

Impacts of COVID-19 Regime on Labor Within Food Systems: Whither BRICS Now and Beyond?

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 has reconfigured foodscape across the globe, BRICS inclusive. Some of the familiar sites where people in BRICS found food in pre-pandemic period has become increasingly threatened while many have completely disappeared, leaving behind dark food deserts. Information on the extent of the devastation caused by the pandemic is still emerging. Such information is pivotal to the articulation of affirmative programs and policies. This article, therefore, explores the impact of the pandemic on food systems of BRICS to indicate how the alliance may positively influence the repositioning of each country member's foodscape to achieve food security both now and beyond this pandemic. This article uses content analysis of relevant documents and draws from functionalist's perspective to outline various impacts of the pandemic on food systems. It argues that creating enabling environment for labor, making food security a common goal of BRICS as a body as well as putting in place mechanisms supporting local food systems will invariably ensure food security across various levels in BRICS.

Keywords

BRICS, food security, foodscapes, COVID-19 pandemic, labor, functionalist theory

Introduction

Narratives on the origin of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) are marred by controversies. Also, historians are enthusiastically debating the possibility that the pandemic may qualify as one of the top ten plagues of the world (Walsh, 2020). While these debates rage, no one denies the consequences of the pandemic. The disease has prompted changes in every aspect of human society. It is still reconfiguring global systems in an unprecedented way. In fact, COVID-19 and globalization mutually reinforce and simultaneously weaken each other in multiple spaces and places. The contagious nature of the pandemic

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as well as the deterritorialization processes of globalization have greatly connected everyone everywhere like the impacts of climate change on the global system (Amusan & Jegede, 2014). So intimately connected is the world in this pandemic era that an infection anywhere is a harbinger of infection everywhere. No wonder, a sneeze in Wuhan spontaneously sends shiver down the spines of Warsaw and Washington vice versa. Yet, the pandemic has prompted mutual recriminations and divisions among nations. It is still undermining various bilateral and multilateral relations as well as informing new ones. COVID-19 regime practices such as lockdown, physical distancing, and restrictions on movement collectively impinge on dynamics and ethos of global trade agreements. Yet, opportunities to supply vital items, including food, mask, testing-kit, and medicine across the globe to curtail the spread of the virus offer a compelling evidence supporting globalization processes and world unification.

Amid these contradictions, BRICS in its April 28th, 2020 communique strongly affirmed the collective resolve of its five members to forge a common alliance against the contagion and its repercussions. Every consequence of the pandemic fit into what Marcel Mauss called a “social total fact” (Okorie, 2018). It has multiple dimensions affecting every sphere of human existence. As such, efforts addressing COVID-19 and its consequences must necessarily cover every dimension of human existence. Food is a critical aspect of human existence. It is also a social total fact (Amusan et al., 2019; Okorie & Ajayi, 2019). Food is not only a material for the satiation of physiological needs but also a critical item in human sociality and spirituality. It has multiple careers and comprises various dimensions such as health, social, legal, economic, environmental among others, connecting several realms including bilateral and multilateral relations (Amusan, 2019). Additionally, food system was the first casualty in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak in many countries.

Food system is related to all processes and infrastructure involved in feeding a population: it exists at multiple levels, such as global, regional, national, community and neighborhood and encompasses activities such as growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consumption, and disposal of food and food-related items (Ericksen, 2008; Godfray et al., 2018; Ingram et al., 2013; Tendall et al., 2015). The system also includes the inputs needed and outputs generated at each of these steps. It operates within and is shaped by socio-ecological, political, economic, and cultural contexts and requires human resources that provide labor, research, and education (Godfray et al., 2018). The declaration of lockdown elicited panic buying which caused food deserts in many homes. As food and water were exhausted in most homes, malnutrition began to lower immunity, especially among the most vulnerable, such as the elderly and children, who began to succumb to infectious diseases and death. And a sustained occurrence of such deaths would likely produce Scheper-Hughes’s “death-without-weeping” scenarios (1992). Certainly, food has significant influence over vulnerability and susceptibility of the masses to COVID-19. The battle against COVID-19 pandemic will be lost or won in the arena of food and nutrition security.

