

# COMMENTARY: Food security vital for a world in crisis

Contributed

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Food self-reliance means ensuring farm and garden supply stores remain open, with functioning supply chains, say three members of the Nova-Scotia based Centre for Local Prosperity. They argue that seed production and supply should be considered an essential service. - SaltWire File Photo



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**ROBERT CERVELLI, PHIL FERRARO & GREGORY HEMING**

Recently, an Indiana man in his early 60s, in few words and with tears, laid out the absolute sadness of COVID-19. "After 45 years of marriage, my wife is dead, I am in quarantine. This is how it ends."

The once unimaginable consequences of this pandemic are upon us. Complicating matters even further is the unrelenting march of climate change, with millions of displaced persons left alone to wander on a planet that is too hot and getting hotter. Near-term societal collapse is now a potential outcome. The simple fact is that humanity has never had to endure the level of distress that now exists on the planet.

Is this how it ends? Not necessarily. As COVID-19 explodes worldwide, now is the time to begin planning for the inevitable global social disruption surely to follow.

Just the other day, Salvatore Melluso, a priest at Caritas Diocesana di Napoli, a church-run charity in Naples, Italy, spoke out. "Now people are more afraid — not so much of the virus, but of poverty. Many are out of work and hungry. There are now long queues at food banks."

Here in Atlantic Canada, indeed throughout the world, we believe the road to stability and resilience, in light of both COVID-19 and the more complex consequences of climate change, begins with food security.

Shelves have been emptied in many grocery stores over the past few weeks as people realize the need to stock up on food in preparation for isolation, transportation disruption and social distancing. While toilet paper hoarding is the current joke, the run on canned goods, flour, pasta, rice, sugar and many other basic staples is a serious indication of the vulnerability of our current food system.

Many grocery stores typically carry only a three-day inventory of food. Our food system is now almost entirely dependent upon delivery trucks and distribution centres to keep running. Over the past decades, our primary food chain has become little more than that — a long-distance, just-in-time, import-delivery system.

COVID-19, and the related structural and economic fallout, has quickly brought to the surface the utter fragility of our food system. It is now in danger of failing altogether. If the countries we rely on for many food imports, particularly Mexico and the U.S., fail to control the spread of the virus, the scenario painted by Salvatore Melluso is a certainty.

The good news is that food security is now becoming mainstream. Interest in gardening has skyrocketed. There is clear evidence that Atlantic Canadians are working quickly to plan for the coming growing season and are either starting a garden or expanding the one they have.

The old adage of the "Victory Garden" is back. These gardens harken back to the First and Second World Wars as a way of supporting the war effort through home gardening and local food security. COVID-Climate Victory Gardens are essential and have arrived in Atlantic Canada. Plant one. Join one.

There are clear signs that some of our municipal and provincial governments are responding. Some have passed motions and set policies around food security.

Local farmers have recently raised the immediate issue of temporary foreign workers. Some 1,500 workers are needed in Nova Scotia, 400-500 in Prince Edward Island and 60,000 nationally. As travel restrictions are imposed on all non-essential travellers, temporary foreign farm workers are exempted. The federal government will allow foreign workers in, but they must undergo a 14-day quarantine. Many may not be willing to come here due to pandemic concerns for themselves and their families.

Ironically, we now have many newly unemployed workers who need paid work. Provincial governments should consider a wage subsidy, in addition to current EI and other COVID-19 relief programs, to encourage local residents to help farmers and minimize the risk of the virus spreading due to foreign workers coming to the region.

In British Columbia, the government recently imposed regulations set out to protect supply chains and ban the re-sale of food (as well as medical supplies and personal protective gear). We strongly suggest that our regional provincial governments prepare to impose similar food price limitations at the wholesale and retail levels to prevent price gouging in the event of shortages. They would do well to consider additional support for food banks as an essential service to sustain the families that need them. Without taking such bold measures now, we may have to deal with the need for rationing in the event that supply lines continue to fail.

Food self-reliance requires measures to ensure that farm and garden supply stores remain open and their supply chains functioning. Seed production and supply should be considered an essential service.

This coming growing season is the right time to expand agriculture extension services and horticultural training programs, and to develop programs that emphasize best practices for food production, including no-till agriculture. Government-backed guarantees on wholesale food prices will also enable farmers to grow the food we need without facing potential financial loss.

COVID-19 has taught both government and citizens that it is urgent and essential to plan ahead for pandemics and climate change. While our immediate personal and public health is job one, we also need to begin preparing for greater control over our food supply.

It is all of us together who are ultimately responsible for making healthy choices for our individual lives and for the lives of our children, our grandchildren and our neighbours. We

determine the economic and ecological health of our communities. It is us who will determine the future of the earth.

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