

# COVID-19 AND FOOD SECURITY:

## Revisiting the pyramid, grandma and other things

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**C** OVID-19 has taken our world by storm. There has been little time to react and it will take more time to adapt. In a matter of days, our economy and societies have undergone an acid test like they had not in a long time. Important questions, many of them existential, have had to be asked. Perhaps, the most personal and intrusive one is to decide what is essential and what is non-essential, and by what, the question really has come down to who is and is not essential. This one is rather traumatic because, for many, it has meant that they lost their jobs, part or all of their income, with all the implications about their livelihoods, security, sense of purpose and future.

Those who know me know that I look at many things through Maslow's pyramid of needs. To me, the current troubled times that we are going through and how people cope, or not, with it, is very much the same as revisiting Maslow's pyramid. Until a few months ago, the world economy seemed to run on all cylinders and, although a recession seemed to be overdue, as one tends to happen every decade or so, there was very little that indicated that the economy would slow down drastically. The stock markets were like a fun fair. Then, everything freezes over. The topic of essential vs non-essential sent us right back to the pyramid. All of a sudden, the lower layers of the pyramid took precedence. Physical security and security of food and shelter became obvious

again, and the more superficial matters had to step back a bit.

### Regulating supplies

Not only did many household budgets take a painful hit, store shelves were often scarcely filled. This pandemic has shown that our economic model is really built around quantitative growth and abundance but, should conditions change drastically, it is not as agile and resilient as we may have liked to think all this time, especially when nobody really wants to have inventories. Empty shelves did not remain empty for just a couple of days, but it took more like a couple of weeks for some products to reappear in satisfactory quantities, and some items have hardly reappeared at all, even a couple of months into this crisis.

Shelves were empty, and yet farmers dumped their products, in particular dairy farmers literally pouring milk down the drain. An outrageous food waste has been taking place, in a time where food banks are overwhelmed and can get enough to help the ones in need. There is some thinking to do about connecting the links of the value chains, because it shows very little value and does not behave like a chain, either.

The small shops actually did rather well in this mayhem. They adapted quickly to ensure social distancing. They took orders for pick up and for delivery and prepared them without errors. Most of all, they showed no disruption of supplies. The small meat store had meat and the baker had bread.

A look at what flew off the shelves is quite revealing and a confirmation of our revisiting Maslow's pyramid. Remember



the trendy times from before the Corona Wars? Yes, it feels like an eternity but, in fact, it was not that long ago. When it came to food, many of us had been convinced that the good old-fashioned foods that previous generations, all the way back to the early times of agriculture, had become about irrelevant, that farming was going to be revolutionised.

### **Adapting the food industry**

I wrote my thoughts about this in previous articles. The virus came and we stopped flying around in planes, we have to work from home and forget about morning and evening commute, our factories had to shut down and our energy use dropped dramatically. Then, all climate monitoring showed the same thing: greenhouse gas emissions dropped significantly and the quality of our air improved, and all of that with the same numbers of cows and farm animals.

Understand me well, some animal farming systems will need to change dramatically to adapt to a climate friendly approach of agriculture. We were supposed to all become vegetarians and vegans, and yet the most striking thing I could see in grocery stores was that meat, dairy and eggs were about all gone. People hoarded the recently forbidden fruit and apparently were proud to do so. With most of the staple animal products gone, what was left in the stores, then? Well, the sections with plant-based animal products surrogates were still aplenty even though the shelf space for those is usually rather small. No shortage of soy- and pea protein burgers, but no ground beef. No butter except the more “natural” ones, but plenty of margarine on the shelves. No milk today, but lots of soy and almond milk. No regular eggs, but no shortage of ones produced with special feed. On the protein side, consumers left massively the higher layers of Maslow’s pyramid, rushing back to the basics.