Therefore, food and nutrition are and will be a critical battleground in this pandemic era and beyond. Impacts of the pandemic on food system ripple through every facet of human society. Accordingly, there is a bidirectional relationship between food security and COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing problems of food security in this pandemic era and beyond is in consonance with lessons from previous outbreaks, which have shown that as a pandemic evolves, there is an urgent need to expand public health activities beyond direct clinical management and extend to nonclinical including food (Gamage et al., 2010).

Impact of COVID-19 regime on global food system is still evolving. This article explores ways in which the pandemic is reconfiguring precursors of food system in BRICS, paying attention to necessary policy options to curbing the looming food and nutrition crises. The article uses content analysis of data to interrogate various changes prompted by the pandemic in food system of BRICS coupled with

functionalist theory. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to the fledging literature on impacts of COVID-19 on societies (Béné, 2020; Naja & Hamadeh, 2020). The specific contributions to the fledging literature include documenting the prevailing conditions of food systems in BRICS in the context of the pandemic. Data used in this article are from desktop research conducted between December 2019 and July 2020. Information gathered was screened based on the objectives of article and summarized into five sections. This introduction is followed by theoretical framing, which is followed by impacts of the pandemic on food system of BRICS. The subsequent section suggests interventions for safeguarding the food system and lastly the conclusions are presented.

Theoretical Framing

This article uses the common ground among functionalists as a theoretical lens to illuminate ways in which BRICS may forge effective alliance addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems in this COVID-19 era and beyond. The functionalist paradigm is deemed an appropriate frame for this article since the model emphasizes cooperation and synergy among nations. Given the unfolding challenges, which the pandemic presents to the globe both now and beyond, the importance of the cooperation among nations cannot be over emphasized. A consensus among functionalists is the possibility of bypassing political rivalries among states to build alliances for cooperation in nonpolitical economic and social sphere by addressing problems requiring international cooperation for solutions (Amusan & van Wyk, 2011; Karns et al., 2004). While food is a lightning rod of political rivalries as well as an epicenter of warfare (Allouche, 2011), emerging realities across the globe show that food can be a platform for symbiotic bilateralism and multilateralism (Okorie et al., 2019).

The use of food as an instrument of political rivalry and war often takes subtle but subversive insidious forms like dumping of highly subsidized or unwholesome food at the detriment of economy, ecology, and public health of the recipient nations. It may also be in the form of denying a particular country access to a given food market either as a seller or a consumer, thereby weakening the economy, health, among others of such a country. The rivalry often exists in the two extreme ends, which have negative effects not only on food systems but also other spheres of relations between the contending nations (Dale, 1980; Polouektov, 2002).

Consistent with functionalists' perspective, BRICS food system stands out as a site for beneficial alliance. Benefits to be derived from such an alliance are both material and immaterial. BRICS as a body has a long-term strategy that makes provisions for alliance to pursue common interest. The strategy is based on five pillars covering economic, political, environmental, and social cooperation in material and immaterial things. Through the cooperation, economic growth, and development; political and economic governance; social justice, sustainable development, and quality of life; peace and security; and progress through sharing knowledge and innovation are to be collectively pursued by member states. In the context of ameliorating the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems and security, the common interest and value may revolve around supporting the development of local food systems across the member states. In other words, the overall common goal of BRICS should be to enable each member to feed its residents during the pandemic and beyond. Thinking beyond the pandemic allows for planning for the hangover of the post-COVID-19, which will certainly affect the quality and quantity of food that flow across national boundaries and shapes food and nutritional security. The impacts of COVID-19 and beyond on food security are explored in the next section.

