and forced households to adjust by reducing the quantity or quality of their food intake. It thus exacerbated malnutrition and hunger, already on the rise even before the pandemic.¹ More vulnerable groups, like women, refugees, and students are among the most affected by the social repercussions of the financial crisis exacerbated by the pandemic.

While preparing this study, the authors faced a real obstacle in the scarcity of literature relating to small-scale food producers, in contrast to the abundance of reports documenting the effects of the pandemic on the global economy, global trade, market conditions, and oil prices. Institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) speak on behalf of transnational companies and international capital, and disregard small-scale producers.

It is up to the organisations of small-scale food producers and labourers and their allies to highlight the situation and struggles of these producers and labourers, as the North African Food Sovereignty Network (NAFSN) has striven to do since its foundation. This study is therefore the fruit of an effort that grew with the network, and which

builds upon studies of regional agro-food systems, some of which have been conducted by the network's allies or affiliated organisations:

- 'Our Food, Our Agriculture, Our Sovereignty: Analysing Tunisian policies in light of food sovereignty', Working Group for Food Sovereignty, 2019.²
- 'For food sovereignty in Morocco: A field study on agricultural policy and resource plunder', ATTAC Morocco – member of the Committee of the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM), 2019.³
- 'Land and Food Sovereignty in Algeria: The Algerian peasantry between colonial dispossession and the upheavals of Infitah', Hamza Hamouchene, 2019.⁴
- 'Land, Farmers, and Investors: A study of agrarian questions in Egypt', Saker Abdel Sad Hilal El Nour, Al-Maraya for Cultural Production, 1st ed., 2017.⁵

With this study, we hope to facilitate a discussion among food sovereignty advocates. At the forefront are organisations and committees of small-scale farmers, agricultural labourers, fisher folk, indigenous communities, and consumer federations, who produce nourishing food for their communities and work to combat policies that serve big food corporations. We equally hope that this contribution starts a conversation among academics, university students, and intellectuals, in order to foster further interest in the question of food sovereignty and ways of breaking with food import dependency in our region.

**North African Food Sovereignty Network (NAFSN) on
10 February 2021**

Introduction

The end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 saw the emergence of a new type of virus called coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Its high transmission rate and rapid spread around the world has led the World Health Organisation (WHO) to classify the COVID-19 disease it causes as a “global pandemic.

Covid-19 reached several countries in North Africa in mid-March 2020. On 23 March, a statement published by the Regional Secretariat of the North African Network for Food Sovereignty (NAFSN) raised the alarm about the pandemic, its economic repercussions, and how it would endanger public health and affect social conditions:

Millions of small farmers, agricultural workers, fisher folk and other small-scale food producers (the majority of which are women) who bear the burden of providing daily food to everyone else are forced to work during this pandemic. In order to ensure that food production continues, millions of them will be at risk of contracting the virus. It goes without saying that closing borders with Europe and reduced market access will have major social consequences (redundancies, unemployment, bankruptcy, indebtedness, etc.). It is evident that the risk

of infection threatens poor agricultural workers and peasants, especially without taking the right measures to protect them and other workers who are driven to toil in intolerable conditions. Moreover, the majority of these working poor do not have the purchasing power to ward off the risk of the virus by purchasing the necessary medicines and food that they need.⁶

As NAFSN highlighted the implications of the viral outbreak for the region, it also considered the crisis to be an opportunity to create an alternative to the current unjust and precarious systems we are living under.

This study, which builds on analysis carried out by NAFSN and others, examines the intersections between Covid-19 and food systems across the North African region. It looks at how the dominant ‘food security’ paradigm increased vulnerability to the economic dislocation wrought by the pandemic. It examines the impacts of Covid-19, particularly on (rural) working people and small-scale food producers and how governments across the region responded to these challenges. Finally, it offers a pathway out of this moment of crisis rooted in models of food sovereignty and economic justice.

1. Roots of crisis and resistance

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequality and insecurity in North African food systems, but it did not create the current crisis. To trace the origins of the present moment, one must examine the legacy of colonialism and imperialism; the impact of neoliberal agricultural, economic, and trade policy; and the ongoing promotion of a failed food security paradigm centred on continuing forms of unequal competition, extraction, and environmental destruction.

Lineages of revolt

Moments of generalised crisis and popular resistance in North Africa have often found expression in, and been channelled through, food systems. Decisions to lift subsidies and hike prices of essential food items (especially bread) have resulted in social uprisings, nearly always intensively suppressed. Some of the most prominent instances of revolt include:

- **Egypt:** The ‘Bread Uprising’ of January 18th, 1977, labelled by then President Anwar Sadat as the ‘Uprising of Thieves’.
- **Tunisia:** Uprising in late December 1983, early January 1984.
- **Algeria:** Uprising in both Constantine and Sétif in 1986, followed by the uprising of October 5th, 1988, two years later.
- **Morocco:** Uprising of June 20th, 1981, with protesters labelled by the then Minister of the Interior as the “Kumeira Martyrs” (“bread martyrs”).

It was followed by the January 19th, 1984 uprising, concentrated in particular in the cities of the north. King Hassan II described the protesters as “scum” or “savages” [“Awbaash” in Arabic]. Another uprising took place on December 10th, 1990 with Fes taking centre stage.

BREAD UPRISINGS IN NORTH AFRICA

1981
1984
1990

Uprising in 1981 with protesters labelled as “bread martyrs”. It was followed by the 1984 uprising in the cities of the North and another uprising in 1990 in Fes.

1986
1988 Uprisings in both Constantine and Sétif in 1986, followed by the uprising of October 5th, 1988.

1983-1984 Uprising in late December 1983, early January 1984.

Morocco

Algeria

Tunisia

1977

Egypt

The ‘Bread Uprising’ of January 18th 1977, labelled by then President Anwar Sadat as the ‘Uprising of Thieves’.

Libya

Such uprisings broke out at a time when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had been intervening through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in developing countries to ‘repair the economic situation’ following the debt crisis that imploded in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This led to a series of sweeping neoliberal economic reforms including in the agricultural sector. This was mainly geared towards promoting export-oriented

agriculture to draw in hard currency in order to help states meet their international debt obligations. In parallel, a suite of other measures was introduced, including the privatisation of public land (cooperatives in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, SODEA and SOGETA lands in Morocco)⁷ and the privatisation of agricultural extension and veterinary services, including the removal of support for agricultural inputs such as seeds and irrigation services.