### **A comeback**

Other categories that showed an amazing comeback are flour and pasta. What a change of heart! Here, too, consumers went back to the basics. Baking and cooking have been among the most popular activities during the pandemic lockdown. What happened to carbohydrates and gluten? Well, not only the pasta, flour and baking sections in the stores were desperately empty because the staples products were back in favour, but the amazing part was that the shelves with gluten-free and other carb-alternative diet products were left about untouched. Flour is back, and so is bread and baked goods because 1) they are fun to make, 2) they are cheap to make and 3) they are good for you, of course with moderation that is. That is the stuff I am advocating on my other blog, *The Sensible Gourmet*. Take a look at it is you have time and you will see the many advantages of preparing food yourself.

Baking and cooking are so much more than just that. They are an act of love and they are a unique way of connecting people and generations. This is what we are witnessing here. The need for social contact and love, the second layer from the bottom in Maslow’s pyramid is as popular as the bottom layer about basic physical needs. Baking is just a trip back to grandma’s kitchen. It is a reminder of our childhood and the atmosphere of grandma’s kitchen and the complicity that it brought around the stove. It is a reminder of the happy moments of tasting warm dough and making

a mess with chocolate cream. In the current uncertain times, it is a safe haven where love and comfort bring us a badly needed protection from a harsh reality.

But the journey into nostalgia is not only limited in the kitchen. The poorly agile supply chain to large grocery stores and empty shelves showed that food supply

is not a given. This has not gone unnoticed and, if baking and cooking are popular right now, so is gardening. People transform their lawns into veggie gardens and those living in apartments buy and grow herbs, tomatoes or strawberries in pots on balconies to find some sense of food security. Empty shelves and long distances bring a reflection of where food should be coming from.

There is a renewed attention for local food production, this time not some much as a trendy phenomenon, but for food security reasons, which in turn is becoming trendy. The conversation is more about a philosophical “we-should” approach, but few address the important part, which is how to make it work financially and for the local producers to be competitive, especially when many consumers are going through a financial crunch.

### Urban farming

Other questions would be to figure out who the farmers would have to be and where they should farm. Urban farming could be a possibility but comes with its own challenges. As someone who has a garden, I can tell you that growing your own food has advantages. I do not have to worry about residues, as I do not spray any chemicals. I also can tell you that the cost of a seed is much lower than buying produce from a store, but the untold reality about gardening is that to have a garden, you need to buy one and that if you look at it from an economic point of view and were to calculate your cost as if it were a commercial operation, you will have to include the price of the land on which you garden. Nonetheless, gardening is a great hobby. Personally, I find it very soothing to work the ground and take care of the plants with nobody around. It probably feels like a bubble or a cocoon and I can imagine that this is also part of the renewed interest about gardening.

So, here we are. We revisited Maslow’s pyramid of needs. We took a trip back in time to grandma’s kitchen and garden. Grandma (at least both of mine, who were born in the early 1900s) knew scarcity. She knew the value of things and would never waste anything. She would not throw food away, as it was too precious, and the same thing is true about everything, being bits of candle, bits of soap, water or old socks that would be repaired. Grandma knew what sustainability meant. It was engrained in the way they were raised. Other things that my grandmas used to telling me to do were to always cover my mouth and nose when sneezing, wash my hands after touching things from others, in particular money. Sounds familiar? After all, they had grown up in a time when there were not many vaccines, tuberculosis and long ailments were shortening many lives and they also had been through the Spanish flu.

The current crisis has led us to look for more security, but will we learn from it and will it last? The question is what will this mean for the future? How will retailers adapt, if they do? How will supply chain adapt? How will food producers manage a transition to a five-foot economy, as the Dutch government calls it? How will farmers and food producers find the work force of the future? What products should have priority in the future of food and agriculture, and will the marketing realign along grandma’s lifestyle or will we feel compel to revert as soon as possible to the pre-coronavirus times? These are critical questions to ensure that we will keep having food supplies secure and affordable. I will come back on these questions in future articles.



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