An Overview of COVID-19 and Its Impact on Food System in BRICS

Brazil's COVID-19 landscape is highly frightening. The first case of the pandemic was confirmed on February 25th, 2020. However, by July 27th, 2020, 2,442,375 had tested positive for the virus while 87,618 had died of COVID-19 related complications (Rios, 2020). With these grim statistics, Brazil in July 2020 has the second-highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world and the highest number in BRICS alliance. In Russia the first case was announced on January 31st, 2020, when two Chinese citizens in Tyumen (Siberia) and Chita (Russian Far East) tested positive for the virus, with both cases being contained. However, the number of confirmed cases as of July 27th, 2020, in Russia was 823,515 while the number of deaths was 13,504 (Elagina, 2020). Russia has the largest number of confirmed cases in Europe, and the fourth-highest number of confirmed cases in the world and the third-highest in BRICS alliance as at July 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic in India is part of the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first case of COVID-19 in India, which originated from China, was reported on 30th January 2020 (Regencia et al., 2020). India as at July 2020 has the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia, the third highest number of confirmed cases in the world and the second highest in the BRICS alliance. There are conflicting dates with respect to the first confirmed case in China. However, all views indicated that the first case occurred in 2019, making the country the first nation to confront the deadly virus. Between 2019 and 28th July 2020, China has confirmed 84,337 positive cases while 4,634 people have died of COVID-19 related complications. The pattern of the pandemic is not different in South Africa. Between the first confirmed case in the first quarter of 2020 and the time of this writing—July 2020, 452,529 people have tested positive for the virus just as 7,067 have died (Regencia et al., 2020).

Although the virus was confirmed at different dates in BRICS, its impact has elicited similar responses among the nations and their citizens. BRICS have implemented lockdown, traffic control; closed management of villages and communities and adopted some palliative measures. The pandemic has caused general decline in the global economy, BRICS inclusive. The disease is having disproportionate impact on various sectors of the economy. With respect to agriculture, which is the basis for food security, COVID-19 regime threatens food systems and exacerbates food insecurity in several ways.

Farm labor, a critical factor in any food system has been severely affected by the pandemic. Although BRICS have attained a certain level of mechanization, human labor is still pivotal to critical activities underpinning its food systems. Production, harvesting, processing, preservation, and marketing of food still require both unskilled and skilled labor to ensure availability of food, which is an essential pillar of food security. Hence, labor is required from farm, factory, family to fork levels to make food not only available but also utilizable to guarantee food and nutritional security at individual level.

The advent of COVID-19 has invariably disrupted labor supply across various components of food system. The pandemic has even prompted changes in educational, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which BRICS food systems are embedded to shape availability of labor. For instance, with the closure of school, the latent functions of formal education, which include babysitting, has been halted. Some workers at various components of BRICS food system are, therefore, forced to stay back home taking care of children and caring also for any members of their families infected with the virus. This reallocation of labor invariably limits the availability of workforce for food systems in BRICS.

The implementation of border closure across the globe has further affected the availability of labor, especially the migrant labor, which undertakes over one quarter of the farm work (Hurst et al., 2005). For instance, cheap farm labor in Russia is supplied and sustained by Central Asian workers. These workers play a vital role in the Russian food system. Similarly, South African food system uses cheap migrant labor from southern and eastern Africa. Also, cost of labor in Brazil is significantly reduced by the

presence of migrant labor from African Lusophone states. However, the lockdown has left most of the workers in a limbo. Against this background, the Berry Producers' Union warned that without the migrant workers, Russian strawberry farmers would not be able to harvest more than 10–20 percent of the crop (Najibullah & Chizhova, 2020). Similarly, the situation of migrant workers in South Africa is not any better. The African Union (2020) reported that the lockdown has left thousands of migrant workers in African countries stranded. The workers and their dependents are struggling to make ends meet. Some are stranded at various borders. Many are battling the challenges of expired documents; others are deprived of work and access to any social protection and the various relief measures that some governments are extending to their populations. Worst still, countries like South Africa are grappling with deporting or repatriating stranded migrants back to their home countries in the face of increasingly shrinking economy and labor market. In India, where there are about forty million seasonal migrant workers, global media showed over hundreds of thousands of the workers trekking thousands of kilometers to return to their home villages (Mahendra, 2020).

