

A Salesian sister greets a man receiving a meal at a canteen the sisters run in Ibarra, northern Ecuador. (Courtesy of the World Food Program/Ana Buitron)



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The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on those living in economic poverty may be spiraling out of control, leading to worsening hunger, the leaders of humanitarian organizations and Catholic sisters who advocate for the most vulnerable say.

"It's very worrisome," Sr. Teresa Kotturan, an Indian Sister of Charity of Nazareth and the U.N. representative for the Sisters of Charity Federation, said of the worsening global situation. "If you're being pushed into poverty, you're being pushed into hunger."

"If you don't work today, you don't eat," she said in an interview with Global Sisters Report. "You can only tighten your belt so much. How do you feed your children?"

"The situation looks very dire," Sean Callahan, president and CEO of Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services, told GSR in an email. Citing problems in Central America, Callahan said "hundreds of thousands of people are struggling day to day, month to month, and year to year to access enough food to meet their basic needs."

The situation was already serious before the pandemic, with small farmers facing drought and poor crop yields over the last six years, Callahan said. Now, the urban poor in the region "are being increasingly impacted by food insecurity," he said.

Those sentiments were echoed by David Beasley, the executive director of the World Food Program, who visited Ecuador and Panama from July 20 to 24.



Men stand outside a canteen run by Salesian sisters in Ibarra, northern Ecuador. The World Food Program provides food for the canteen. (Courtesy of the World Food Program/Ana Buitron)

In a July 29 statement, Beasley cited worries about the overall situation in Latin America, which has become the region most affected by the pandemic, accounting for more than a quarter of the world's COVID-19 cases, according to the World Food Program, which is the United Nations' food assistance arm.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has just been devastating in Latin America, where the economic storm clouds were already gathering," Beasley said in the statement.

"Families are struggling to buy basics like food and medicine, as livelihoods are destroyed and the number of people out of work in the region hits 44 million," Beasley said. He called that "a deadly combination" and added: "You can't just deal with COVID-19 by itself or hunger by itself. They must be dealt with together. If we do it right, we can save lives. If we don't do it right, people will die."

The U.N.'s annual "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World" reports that nearly 690 million people in the world — almost 9% of the world's population — are estimated to have been undernourished in 2019.

While "the full extent of the devastation that COVID-19 will cause is still largely unknown," the report noted that preliminary assessments suggest "the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 [million] and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020 depending on the economic growth scenario."



As a precaution against the spread of the coronavirus, a Salesian sister sprays hand sanitizer on a man entering a canteen the sisters run in Ibarra, northern Ecuador. (Courtesy of the World Food Program/Ana Buitron)

That in all likelihood would derail the U.N.'s hopes for achieving "zero hunger" by the year 2030, part of an ambitious global plan to tackle poverty, hunger and other challenges known as the sustainable development goals.

"The food security and nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to deteriorate further due to the health and socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic," said the U.N.'s International Fund for Agricultural Development , a U.N agency that jointly produces the annual report with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization and the World Food Program.

In Ecuador, a 'commitment to reach the vulnerable'

Beasley's visit to Ecuador and Panama highlighted the urgency of the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, where World Food Program officials expect to see a 269% increase in the number of people facing severe food insecurity, which is defined as not having a reliable access to affordable and nutritious food.

That would bring "the total to 16 million people not knowing where their next meal is coming from in coming months, up from 4.3 million in 2019," the World Food Program said of Latin America and the Caribbean.

One of the sites Beasley visited was a canteen that Salesian sisters run in Ibarra, northern Ecuador, that serves food provided by the World Food Program.

The focus of the sisters' program is assisting Venezuelan and Colombian migrants, who, the program said in a statement provided to GSR, "had to leave everything behind, and with no source of income, are left to beg on the streets — the daily meals provided by the Salesian Sisters are critical."

"For many people this is the only food they have during the day," Sr. Elvia Hidalgo, who coordinates the canteen, told the World Food Program. "Every day we serve around 90 and 100 nutritious breakfasts for migrants [from Venezuela and Colombia] and also for Ecuadorians who are in a vulnerable situation. Many of them work parking or taking care of cars on the streets, but with the pandemic they are having difficulties."