These policies endured throughout the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. As North African countries (with the exception, so far, of Algeria) joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO), liberalisation policies deepened. In terms of agro-food systems, the general direction across the region was towards the expansion of large-scale, commercial agriculture practices, the attraction of foreign investment and big agribusiness, export-orientation, and a reliance on imports to meet domestic food needs and production inputs.⁸

This has come at the expense of broad-based rural development and traditional farming practices as cash crop agriculture, extractive industries, light manufacturing and tourism are deemed more important to the development of global agrarian and industrial capitalism. The result has been a profound impoverishment of rural populations and their collective migration to urban areas.

It has also produced a fundamental change in the nature of rural work and life itself in North Africa, as described in Adam Hanieh's book, *Lineages of Revolt*:

The share of the population engaged in agricultural labor has declined significantly alongside these internal migration flows. This is not just a function of urban

growth—from 1985 to 2010 the proportion of people working in agriculture dropped at a much faster rate than the overall rural population. This trend points to a marked shift in the nature of rural life. Fewer people in rural areas are able to survive through agriculture and instead seek alternative forms of work (in some cases, by commuting daily to nearby factories or towns).⁹

Traditional farming deteriorated as did local food production. Food dependency further intensified with communities increasingly reliant on the importation both of food and of critical agricultural inputs. In the meantime, the takeover of land, water, and seeds by domestic and foreign capital continued.¹⁰

The 2007-08 global food crisis

The weakening over time of the domestic agricultural base of countries across the region, which came to a head in the 2007-08 global food crisis, has not been passively accepted by rural or urban communities in North Africa. Price hikes in essential food items are commonly considered one of the main catalysts for the wave of uprisings that broke out in Tunisia in late December 2010 and early January 2011, later spreading across the North African



Traditional oasis agriculture on three levels, first is the date palm then smaller fruit trees and finally vegetable crops or animal fodder. Picture taken in south-east Morocco. Photo Credit: Ali Aznague.

and the Arab region. It is no coincidence that the 2010-11 Tunisian uprising was sparked off in impoverished agricultural areas (Sidi Bouzid), where speculative capital and agribusiness proliferated. Neither was it a minor detail that the event that sparked the Arab uprisings was the self-immolation of the street fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi.¹¹ Likewise, bread was at the forefront of the demands of the Egyptian revolution, captured by the slogan 'Bread, Freedom, Social Justice'.

Jane Harrigan, author of *The Political Economy of Arab Food Sovereignty*, interprets the series of Arab uprisings as follows: 'Although the Arab Spring was, first and foremost, a political movement that aimed at overthrowing undemocratic repressive regimes, it also boasted significant social and economic foundations formed around the inflation of food prices as well as increased unemployment and inequality.'¹²

However, the 2007-8 global food crisis and associated rebellions did not lead to a change of direction by states. The Arab food security programme, launched in 2009 during the Arab Economic, Social, and Development Summit, identified the instability of global food commodity markets and resource competition as two of the primary drivers of the crisis. Despite this fact, its recommendations

continued along the same path – namely to pursue stronger trade relationships to boost food exports and secure imports and to increase the performance of agricultural sectors by encouraging land appropriation and greater capital investment.¹³ In other words, market failures and neoliberal reforms are to be addressed through further market-driven interventions and neoliberal policy prescriptions.

However, this ignores the fact that many food systems that feed people exist despite of, not because of, global capitalism. This is reflective more broadly of the way in which food security is often framed in dominant discourses. Food systems are evaluated in these spaces according to whether they can deliver access to sufficient food of adequate nutritional value, regardless of whether this is done by an agribusiness company or a small-scale farmer, or whether food is imported or produced locally. Broader issues around how food systems are embedded within the global political economy, and local communities, are left unexamined. This stands in contrast to notions such as food sovereignty where questions around rights and agency are foregrounded. These contrasting pathways for food system transformation as a way out of the current impasse are addressed further in section 4 of this study.



A woman making bread in a traditional clay oven in Egypt. Photo credit: Saker El Nour

A state of increasing food dependency

The result of the course that North African states have charted over the past decades is that the region is currently marked by a high degree of food dependency. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), more than 50 percent of calories consumed daily in the Arab region are from imported food, with the region spending around \$110 billion annually on food imports, about 4 percent of its GDP.¹⁴ Similarly, a 2018 report published by the Arab Organisation for Agricultural Development notes that 'The Arab food budget suffers an evident deficit due to the

Arab region's reliance on external supplies, as food imports constituted a percentage that ranged between 81 and 87 percent of all agricultural imports of 2016-2018', reflecting the fact that these imports are primarily goods for food consumption. Moreover, the ratio of the value of food exports to food imports didn't exceed 28 percent in the same period.¹⁵ According to the same report, nine Arab countries - including Mauritania, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco - all produced less than 22.1 percent of the grain their populations consumed.

Moreover, while the world's average agricultural GDP per capita increased, it notably declined in the Arab region.

Agricultural GDP per capita (dollar per capita) during 2015–2018:¹⁶

Year	Average in the Arab region	World average
2015	372.26	402.18
2016	336.34	403.43
2017	286.65	424.57
2018	268.20	449.59

Wheat is the main cereal consumed in the region, but 65 percent of wheat consumption is imported. According to another report published by the United States Department of Agriculture in May 2019, nine Arab countries were expected to import around 40.2 million tonnes of wheat throughout 2019-2020, which represents 21.9 percent of global wheat imports.¹⁷ Egypt and Algeria are ranked among the five biggest importers of wheat in the world.