The labor market is shrinking not only because of the border closure but also the high rising prevalence of infection among workers as well as the increasing decline in the demand for food. For instance, in Brazil, processing facilities in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná recorded increased cases of coronavirus infection. Animal production facilities alone had reported a total of 528 infections while 2,595 workers had flu-like symptoms. With almost 30,000 people working in the industry, the potential virus spread is huge. Therefore, three poultry plants were forced to halt operations (Azevedo, 2020).

The impacts on health are not only limited to the workers but also the management. The pandemic has affected health and wealth of farm owners. Besides the rising prevalence of the infection among farm owners, the pandemic has imposed extra cost by necessitating the provision of hygienic and hand washing sanitation equipment. They are expected to provide hand washing and hygiene facilities in their premises as well as personal protective equipment (PPE). The competing demand for these facilities across the globe has led to high cost and shortages of PPE and other protective equipment vital for operating a farm safely. Moreover banks, in their quest to prevent bad debts, are wary of offering credit facilities to businesses whose profitability has been marred by uncertainties arising from the pandemic. COVID-19 regime has heightened the degree of uncertainty in farms by prompting poor sales which erodes the capacities of farmers to repay loans. Worse still, the cost of insurance in various sectors has gone up. Hence, keeping owners, workers, crops, and animals safe is now a herculean task across agro-value chains. Maintaining adequate sanitation and safety is also no less problematic at every node of the value-chains. At the factory level, many pieces of processing and storage equipment, for instance, are operating above their capacities due to glut. The average period for the transportation of a given farm produce from farm to factory, and finally, to a family's table is elongating due to multiple delays arising from COVID-19 regime. These challenges collectively pose health and economic risks to all categories of the stakeholders in BRICS.

While comprehensive guidelines for keeping the farms, workers, owners, animals and crops safe are still emerging. The basic guidelines from the World Health Organization imply extra cost, which many farm owners are yet to meet. In India for instance, Oxfam reported that some of the fourteen tea estates had not installed adequate handwashing and hygiene facilities while many did not have quarantine and health facilities should the workers fall ill, although tea picking was partially resuming. The rising cost of managing a farm perhaps explains why many farms are struggling with payment of workers. Workers on tea estates throughout India were reported to have received no wages, despite government guidelines that they should be paid in full during the lockdown period. This has led to tens of thousands of tea plantation workers in India to stage protests at the end of April 2020, to demand payment of wages during the Coronavirus lockdown (Mahendra, 2020)

In a nutshell, COVID-19 has left in its wake a rising pool of demotivated and restless workers as well as a surging number of indebted farm owners in BRICS food systems. The rising debt profiles of some farms may not be unconnected with implementation of some import restrictions by many countries in their attempts to both secure supply for their citizens and in the belief that this will help halt the spread of the virus as well as the changes in market and farm prices. The implication is that farms may have to shut down, although food is globally recognized as an indispensable item. But then, shutting down production process cannot even help the precarious situation of some categories of farmers. For instance, dairy farmers face more difficult situation with the closure of schools and restaurants and the implementation of importation restrictions, which collectively deplete the number of consumers of dairy products. Booked supplies can easily be canceled while ripening of fruits may suddenly be delayed. However, sudden delay of lactation of cows constitutes a huge economic loss. Keeping the dairy cow safe constitutes more cost for the farmers.

Worse still, while zoonotic origin of the pandemic is extensively discussed, there are no scientific evidence that poultry, beef, pork, or other sources of animal protein may transfer the virus (Azevedo, 2020). However, nations and consumers are increasingly cautious. To this end, importation of food is increasingly being restricted even among BRICS members. Azevedo (2020) reported that the rising concerns about COVID-19, after new outbreaks in Beijing has necessitated China to revoke the export authorizations of five Brazilian slaughterhouses with effect from July 2020. Also, the Brazilian government on its own suspended one of its facilities from exporting meat because of the spread of COVID-19 among the facility's workers.

