

COVID-19 and food: the search for food security at the heart of households

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The image of empty supermarket shelves is one of those that will remain from the announcement of the first containment. The Europeans practiced the «Hamsterkauf» as named by the German speakers: they stocked up on hamsters. This rush on food supplies, especially rice and pasta, shows that even before thinking about the disease, for many people, the first thing they worried about was the risk of running out of food. A striking phenomenon at the center of affluent societies. Food stores were suddenly highlighted as «essential» and food with it. In times of confinement, it becomes central again: one can no longer delegate it or forget its role, as is often the case in the West, due to its easy access and urban lifestyles. The major role of food is exacerbated : setting the rhythm of a daily time that stretches to infinity, regulating emotions, at the center of constrained social interactions and anxieties about the risk of food insecurity.

Research in the human and social sciences has set out to dissect how the pandemic has shaken our relationship to food. Several studies listed in the World Pandemic Research Network database already shed edifying light.

All bakers ?

In France, baking at home, «making your own bread» in particular, will have a striking social fact during the confinement period, resulting in a relative shortage of flour and yeast on the shop shelves. According to the CNRS survey Manger au temps du coronavirus listed on WPRN, this phenomenon is surprising given the continued openness of bakeries and supermarkets, and cannot be reduced to the objective of limiting social interaction during shopping. Beyond the pleasure of the table (fresh bread and pastries are emblematic), the researchers put forward the hypothesis that the confinement triggers re-identification dynamics around gestures and products that are strongly symbolic of cultural and social ties. Moreover, as Abdu Gnaba, author of [Anthropologie des mangeurs de pain](#) explains: «We are going through a crisis.

Sanitary, that's for sure, but also an identity crisis. From one day to the next we find ourselves cut off from the world and our habits. In our culture, bread is reassuring, stable. To lack it is synonymous with terror (...) There is also a very strong link between bread and autonomy. It is the first food that babies eat in perfect autonomy, or the one that older children can go buy alone. »

A desire to become more food self-sufficient

The CNRS study, which is based for its first phase on nearly 800 testimonials, underlines this: another social phenomenon that is characteristic of containment is the regaining of control over one's own food security. Citizens with the capacity to produce at home have turned to self-production (gardening and micro-livestock farming). Many have become more involved in cooking, others have begun to share their culinary productions with friends and neighbors. According to the findings of the study, these practices are part of a desire to become more food self-sufficient. Many consumers have taken an active, sometimes inventive, role in gaining direct access to products. Confinement has reinforced short-circuit ordering systems, both through formal and informal arrangements (grouped orders between neighbors, calls between regular market customers and producers to buy directly, volunteer citizens offering their help to small producers in need of labor to reduce the number of deliveries - for example, by acting as relays and selling products to their neighbors). The direct relationship between consumers and producers has developed. In the United Kingdom, according to a YouGov survey conducted by WPRN, three million people tried for the first time an organic vegetable basket or ordered food directly from a local farm, both to obtain the food they needed and to support local production. The WPRN survey indicates that the stability over time of these new short-circuit practices remains an open question, with recent months suggesting a return to pre-confined consumption patterns. But what about organic?

Containment has accelerated the transition to organic and zero waste

Preliminary results from a study of ten European countries show that during the pandemic, in most countries, more organic products were purchased and less food was thrown away (however, the majority of households consumed less fresh food than usual). Contrary to the expected results, it was not in the countries of Central and Northern Europe that the change in these directions was the greatest, but in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The researchers' hypothesis is that the latter countries had not yet reached as high a level of organic purchases as the former and that they were less concerned about food wastage: the changes in diet caused by the pandemic would have pushed them to catch up. Another part of this study from Denmark, Germany and Slovenia also points out that the type of food purchased often differed according to the degree of income loss during the pandemic. Those who experienced large income losses tended to switch to more affordable foods and away from fresh foods, while those who experienced small losses compensated more for isolation by increasing their consumption of prepared meals, sweets and alcohol. Food played an important role in regulating emotions during this confinement.

Discipline or emotional comfort: an ambivalent relationship to food

In Spain, a study conducted in Catalonia on WPRN highlights the implementation of preventive practices related to the search for «healthy food» aimed at being «healthy», protecting the immune system and/or minimizing the emergence of other diseases. Concerns about fitness and weight, particularly those derived from the internalization of aesthetic standards of thinness, have emerged or intensified, reinforcing disciplinary practices. This oscillated with moments of indulgence: an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, pastries, snacks or products whose consumption is usually controlled. This was a way of managing time («filling in» temporary availability and «boredom»). But this consumption also represented a way out, a way to manage social discomfort, disciplines (legal, social, moral and physical) and various uncertainties about the risk of the virus, the evolution of confinement and the numerous - often contradictory - pieces of information circulating in the media and on social networks.

Food has thus become a means to ensure a minimum amount of pleasure, to escape, to give oneself emotional shelter.

Food has become a key element in the emotional health of the respondents, through which they have channeled or subverted these processes of discipline and individual control. However, this transgression of the rules was also experienced under the sign of guilt: moments of relaxation therefore also became dosed and controlled. Behind these adaptations and disciplinary practices, the Spanish study emphasizes that one senses a moral of confinement: to know how to reinvent oneself, to control oneself, in a context of imbalances and uncertainties. Economic precariousness has added an additional source of anguish to this situation.

An explosion in the demand for food aid

In France, many households «plunged» below the food distress line, through loss of income or increased expenses (for example, for families whose children had free access to the canteen). The CNRS survey underlines that this is evidence of a massive influx of people who have until now managed to feed themselves without outside help, and that these people are new audiences for food aid organizations. A study conducted at Princeton University, listed on WPRN, reveals that the number of applications to the U.S. food voucher program has also soared (for example, they have increased fivefold in Vermont). Between April and June, as a result of the pandemic, more than half of those already in the program reported skipping meals and relying on relatives or associations to eat.

Worldwide, the figures are even more alarming. According to the [UN report](#) The impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition, between February and June 2020, measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 may already have pushed up to 45 million people into acute food insecurity, the majority of them in South and Southeast Asia (33 million), and most of the rest in sub-Saharan Africa. In India, in the first four weeks after the announcement of the containment, poor households lost 88% of their average weekly income compared to the previous year, and had to reduce meal portions and consume less food (study conducted by Virginia Tech, listed on the WPRN.) Central Africa, already affected by droughts, has seen its production fall as a result of measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus. The UN report highlights the dramatic impact that the crisis could have on global food security.

Food crisis, resilience, experimentation

By putting pressure on our systems, the pandemic revealed their strengths and weaknesses. Food is no exception. While inequalities have increased, throwing millions of people into food distress, containment has also enabled experimentation, the emergence of new practices and the demonstration of human resilience and creativity. How will these phenomena evolve in 2021? Several studies listed on the WPRN, notably the one covering ten European countries and the one of the CNRS mentioned above, continue to monitor the situation.

Is there a risk of a shortage in France ?

As the CNRS points out in its study *Eating in Coronavirus Time*, in France, the difficulties have not concerned the actual availability of food but rather the ability of the supply chain capacity to adapt to a sudden, one-off increase in demand (increase in the number of customers and increase in the average basket). This caused the supply systems to be put under strain, requiring the emergency recruitment of personnel for transport, storage, shelving and sales. The study concludes that the supply chain has on the whole been agile and resilient to the crisis. It underlines the capacity of territorialized food circuits to respond almost instantaneously to this explosion in demand thanks to the reinforcement of existing systems and the emergence of new systems.