The situation in a number of oil exporting countries in the region is even more precarious as the capacity to import key food items is tied closely to the revenue generated through the export of fuels. As Hamza Hamouchene explains in the case of Algeria:

Algeria's "food security" paradigm relies on a hydrocarbon export-based model which shows a high dependence on international markets to sell oil and gas on one hand and, on the other hand, importing what is lacking

in food, especially staple products such as cereals and milk. In other words, Algeria's ability to cover the costs of its food imports...is dictated by external factors (oil and food price fluctuations). Basically the oil and gas rent finances Algeria's food dependence, creating a situation of double-dependence.¹⁸

In sum, food dependency is an outcome of market-based food security policies dictated by global financial institutions (the IMF, World Bank, and WTO), reinforced by UN organisations (FAO, UNDP, ESCWA), and translated into guiding policy frameworks by regional organisations (Arab Organisation for Agricultural Development/the Arab League). National regimes, in their turn, followed these prescriptions to a tee.

Then a global pandemic in the form of Covid-19 entered the equation.

FOOD IMPORT DEPENDENCY IN THE ARAB REGION

ARAB COUNTRIES ARE NET FOOD IMPORTERS

More than **50 %** of calories consumed daily in the Arab region are from imported food.

The Arab region spends around **\$110 billion** annually on food imports.

The ratio of the value of food exports to food imports didn't exceed **28%** between 2016 and 2018.

ARAB COUNTRIES ARE THE WORLD'S LARGEST IMPORTERS OF WHEAT

65 % of wheat consumption is imported.

Nine Arab countries (including in North Africa) produced only around **a fifth (1/5)** of the grain their populations consumed.

They imported around **21.9%** of global wheat imports



2. Impacts of Covid-19 on working people and food systems in North Africa

Covid-19 has been an unprecedented global health crisis. From the beginning, the pandemic has taken on a dual character resulting from the loss of life and other health impacts on the one hand, and the economic fall-out of lockdowns and other restrictions on business and daily life on the other. In the North African region, where oil plays such a central role in the economies of several states, the economic hardship has been even more keenly felt due to the global collapse in oil prices. The impacts on household incomes, food supply chains, health services and schools have been vast.

While no one has been left untouched by Covid-19, the impacts of the dual crisis – health and economic – have not been felt evenly. Its effects across the North African

region, and even within a given country, are diverse. This section unpacks some of these complex impacts, the way they have manifested within food systems, and what this means for working people.

Economic dislocation and disruption of supply chains

It is hard to overstate the impact of the pandemic on the economic prosperity of the region. Coupled with the downward swing in oil prices this has resulted in considerable economic hardship. As an October 2020 World Bank report on Middle East and North Africa (MENA) economies states:

*The combination of a Covid-19 pandemic and a collapse in oil prices has affected all aspects of the economies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The region's economies are projected to contract by 5.2 percent in 2020, which is 4.1 percentage points below the forecast in April 2020, and 7.8 percentage points worse than that of October 2019, reflecting an increasingly pessimistic outlook for the regional economy. The region is expected to recover only partially in 2021.*¹⁹

In oil producing countries of the MENA region, where oil is a key source of foreign exchange earnings and thus central to the ability to pay for food imports, the collapse in oil prices has left countries struggling to cover the costs of food imports. The economies of a number of countries were hard hit as oil prices dropped below 30 dollars a barrel in the first months of the pandemic, a historic low. Algeria for example, where fuels accounted for 83.5 percent of exports in the first quarter of 2020, faced a potentially significant food supply crisis as the collapse in oil revenues hampered its import capacity, increasing an already large food deficit. In late 2019, Algeria saw a crash in its foreign exchange reserves to 60 billion dollars, which would barely suffice to fund two years of essential

imports.²⁰ The decline in export revenues has put an additional squeeze on Algerian purchasing power resulting in a decline of imported food items from 57.1 billion dollars to 44.1 billion dollars - a 30.8 percent drop between the first quarters of 2019 and 2020.²¹

The implications of this collapse in oil prices for the region's food security are significant. A report published by United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) stated that 'Low energy prices will affect incomes and the economies of oil-export-dependent countries in the region (Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Algeria and Libya mostly)...This may have a ripple effect on the economies and on food security in the region through their impact on employment, remittances, investment flows and aid.'²²

The collapse in oil prices translates into lower energy costs and, therefore, in principle, also reduced production costs for farmers reliant on mechanization, irrigation, transportation, and energy-intensive inputs such as fertilizers and electricity. This has however mostly benefitted larger, export oriented producers rather than small farmers.

While the FAO also notes that lower energy prices will result in lower production costs for (some) farmers and will



A Moroccan farmer sowing seeds on his parcel of land. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

exert downward pressure on the prices of sugar cane and maize - a potentially beneficial effect considering that the region is a net importer of maize²³ - this will not make up for the other harmful effects of the economic dislocation wrought by the pandemic. For example, countries that rely on agricultural exports to drive economic growth are impacted by disruptions in global trade and international food supply chains. As a 2020 FAO report notes:

Fluctuating demand from trading partners and disruptions to logistics may hurt countries that export high-value perishable products. Some countries in the region may face specific risks related to their agro-food import-export profiles...food exports make up more than 20 percent of total merchandise exports for six countries [among which is Tunisia at 76 percent, Morocco at 58 percent, Egypt at 25 percent, and lowest ranking Algeria at 7 percent]... they export varying amounts, in some cases substantial, of high-value products such as fruits, vegetables, fish and meat. In most cases exports come from just a few agricultural commodities, as in Morocco, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia... Dependency

*on such highly perishable exports exacerbates exposure to disruptions in supply chains due to logistical problems.*²⁴

Trade disruptions also affect the supply of key agricultural inputs. In Tunisia, for example, the Union of Tunisian Farmers (SYNAGRI) sounded the alarm about the loss of necessary production inputs, such as ammonitrate (a synthetic fertiliser), and criticised the lack of governmental subsidies.²⁵ The same applies to seeds, with the president of the union stating that:

*Many farming sectors were already vastly vulnerable to foreign dependency; most seeds are imported from abroad and are genetically modified, which is no secret - and which exposes us to the risks of losing those seeds in times of crisis, that is, after we had lost our own original seeds and are now incapable of supplying seeds due to the disruption of trade routes.*²⁶

In Libya, the pandemic-induced lockdown resulted in 'understaffing due to illness, a standstill in freight traffic, while quarantine measures limited the ability to reach markets and provoked interruptions in supply chains, resulting in food loss and waste.'²⁷



Food producers in Tunisia struggling to sell their products due to low demand during pandemic. Photo Credit: Layla Riahi

In sum, the pandemic has disrupted supply chains which has had profound repercussions, especially in countries that are marked by semi to total technological and commodity dependency. This has made market-based food security strategies, defined by a high degree of dependency on international food imports, a liability rather than a strength.