This trend constitutes disruptions in the food service sales, which has negative impacts not only on markets and prices but also on logistics, which affects the entire food system, including the supply chain. As logistics are disrupted by efforts to slow the spread of the virus, multiple connected industry sectors are already being impacted. These disruptions ultimately intensify food fraud, which is the act of purposely altering, misrepresenting, mislabeling, substituting, or tampering with any food product at any point along the farm-to-table food supply chain. Fraud can occur in the raw material, in an ingredient, in the final product or in the food's packaging (Food Safety Network Service, 2016). Food fraud as a phenomenon is not strange in BRICS. There were several cases of food fraud in pre pandemic era BRICS (Tibola et al., 2018). Whitworth (2020) noted that the disruptions to global supply chains caused by COVID-19 and its regime has diminished level of food surveillance, thereby opening the floodgate of food fraud across the globe. The author also documented the cases of multiple packages with counterfeit food supplements originating from Brazil, China and Hong Kong, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, which were detected and seized during a recent investigation by the European Union. Food fraud replaces hunger with disease and undermines food and nutrition security. BRICS as a body therefore need to rise to these challenges.

Toward Food Security in Pandemic Regime and Beyond in BRICS

The challenges posed by the pandemic to food system and food and nutrition security in BRICS are generative. As such, immediate attention is required. "Waiting for Godot" or fair weather before dealing with the challenges is inimical in both short and long runs. This is because there is a high tendency that COVID-19 regime will become a new normal. Thus, socioeconomic alliances that fail to align with the emergent order of things may necessarily go into extinction. Organization and charters that fail its people at this critical period stands the peril of being forgotten after the pandemic. To this end, BRICS should

live up to demands of the five pillars sustaining its long-term strategy. The strategy is anchored in promoting cooperation for economic growth and development; political and economic governance; social justice, sustainable development, and quality of life; peace and security; and progress through sharing knowledge and innovation (Okorie et al., 2019).

Migrant laborers and their dependents need social justice. Portugal, for instance, has started granting citizenship to stranded migrants. This is to enable the laborer's access to state-welfare packages, thereby reducing their vulnerability and susceptibility to the pandemic. BRICS should consider various mechanisms that may allow stranded migrants to gain access to COVID-19 palliatives, especially to reduce vulnerability and perhaps susceptibility. This is because infections among stranded migrant workers within a given nation-state poses a biological threat globally. This form of bio-insecurity if unaddressed would undermine ideals of peace and security articulated in BRICS's pillar three.