A Salesian sister prepares meals in a sister-run canteen in Ibarra, northern Ecuador. The World Food Program provides food for the canteen. (Courtesy of the World Food Program/Ana Buitron)

In an interview with GSR following Beasley's visit, Mario Touchette, the World Food Program's country representative in Ecuador, said the situation in Ecuador is dire because of a host of problems, including already-existing food challenges, a large number of COVID-19 cases and mandated lockdowns that have precipitated an economic crisis. Also worrying are disruptions in the food supply chain, which affect both farmers and distributors.

"It's a critical situation" without any immediate prospects of improving, he said. And with government aid limited, that means more and more people are dependent on the kind of food assistance the Salesian sisters provide.

Before the pandemic, the sisters served about 125 people a day, Touchette said. Though the sisters had to close their operation during the initial months of the pandemic, they reopened before the summer months, reducing the numbers they

served because of health and safety concerns.

Still, Touchette said the World Food Program's partnership with the sisters, as well as with male religious congregations in Ecuador, has been successful because the groups are efficient and respected.

"They are brave. Not everyone would be brave to continue this work for the most vulnerable who are often at most risk [for COVID-19]," Touchette said of the sisters' ministry. "We have to recognize their good work and good will and commitment to reach the vulnerable."

Still, Touchette said he recognizes the overall challenges the pandemic poses remain grave. He said the situation looks particularly serious long-term for young people, who are facing an uncertain future and extended unemployment.



From left: Mario Touchette, the World Food Program's country representative in Ecuador; Salesian Sr. Arcangela Piazol; and David Beasley, executive director of the World Food Program during a July visit to a canteen the Salesian sisters run in Ibarra, northern Ecuador (Courtesy of the World Food Program/Ana Buitron)

An even steeper road for global development goals

Kotturan said there is now little possibility the United Nations will achieve the sustainable development goals within 10 years.

"These dreams are going to have an early death," Kotturan told GSR. "They have been nipped in the bud."

Because major United Nations events now happen online, the July 7-16 High-Level Political Forum, the annual review of the progress toward the sustainable development goals, was virtual, with no major final declaration.

Achieving the goals was going to be difficult in any case, said Amina Mohammed, the U.N. deputy secretary-general.

The "road ahead is now even steeper," Mohammed told UN News, adding it remains important to "stay true" to the U.N.'s vision.

That won't be easy, given the changed and perplexing landscape brought by the pandemic, anti-hunger advocates say.

Sr. Cecilia O'Dwyer, who recently completed her assignment as U.N. representative for the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, told GSR in an email that the pandemic has caused "both general population and their representatives in national governments [to focus] almost exclusively on surviving."

"Efforts to control the pandemic and the economic crisis involving loss of millions of jobs and closure of small businesses are foremost," she said.

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The promises of the 2030 agenda "are testing our capacity as humans to transcend personal and national needs," said O'Dwyer, now based in Spain. Like Mohammed, she credits the U.N. for not losing sight of long-term goals that need attention. But, O'Dwyer acknowledged, "it is difficult to see future possibilities when we are in a place of darkness given the unique situation that has changed the lives of millions."

Both Kotturan and Touchette point out that among those millions are large numbers of people, like in India and Ecuador, who work in the "informal sector" without

regular salaries and social protections like health care.

Those worries are reflected in a recent report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. The report, "COVID-19 and the Informal Sector," says "the short- and long-term damage to national economies — especially in the developing world — continues to be felt disproportionately by poor women."

The "initial analysis of data from countries including Brazil, India, Russia, and Kenya suggests women workers are particularly vulnerable to the current economic crisis because national lockdowns have brought the informal sector to a halt," the report said. As a result, "more women have found themselves out of work during the pandemic."

The economic toll for families also leads advocates like Kotturan to worry the pandemic may result in the increase of child marriages: marriages of girls to older men with the goal of reducing family size so family economic burdens are lessened.

That and the concerns about increasing instances of rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence during lockdowns do not make this a good moment for those advocating for policies to help women and girls, Kotturan said.

"I am worried," she said. "I really am."

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This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger** feature series. View the full series.