Collapse of working people's incomes and livelihoods

The pandemic and accompanying recession has had a profound effect on the incomes and livelihoods of working people. According to the World Bank (October 2020), unemployment in the MENA region hit a record high during the crisis and caused widespread impoverishment:

The pandemic has profoundly affected livelihoods and is causing many citizens in the region to fall deeper into poverty...poorer people are more likely to have lost their incomes. The financial situation of poor households is deteriorating rapidly.²⁸

The situation in a number of countries illustrates this point vividly. In Tunisia, for example, 41 percent of people were unable to continue work due to the pandemic. In Morocco, up to 44 percent of impoverished households lost their income during the lockdown.²⁹ These numbers were collected through telephone surveys, so the true numbers may be higher still. In Egypt, the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (June 2020) conducted a study on the impact of the pandemic on households and reported that 'most respondents, that is 73.5 percent, reported a drop in income following the emergence of the virus...and

IMPACTS OF COVID19 ON WORKING PEOPLE'S INCOME IN NORTH AFRICA.

Egypt

73.5 % of households reported a drop in income following the emergence of the virus

55.7 % worked fewer days or fewer hours than usual

26.2 % were laid off



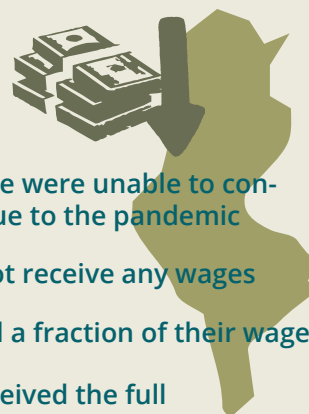
Tunisia

41 % of people were unable to continue working due to the pandemic

59 % could not receive any wages

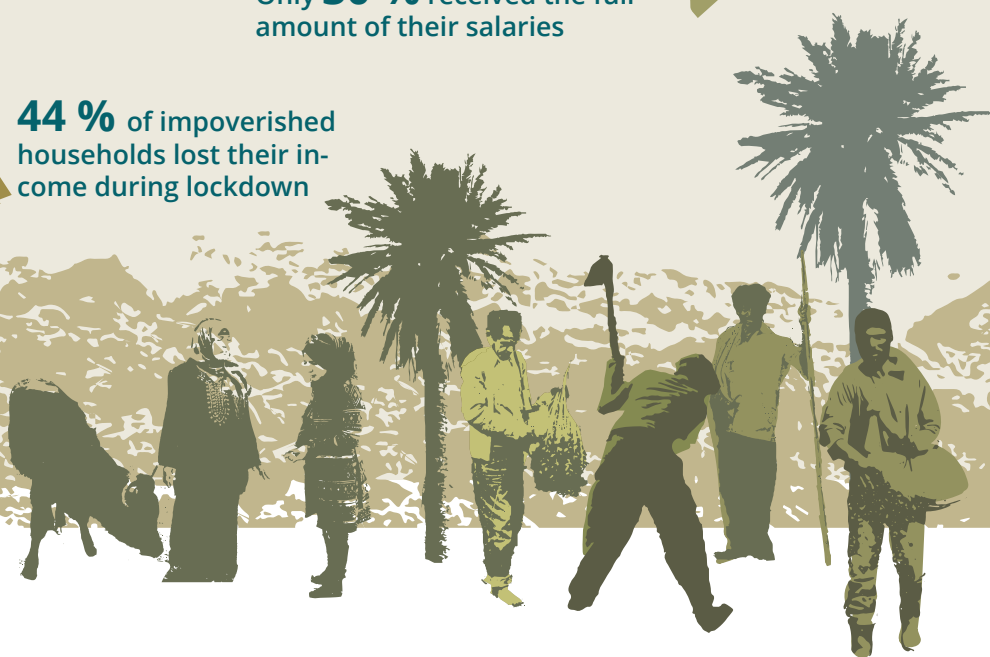
10 % received a fraction of their wages

Only **30 %** received the full amount of their salaries



Morocco

44 % of impoverished households lost their income during lockdown



more than half of respondents (55.7 percent) now work fewer days or fewer hours than usual, while a fourth (26.2 percent) are laid off and are no longer working.³⁰

Where falling prices occurred due to reduced purchasing power of workers and loss of demand from tourism, this harmed food producers, especially small-scale producers, even as it provided a slight benefit to consumers. Driss Radi, president of the Chamber of Agriculture of Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, Morocco, pointed out that ‘the slowdown in the prices of agro-products in markets, especially red and white meat, vegetables, and fruits, have caused producers losses, barely covering their costs. Likewise, dairy product losses have reached 50 percent of the sector share in the market.’³¹

The vast informal sector, which employs a substantial proportion of the workforce throughout the region, must also be mentioned. The social implications of quarantines and near total lockdown, which imposed a partial or complete halt on activity in this sector, are substantial. Informal sector workers are particularly vulnerable to income loss and subsequent loss of access to food.

Even if food prices were not rising during this period, these job losses would render food inaccessible for large numbers of people. The lockdown led to hundreds of

thousands of layoffs, diminishing households’ purchasing power and disrupting their ability to access food. Temporary cash transfers from the government to laid-off workers (in all affected sectors, including the informal sector) were inadequate to deal with the severity of the crisis (see section 3).

Small-scale farmers hit by market closures

Small-scale food producers have been amongst the hardest hit by the crisis, suffering due to the closure of food markets, declining sales of food and agricultural products, and difficulty accessing key production inputs.