Brazil has outlined and published protocol to ensure the protection of workers. Other relevant interventions include sharing information about COVID-19 in the most spoken languages among migrants. Partnering with migrant recruitment agencies can be key to the success of such campaigns, as these agencies usually have direct contact with migrants and know their situations and needs. There is a need for BRICS to build on such existing initiatives in member states to ensure healthy labor force. A healthy workforce makes a healthy food system. Additionally, the pandemic does not discriminate between citizens and noncitizens. Reducing vulnerability and preventing infection through welfare packages for stranded migrant laborers should constitute a policy priority for BRICS. A cursory glance through BRICS showed that China and India are experimenting with some welfare packages for their migrant laborers, although with limited degrees of success. India has ordered employers to pay their employees. This is a sign of a hegemon with more emphasis on China as alluded by Iqbal et al. (2020). As stated earlier, many employers have not complied with the directive. The recommendation here is that BRICS should encourage member-states to assist employers through various incentives such as tax break or reduction. Such incentives may contribute significantly to economic growth and development; political and economic governance; sustainable development as stated in the BRICS's pillar one, two and three. BRICS should encourage member-states to reorganize their respective welfare environments such that private sector will be able to play a critical role. The same attention should also be given to workers trapped in-between their country of origin and place of work. This is highly relevant in the context of Russia whose farmers are at the verge of losing over 10 percent of their crop because their migrant laborers are stranded due to visa problems. Perhaps lifting travel bans for such category of workers and providing for their quarantining for two weeks on arrival should be considered. BRICS can play vital role in working collaboratively to articulate guidelines. BRICS should outline clear road map with respect to ensuring food and nutrition security. BRICS as a body may encourage members to offer universal coverage of food distribution within their respective borders, at least within the next few months. Mahendra (2020) reported that India has inaugurated some nutrition interventions such as Integrated Child Development Services midday meals and *Anganwadis* (rural childcare centers). Others within the alliance may learn one or more lessons from this type of effort. There is an ongoing intervention with respect to giving cash as palliative as well as activating another financial stimulus in BRICS. South Africa, for instance, rolled out US\$26.2 billion as palliative interventions (Dludla & Winning, 2020). India is not far behind. The country provides cash transfers of about \$6.60 USD per month to the bank accounts of 200 million women through one of its financial programs (Mahendra, 2020). Although, highly insufficient, given the high number of the vulnerable in the country, the financial inclusion is important in stimulating food consumption, which is an important factor in revamping the food system. The intervention, if transparently managed, will enable recipients' access to nutritious food thereby

boosting immunity against the disease. BRICS may contribute to benefitting the people maximally from such interventions by articulating and urging member states to embrace guidelines that ensures transparency in the disbursement of funds.

Finally, without any bias toward the dynamics of free trade, BRICS should make the emergence of a resilient local food system in member states a policy priority. This is highly important to pillar two of BRICS, which emphasizes growth and economic development among members. Moreover, overcoming the constraints which the pandemic poses to food security demands that each nation produce at least a certain quantity of its staple food. BRICS should encourage multilateral and bilateral relations among member states to strengthen local food systems. Every local food system within BRICS has commercial and smallholder farmers. A clear definition of policy intervention for each category is a step in the right direction. Given the prevailing COVID-19 regime that forbids the assembling of many people, the smallholder farmers' enterprise, relative to the commercial has a greater advantage for common good. Some commercial plants have already shutdown due to the rising spate of COVID-19 infection among their workers. The shutting down implies not only loss of job and revenue for the workers and the owners, respectively, but also the loss of substantial quantity of staple for the populace of the affected countries, thus the need to stimulate an alternative. Smallholder farms are a better alternative as they may sufficiently address issues of infections among workers, sustainability, and food quality, which are all critical to the survival of BRICS now and beyond.

The small-scale level of the enterprise implies that a smaller number of workers will be required to carry out necessary operations in the food system. More so, this category of farmers is vastly distributed throughout boundaries of each nation-state. As a result, the distribution of food will be more equitable. Besides, the smallholder farming enterprise encourages food sovereignty which according to Windfuhr and Jonsén (2010) confers following advantages: farmers' right to produce food and a recognition of farmers' rights; consumers' right to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced; countries' right to protect themselves from underpriced agricultural and food imports; upholds the need for agricultural prices to be linked to production costs and to stop all forms of dumping and the populations' participation in agricultural policy decision-making and support for agroecology as a way not only to produce food but also to achieve sustainable livelihoods, living landscapes, and environmental integrity.

To this end, BRICS should encourage member state to address the farm needs of the smallholder farmers. Major challenges to addressing the farm needs of the farmers are not only the generation of innovation but also timely delivery and scope of coverage among end users. A very low extension to farmer ratio has largely contributed to late innovation delivery and limited scope of coverage, thereby limiting the pace of food security and agricultural development (Okorie et al., 2020). BRICS in line with its pillar five should encourage member states to leverage on digital revolution, which is rapidly changing information economy, including agricultural extension services. Emerging digital technologies are unprecedentedly replacing traditional gadgets. Smartphones are increasingly swapping traditional radio and television. Online blogs and smart bulletin are substituting for hard copy newspapers just as more people across rural–urban divide are spending more time on social media relative to traditional devices. These changes have given rise to digital extension service, which has the potential to promptly transfer innovation from the point of generation to millions of end users.