A FAO report highlights how the pandemic-related closure of local food markets has particularly affected small food producers:

Unlike large-scale producers, the closure of informal or traditional rural markets in some countries in the region as a preventative measure to limit the spread of COVID-19 is likely to lead to a loss of income and market access [for] many smallholder farmers who used to sell their products there. Some of these farmers lack access to formal market channels.³²



A Tunisian farmer having difficulties marketing his produce while markets were closed due to the pandemic. Photo Credit: Layla Riahi

In Tunisia, the imposition of emergency health measures led to fears amongst farmers about their ability to market their products in light of the closure of markets and falling demand. This has been particularly the case for date producers who do not traditionally bring their products to market themselves but rather sell them to large-scale merchants, who, in turn, market them to foreign countries, which, so far, has failed to happen.³³ Tozeur farmers organised a rally in front of their governorate's headquarters in response to a call for action from the Regional Union of Agriculture and Fishing (URAP) in Tozeur. The head of this union,, Aref Naji, stated:

The country failed to listen to the voice of Tozeur farmers, whose only [or] main revenues are generated from date sales. The sales slump of dates left to rot on palm trees is a systematic process...Exports never stopped despite the general situation following the coronavirus pandemic, as exporters pressure small-scale farmers to sell their dates at low prices that do not cover the production costs, exploiting their vulnerability, while efforts are being made to maintain social stability. The union, however, will not consent to a compromise in prices and inflicting harm on farmers.³⁴

In Morocco, small-scale farmers who relied on the Meknes Annual International Agricultural Fair to market their products (including oils, honey, couscous, dried fruits, and cactus-based cosmetic products) were harmed by its pandemic-related cancellation. As the fair typically accounts for around 70 percent of the annual transactions of the country's agricultural cooperatives and associations, its annulment has resulted in catastrophic losses.³⁵ The benefits from participating in the international fair do not accrue only during the fair itself through direct sales; many visitors make connections with potential buyers at the fair that translate into future orders.³⁶

More widespread closures of food markets throughout the country impacted small-scale farmers who were accustomed to show up for weekly markets in rural areas in order to showcase their local products. Mohamed Ait L'Hssan, a farmer from Toubkal (in the Atlas Mountains) affirms that the banning of weekly markets deprived small-scale farmers of an important part of their income, as they would visit those markets in order to sell their vegetables, fruits, and other products.³⁷

In Mauritania, due to the lockdown measures, herders have found themselves unable to access fodder, or trade



A Moroccan farmer filling a box with onions. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

and exchange animals for food and essential items with neighbouring countries.³⁸ Their mobility has also been affected as Coumba Sow, FAO Resilience Coordinator for West Africa, affirms:

Many Mauritanian herders head to Mali and Senegal in search of pasture, [...]The closure of borders, movement restrictions due to the pandemic will prevent nomadic herders from moving with their animals in search of fodder and water, with potentially drastic consequences on their livelihoods. [...]This can lead to herders losing their income as they can't sell their animals or buy what they need for them as well as potentially losing animals as some of them might not survive or might fall ill.[...]When animals suffer, people suffer. When animals die or stop being a source of milk or meat, people go hungry. When animals are lost, so are people's livelihoods.³⁹

In Egypt, a report published by the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies (ECES) noted the decline in farmers' incomes and highlighted also the plight of agricultural labourers and a deterioration in their living standards.⁴⁰

All in all, small-scale food producers and workers thus experienced direct and devastating impacts as a result of the economic restrictions introduced to deal with the public health crisis.

The double burden placed on women

Women are uniquely exposed to the impacts of the pandemic due to the role they play in both productive and reproductive work and their relative position of marginality in society. As one study by the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council in Morocco noted in October 2020:

CLOSURE OF WEEKLY MARKETS IN NORTH AFRICA

Morocco

Small-scale farmers who relied on the Meknes Annual International Agricultural Fair to market their products (including oils, honey, couscous, dried fruits, and cactus-based cosmetic products) were harmed by its pandemic-related cancellation.

Egypt

A report published by the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies (ECES) noted the decline in farmers' incomes and highlighted also the plight of agricultural labourers and a deterioration in their living standards.

Tunisia

The imposition of emergency health measures led to fears amongst farmers about their ability to market their products in light of the closure of markets and falling demand.

Mauritania

Due to the lockdown measures, herders have found themselves unable to access fodder, or trade and exchange animals for food and essential items with neighbouring countries.



A woman agricultural worker from Morocco, picking apples and arranging them in boxes. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

It was found that the Covid-19 pandemic had much more severely affected women's livelihoods, due to the additional burden of patriarchal divisions of social roles, resulting in an unequal division of unpaid domestic work. This also stemmed from the nature of sectors generally occupied by women (at a very low market value and unvalued social utility). Women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men's jobs and while women represent 39 percent of global employment, they account for 54 percent of all job losses.⁴¹

Within the productive economy, women, and especially rural women, play a key role in obtaining food for their households. This exposed them also to the risk of infection during their farming, labouring and other economic activities. In Lalla Mimouna in the Kénitra region of Morocco for example, which emerged in mid-June 2020 as one of the pandemic hotspots, hundreds of women agricultural strawberry workers became infected with Covid-19 while working on farms owned by a Spanish investor producing red fruit for export.⁴²

Their plight is not exceptional. In Tunisia, where women comprise up to 70 percent of the agricultural workforce, they have been disproportionately impacted by pandemic related measures. In a context where they are already paid starkly low wages and carry out exhausting physical work, and where women face clear gender disparities in terms of unequal access to income, economic opportunities, social protection and quality health care, women agricultural workers have, in many ways, borne the brunt of the crisis.⁴³

As Alessandra Bajec explains, 'With lower job security than men, deprived of basic social or legal protection, at high risk of exploitation, and struggling with restrictive societal, religious, and cultural barriers, women agricultural workers are more vulnerable to worsening working conditions during the COVID-19 crisis.'⁴⁴

In Egypt, while all farmers have suffered under the restrictions (which include, *inter alia*, a curfew, limitations on travel between regions and closure of weekly markets), female agricultural wage labourers were again particularly affected. Furthermore, despite the loss of these income earning

activities, women have continued to carry out unpaid labour on family land, further increasing their burden.⁴⁵

The crucial role of women in guaranteeing household food security cannot be overlooked. In Morocco, where female smallholder farmers, like the majority of small farmers, generally sell their output through food stalls or markets, the closures of these outlets left them without income security. As a result, some women farmers had to sell the little livestock they had in order to meet the essential needs of their families.⁴⁶

It is also women that have to pick up the pieces following the loss of a male breadwinner. Marwa Mamdouh, member of the North African Network for Food Sovereignty (NAFSN), shared real-life testimonials on the profound effect the crisis had on women, where their husbands' job loss affected them most:

These men and young men lost their income, and so women's burdens increased – as they would have to endure the hardship of going out to work and risk their

lives in the shadow of this pandemic. Women are out of options: either die of starvation with their children or face a coronavirus infection.⁴⁷

In multiple ways, Covid-19 has thus compounded the double burden of women in both the productive and reproductive spheres of the economy.

Increased hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity

The cumulative impact of the economic dislocation wrought by the pandemic has been an increase in the number of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition in a region in which, even prior to Covid-19, a significant share of the population already experienced food insecurity.

Malnutrition should be counted as one of the most likely and most serious repercussions of the pandemic.



An Egyptian woman transporting water on a cart. Photo Credit: Saker El Nour

As noted by the ESCWA 2020 report: 'Currently, around 50 million people are undernourished in the Arab region. Increased poverty could lead to an additional 1.9 million people becoming undernourished.'⁴⁸

In response to a loss of income and other economic shocks, households, especially impoverished ones, are often forced to lower their caloric and nutritional intake, resulting in poorer quality diets and aggravating the risk of malnutrition. The North African region has already witnessed such coping mechanisms in response to the present crisis. The World Bank noted in October 2020 that:

*On average 19 percent of Tunisian households consume less-preferred foods and 18 percent eat less food overall. Households in the poorest quintile are about five times as likely to have reduced their food consumption as households in the top wealth quintile. Among the poorest, about one in three households reduced food consumption. Among households in the top wealth quintile, about one in 16 reduced food consumption.'*⁴⁹

The report noted the same trend in Libya with 81 percent of households consuming less-preferred foods and over

70 percent consuming less food overall following the onset of the pandemic.⁵⁰ In Egypt, it has also been reported that Covid-19 affected daily consumption of food and non-food items and led to a decrease in protein consumption (meat and poultry) of up to 25 percent of pre-covid levels.⁵¹ Most of the food insecurity indicators in this Egyptian study were worse in rural areas.

The impact on specific population groups must also be mentioned. School closures for example deprived millions of children of school meals which constitute a major part of their nutrition:

*Children are no longer accessing school meals...In the MENA Region, 17,520,796 students are currently deprived of school meals – the main meal of the day for many of them. School meals represent about 10 percent of the monthly income of many poor households, so school closure adds significantly to their economic burden.'*⁵²

In Libya, where the coronavirus added insult to the injuries of the civil war, a UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) press release mentioned that there are around 10,000 food insecure refugees and asylum seekers who

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Libya



Over **70 %** of households are consuming less food overall following the onset of the pandemic

81 % are consuming less-preferred foods



10,000 food insecure refugees and asylum seekers have been mostly unable to find any daily work to support themselves

50% of surveyed refugees proposed for assistance had poor or borderline poor food consumption

have been mostly unable to find any daily work to support themselves in a context of curfews and rising prices for food and basic goods.⁵³

A quick assessment conducted by WFP between 30 May and 3 June 2020, carried out via telephone interviews with 10 percent of refugees proposed for assistance in Libya, found that on average, one out of two respondents had poor or borderline poor food consumption. A majority

showed significantly higher frequency of using negative coping strategies such as reducing the number of meals per day or limiting the size of meal portions. The distribution of food assistance did not take place until 15 June 2020.⁵⁴

Across many different metrics then, the pandemic has had a dramatic impact on people's food security throughout the MENA region.

3. Official responses to the crisis

Governments and institutional actors across the region have responded to the unprecedented health and economic crisis in a number of ways:

Stockpiling, export bans and other trade adjustments

A number of countries in North Africa responded to the disruption of global supply chains by intervening more assertively in the trade of key foodstuffs and medical items. Governments set up committees to monitor the status of food supplies and stockpiled key agricultural and food commodities. In some cases, food import taxes and custom fees on certain products were removed.⁵⁵ Egypt, for

example, imposed a 'three-month export prohibition on beans and lentils, while its Minister of Industry and Trade introduced an export ban on certain types of vegetables... Algeria took exceptional liberalizing measures to facilitate imports of medical goods and certain other products.⁵⁶ Likewise, the Algerian state intervened to ensure market supplies of essential goods (especially durum wheat). The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Chérif Omari, addressed citizens through public TV saying: 'I would like to reassure consumers that storehouses are full and that we have sufficient strategic stockpiles with goods being currently harvested on the field. There is no need to panic. We are working on their proper distribution to avoid monopoly.'⁵⁷



The nomadic tribe of Sidi Ayad, surviving on pastoralism in a semi-arid region in south east Morocco. Photo Credit: Ali Aznague.

The FAO echoed these sentiments. A 2020 FAO report for example noted that ‘ample food supplies exist globally despite COVID-19 impacts...global cereal markets are expected to remain well supplied and balanced. While localized disruptions, largely due to logistical issues, pose challenges to the functioning of food supply chains in some markets, their anticipated duration and magnitude are unlikely to have a significant effect on global food markets, at least in the medium term.’⁵⁸ This comparatively optimistic outlook, however, presumes that the present situation is a mere emergency, unrelated to the basic structure of food production, distribution, and consumption as shaped by food manufacturing companies, global food speculators, and agro-food monopolies. Beyond an acknowledgement of the freight and logistical challenges posed by a reliance on international supply chains that the pandemic has revealed, the inherent vulnerability of this market-based approach to food security is not addressed.