Moreover, digital extension is increasingly viewed by experts as a game changer, especially in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, which has made face-to-face innovation delivery almost impossible. This type of extension leverages on emerging digital technologies to geometrically increase speed of innovation delivery and scope of coverage across rural and urban divide. The ability to deliver timely innovation synchronously and asynchronously across value chains of any staple crops and livestock to

smallholder farmers makes digital extension most appropriate for both farmers and extension agents. It allows farmers to learn at their own most convenient time and provide extension agents easiest ways to know who among the end users has accessed a particular information. Therefore, digital extension packages have potentials to address many problems of the traditional extension. Giving digital extension services to smallholder farmers will invariably boost production, processing, and preservation across value-chains of any staple crops and livestock. These benefits will enable job creation along the value-chain of selected crops and animals, conserving foreign reserve and increase the gross domestic product. BRICS, consistent with pillar five of its long-term strategy should share innovation on extension service delivery for smallholder farmers.

Conclusion

This article discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the food systems and by extension on food and nutrition security in BRICS. The impact of the pandemic on foods system in the BRICS, although still evolving, is unimaginable. The disease has already affected every component of food system in BRICS. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on BRICS ranges from loss of job, wage, capital, to profit. Among stakeholders in the food systems, migrant laborers are the worst hit. Many of the workers are trapped in the border between their countries of origin and their countries of work. Some of the factors keeping the workers in limbo are expired travel documents as well as the closure of farms and plants. Others are the closure of market outlets such as schools and restaurant, which signaled the decline in factory food. As a result, many of the workers are in despicable conditions, which have heightened their vulnerability to the pandemic and exacerbated their prevalence of infections. The pandemic has also affected farm owners. Some owners have lost their farms. Others have closed down to reduce infection among its workers and to curtail loss arising from disruption of the food supply logistics. However, for some farmers neither shutting down nor operating the farm can curtail their losses. This category of owners is mainly dairy group. The cost of stopping lactating cows suddenly is high. Materials for constructing new storage facilities are trapped in the disrupted food system logistics. Operating dairy farming in a context of dwindling demand and upsurge in infection among workers maybe highly unprofitable.

These disruptions have resulted in food desert and food fraud in many contexts within BRICS. The desert and the fraud collectively threaten food security. It suggested that BRICS as a body has a vital role to play in assisting member states to navigate the emergent dangerous foodscape. BRICS as a body does not need to reinvent the wheel to help its member states. The body should build on existing initiatives in the member countries and other relevant contexts. Such initiatives include, but are not limited to, waiving travel document restrictions for some categories of farm workers; recognition of the rights of migrant workers; granting citizenship to some categories of workers; granting access to accommodation; creating awareness for preventive strategies among citizens and migrant workers; and articulating effective framework for operations of labor migration stakeholders, such as labor market actors, migration authorities, recruitment industry, and relevant civil society organizations.

There is a need for BRICS to encourage categorization of interventions for farm owners based on scale of production. The policy-options for assisting commercial farmers may range from giving tax break to the farmers to governments becoming the last resort buyer. For smallholder farmers, given the rising challenges of operating commercial farms, BRICS should assist respective member states to pursue resilient food system through revamping of the local smallholder farms. The benefits of a resilient

local food system cannot be over emphasized. The system, among others, allows consumers to decide their own food while enabling countries to protect themselves from underpriced agricultural and food imports as well as supporting sustainable food and nutrition security. To achieve such a system, BRICS should encourage member states to invest in digital extension service delivery, which is not only compliant with COVID-19 regime but also highly effective for millions of farmers through synchronous and asynchronous deliveries.

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