This analysis also overlooks the increasing risk of hunger and associated unrest posed by climate factors, especially in countries of the Maghreb. As noted during a seminar in May 2020 on the repercussions of Covid-19 on Arab food security organised by the Arab League, ‘Cereal production in the western part of the region’s countries

(Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), were hit with drought and higher than normal temperatures. Morocco was most hit among them, whereby wheat production was expected to decline by 60 percent’.⁵⁹ In March 2020, a locust outbreak, originating in Nigeria, hit Southern Algeria.⁶⁰ And in August 2020, fires in the country consumed 1,085 hectares of wheat and barley, and 145,821 haystacks, 104,676 fruit trees, 5,111 palm trees, and 360 beehives.⁶¹

Emergency aid

As previously noted, the loss of incomes and livelihoods that has resulted from the closure of economic sectors and the standstill of the informal sector has been devastating. As stated earlier, according to the World Bank, 41 percent of people in Tunisia were unable to continue work due to the pandemic; 59 percent of survey respondents who did not work could not receive any wages and only about 30 percent received the full amount of their salaries, while the remaining 10 percent received a fraction of their wages. Outside Tunisia, similar patterns were observed.⁶² In most cases, the loss of income cannot be compensated for through personal savings, loans or family subsidies as long-term economic precarity has left households and extended families with very limited



A Moroccan farmer harvesting wheat. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

resources.⁶³ More widespread government support has been necessary to deal with the scale and severity of the crisis. Many countries in the region resorted to emergency relief in the form of cash transfers. In Morocco, for instance, around 5 million households were registered in Morocco's Medical Assistance Plan (RAMED) to receive monthly stipends (some from April to June 2020 and others from July to December 2020) that range from 800 to 1200 Moroccan dirhams (equivalent to 80-120 dollars) depending on household's composition.

In Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, Driss Radi, president of the Chamber of Agriculture, emphasised the vulnerable position in which small-scale farmers and traditional farmers who have lost their income and ability to support their households find themselves due to climate or market factors – and who form a large stratum of society. He noted that 'although they have been provided with a RAMED card, they have been excluded from benefiting from the Special Fund for the Management of the Covid-19 pandemic'.⁶⁴ He also argued that faced with such a situation, it is critical to ensure that existing social and economic protections reach all producers.⁶⁵

Some governments have implemented specific relief measures for the agricultural sector, such as delaying the payment of agricultural taxes or creating new credit facilities for farmers.⁶⁶ However, many of these measures have left out key constituencies and do not go far enough. In an article titled 'Small-scale farmers and the coronavirus battle: absent from subsidy plans, present in supply chains', Egyptian researcher Saker El Nour remarked that the pandemic and its ensuing crisis constitute 'a chance to think of those invisible people, although quite real after all'.⁶⁷ In speaking of their work conditions, he adds:

While the rich, affluent, and white-collar professionals are able to carry out their work from home, protected from close contact that could lead to an infection with the virus, many labourers and farmers continue to head to the land to tend to crops and bear the risks in order to ensure steady food supplies for all.⁶⁸

Resuming 'business as usual'

In the section 'Responding to the challenge' in its report on the impact of Covid-19 on food security in the Near East and North Africa, FAO states: 'While the COVID-19 crisis puts a considerable strain on the economy and society, it may also open up opportunities to transform agriculture and food systems'.⁶⁹ However, per the organisation, this change should be brought about by following

fundamentally the same policies as before, with minor adjustments to mitigate negative effects, rather than transforming food systems for social justice and sustainability.⁷⁰ At heart, the organisation recommends a continued reliance on global agro-food markets and private capital as key mechanisms to deliver food security in the region.

These recommendations resonate with those of the World Bank which advocates vigorously for the inclusion of agricultural goods and services in global, regional and bilateral free trade agreements:

Trade openness can be significant in achieving inclusiveness. However, to promote growth that benefits all segments of society, trade reforms must move in parallel with other policy reforms... MENA's trade integration, within the region and with the rest of the world, remains below expectations, for reasons both economic and political. They include the exclusion of agricultural goods and services from association agreements with the European Union, as well as the persistence of high non-tariff trade costs.⁷¹

According to Walden Bello, 'recent declarations by leaders of the FAO and other multilateral agencies indicate that they continue to be imprisoned by a failed paradigm'.⁷² According to these institutions, everything that is currently taking place is a mere 'emergency that necessitates extraordinary measures'.⁷³ That is, 'the basic structure of production and consumption is sound and the problem lies in determining the moment when things can return to "normal"'.⁷⁴ Bello and other scholars studying food systems, conversely, call for considering the pandemic as 'an opportunity for transforming a system that is ridden with deep economic and political inequalities and is profoundly ecologically destabilizing'.⁷⁵

Furthermore, the global food supply chain is part of the problem and cannot be the solution and 'having displaced local and regional food production systems and made countries less self-sufficient in food has made many of them more vulnerable to hunger triggered by pandemics and other emergencies'.⁷⁶ The multilateral agencies failed in this sense to learn the lessons from the 2007-2008 food crisis, maintaining or expanding the same neoliberal policies that left people dangerously exposed to fluctuations in global agricultural markets. The Covid-19 pandemic has once again exposed the weaknesses of this approach and the high cost that populations pay for it.

Facing the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, some official institutions were forced to acknowledge the risks of reliance

on global markets, as noted in a study carried out by the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council of Morocco (a 2011 Moroccan constitutional institution):

The particularity of the Covid-19 crisis also stems from the fact that it took place in a context marked by the globalisation of trade in goods, as well as capital and human flows...These interdependencies have factored in the fragility of the global economic system, as they have facilitated the spread of the shock repercussions and increased the vulnerability of countries to disruptions in supply chains and the consequent weakening of foreign demand.⁷⁷

When speaking of possible solutions, however, the study did not diverge from the business-as-usual approach. and illustrates how regional organisations stuck to the framework determined by their international counterparts. The ESCWA announced a number of provisions, the most notable of which are: 'Arab Governments are called upon to coordinate their actions on keeping cross-border logistics flows open for essential goods like medical supplies and food...[and] Arab Governments should consider removing all remaining barriers to the Pan Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA) to boost intraregional trade'.⁷⁸ Those

are the same recommendations that an online workshop organised by the Arab League put forward on May 2020 which included:

- Benefiting from PAFTA potential in terms of establishing joint agricultural projects whose aim is to export food commodities within the Arab region.
- Encouraging the private sector to directly invest in agribusiness and promote larger enterprises that utilise economies of scale and modern technologies, consequently delivering production efficiency.⁷⁹

There is nothing new under the sun then. Dependency on foreign markets, be they global or regional, continues to be seen as a viable, even desirable, situation. The dominant approach to food security continues to tie people's food supply to market mechanisms which prioritise profit generation for private corporations and the delivery of hard currency to furnish states' financial budgets and debt repayments.



A Moroccan farmer harvesting potatoes in Tamtattouchte, at the foot of the high Atlas mountains. Photo Credit: Ali Aznague

4. Towards a just recovery from Covid-19

The North African as well as the Arab region could be an area for cooperation and solidarity among its peoples. However, this will not be brought about by states and local elites that profit from the continuation and expansion of the current agro-food model based on 'free' trade and the liberalization of local markets which have dramatically undercut the position of small-scale producers. It will also not be brought about by following the same productivist model centred on extractivist practices, which are two sides of the same coin in the MENA region, all the while disregarding the impact of those two tendencies on the environment and human health.⁸⁰ These are the very same factors that produced the manifold crises unfolding today.

The severity of the crisis requires more than half measures. It requires, as ATTAC Morocco argues 'a change of direction [...] for an effective response [to the pandemic] ... geared towards labourers and small-scale producers.'⁸¹ It must be rooted in the complete elimination of the structural causes of national food dependency and the lack of food sovereignty, and popular sovereignty more generally.

Alternative visions for a genuinely just recovery are on the table with social movements around the world calling for action to address the structural factors that have left so many people so vulnerable. This final section outlines the basis for such a just recovery in the North African region based on the principles of food sovereignty, agroecology, support for small-scale food producers and localised food systems, and converging struggles for genuine democratic control of agro-food systems.

A transition to food sovereignty, agroecology, and localised food production systems

Studies carried out by North African food sovereignty organisations and scholars have explored in some depth the differences between "food security" and "food sovereignty" paradigms. It is relevant to briefly revisit this distinction, as states and institutions have both made increasing use of the concept of "food security" in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, showing that this framing continues to

dominate, especially in times of uncertainty and upheaval.

Critically, this framing is not about abstract concepts but rather about conscious economic choices that promote specific social interests. According to the Declaration of Nyéléni (27 February 2007 in Mali):

*Food sovereignty puts the needs of 'those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of free markets and transnational corporations...it offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.'*⁸²

The Tunisian Working Group for Food Sovereignty echoes this sentiment:

*The notion of food sovereignty contradicts food security. While the latter calls for further reliance on a mechanism of importing food necessities, food sovereignty imparts absolute importance to the need for supporting local production. And while the notion of food security is based on the central role of the global market in the question of food provision, food sovereignty advocates for the right of countries and peoples to determine their own agricultural policies and food priorities, all the while involving farmers in the process.'*⁸³

By politicising food systems and putting issues around democratic control and the rights and agency of food producers and consumers at the heart of the decision-making around agro-food systems, food sovereignty thus offers a radically different pathway out of the current crisis.

Agroecology, as a science, a practice, and a social movement, embodies these principles of food sovereignty. Rather than offering a one-size-fits all solution based on input-heavy monocultural production, agroecology is tailored to fit specific ecological contexts. In working with rather than against natural processes, agroecology stands in contrast to current forms of extractivism and the (over) exploitation of natural resources in the MENA region. In valuing processes of farmer-led innovation and knowledge sharing, it also builds capacity of farmers and their collective organisations, increasing local control over food



The oasis of Jemna in southern Tunisia has been dispossessed of its lands since colonial times. After the 2011 revolution, it has seen an inspiring community struggle to recover the land and work it collectively. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

systems. The time for transitioning to such a system is now. As the Egyptian scholar, El Nour writes: This could be the right moment to propose a programme to support the transition into an alternative agrarian system[...] This moment equally requires rethinking that fascination with large-scale modes of production and revaluing small-scale and family farming, while supporting small-scale farmers and the transition towards agroecology.⁸⁴

This transition is not possible without adopting an internationalist perspective given that the main challenge to the exercise of food sovereignty is the push for a neo-liberal model of corporate globalization which furthers the commodification of land, labour, food and other resources, deepens the exploitation of workers, and drives new waves of dispossession across the region under the banner of capitalist development and, increasingly, 'green growth'. At the same time, the sway held by global institutions (like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO) over agricultural policies, along with the power of the food industry and global supermarkets, means that the drive for such a transition has to confront concentrated political and economic power.

Forging a united struggle for food sovereignty

Countering such concentrated power and advancing food sovereignty requires the convergence of popular struggles. As Hamza Hamouchene explains:

"Food sovereignty" is not only a subversive concept but it is also a radical project of profound social and economic transformation towards popular sovereignty of the real producers of food in particular, and the downtrodden in general. "Food sovereignty" is generally tied to the right of people to self-determination at the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental levels. Based on this logic, any discussion of food sovereignty in the Maghreb/North Africa must grapple with questions of unjust global structures of power, the sustainability of resources and the historical dispossession and destabilisation of the peasantry in the colonial period and in the post-colonial era through the imposition of neo-colonial-neoliberal reforms and structural adjustment programmes.⁸⁵

The North African Food Sovereignty Network (NAFSN) considers that the core of its advocacy mission is to raise awareness of these global roots and the responsibility the capitalist system bears for the crisis noting that '[...] the current health crisis must be analysed and understood within this global context.'⁸⁶

The main task of NAFSN lies in supporting and encouraging movements of small-scale farmers, agricultural workers, and consumers in rural and urban areas. It has been carrying out this work, along with other similar organisations and movements, like the global peasant movement, La Via Campesina. NAFSN defends an outlook that redefines economic priorities to benefit all, with special attention to the needs and challenges of those at the bottom, rather than serving the interests of the few and the profits of transnational corporations and food exporters.

Powerful actors, both corporations and many states, will push back against genuinely democratic processes that

would empower working people. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed this starkly. Confronted with the weakness and fragility of the globalised neoliberal food regime, power holders and decision-makers responded with policies that continued or even intensified the causes of the crisis, with at best limited interventions to mitigate the worst impacts of the pandemic.

Instead of following this business-as-usual approach, the global food sovereignty movement strives for a fundamentally different pathway. As articulated in the 2007 Nyéléni declaration:

*'What we are fighting for is a world where ... all peoples, nations and states are able to determine their own food producing systems and policies that provide every one of us with good quality, adequate, affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food.'*⁸⁷

A just recovery from Covid-19 requires nothing less.

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