

Opportunities in the midst of crisis: The business challenge to maintain food supply and ensure workers' health in times of COVID19

M.Sc. Gisela Kopper

June 2020

Translation of "Oportunidades en medio de la crisis: El desafío empresarial para mantener el abastecimiento de alimentos y asegurar la salud de los trabajadores en tiempos de COVID19", available [here](#).

As we were preparing to bid farewell to 2019 and making our plans for 2020, a new coronavirus, SARS CoV2, was identified for the first time in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Costa Rican food industries were preparing to supply the high consumption expected at the end of the year and vacations and the arrival of tourists at the beginning of our high season. The world never imagined the pandemic that would be unleashed a few months later. In addition to the health crisis caused by the COVID19 disease, an unprecedented worldwide economic and social crisis followed. The disease, first considered as a strong flu, left thousands of deaths in its wake as its spread seemed impossible to stop.

The international health alert for mass circulation of SARS CoV2 forced the implementation of strict hygiene measures and confinement of the population, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization. While entire families were kept in isolation in their homes, many industries and businesses closed their doors; others, such as food industries, farms and farmsteads, had to remain active in order to provide basic foodstuffs to this confined population. Even though the vast majority of businesses saw a substantial reduction in sales, they also had to take on resources and generate entirely new operating protocols in order to maintain their operations.

Although it has been demonstrated that SARS CoV2 is not foodborne, on March 9, 2020, the Ministry of Health issued a mandatory directive to all food processing plants for the protection of workers as a way to contain and prevent COVID19. The new MoH guideline included personnel health screening, expanding it to exclude anyone with mild respiratory symptoms (cough, fever or other respiratory symptom) from entering a food plant and immediately notifying health authorities. Good personnel hygiene and health practices that are usually managed in food industries extend to following cough and sneeze etiquette. It is required to take all necessary measures to ensure a distance of 2 meters between each worker to reduce the risk of infection by asymptomatic infected persons.

The implementation of the mandatory measures defined by the Ministry of Health was carried out in different ways by different companies. Maintaining the distance between workers was a challenge, since many industries do not have enough space to do so without affecting the company's operations. It was also difficult to comply with the limitation of the use of common spaces (canteens, recreational areas, lockers and restrooms) to 50% of capacity and the cancellation of all staff meetings and recreational activities that bring many people together in one place. Business creativity allowed us to devise multiple solutions to achieve this.

In general, all the companies intensified hygiene and disinfection practices for personnel, production equipment and transportation units. They also implemented better training and communication mechanisms to reinforce the Ministry of Health's sanitary campaigns on

hand washing, sneezing protocols, social distancing and monitoring of symptoms that a COVID19 patient might present.

Knowing that most consumers are unaware of the many actions that food producers have implemented in order to keep their businesses open, comply with the new requirements to protect their workers and maintain the food supply to the population, I requested information from colleagues and friends from various food industries to share their stories with you. They are courageous entrepreneurs who have made unprecedented efforts to stay in business and without fear of being wrong, I can say that many of these stories are repeated in all food companies in the country, whether they are large, medium or small. I transcribe here some examples of innovative actions taken by entrepreneurs that go beyond the mandatory guideline of the Ministry of Health.

Nutriquim, a company based in Heredia, has 50 employees and provides raw materials for more than 120 clients in the food industry, and has had to make important changes in its operations to comply with the guidelines. To reduce the agglomeration of people in the different areas of the facilities, teleworking was implemented in positions that allowed it, and a change in the work schedule was defined, implementing two production days. The company also suspended visits to the facilities by people not involved in production, cancelled face-to-face meetings, and cancelled visits or tours. To strengthen the hygiene and disinfection of equipment and facilities, the transportation units and areas with the highest traffic of people were fogged on a daily basis. Sinks were installed at the entrance to the facilities and the body temperature of employees and visitors is monitored before entering.

Estukurú, a small family business that produces handmade gourmet chocolates in La Fortuna de San Carlos, has been significantly affected by the closure of hotels and tourist activities in the area. Their main consumers have been tourists visiting the region and they had prepared for this by purchasing Italian equipment to expand their production capacity, expecting a high influx of tourists this season. The pandemic cut their plans short, first by the impossibility of bringing the equipment they had already paid for to Costa Rica and then facing a 98% reduction in sales of their products. Along with their chocolate factory, they had to close the newly remodeled cafeteria and cancel the Cacao Tour. In May, they reopened, with a part-time workday for their six employees in the processing plant plus two employees in the field. With the intention of reinventing their sales system, they ventured into e-commerce to publicize their products and initiate sales supported by Correos de Costa Rica for shipments throughout the country. They intend to diversify sales points in the metropolitan area by presenting themselves at fairs and some supermarkets. The company has implemented the Ministry of Health's guidelines for personnel protection without difficulty; however, the biggest challenge to keep the company open is to reopen the market.

For **Mondelez**, a transnational chocolate company, they managed the crisis from a global platform specialized in handling these situations. Protocols from the Center for Disease Control of the USA (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were used, adding epidemiologists for guidance. Subsequently, local platforms considered the reality of each country and particular circumstances. They focused their actions in three areas: administrative, manufacturing plant located in Lima, Peru and external contacts. In the

administrative area, the first action was to mobilize 100% of the remote work of close to 400 employees located in Costa Rica. The company had already been developing good remote work practices for several years, so it was a natural and quickly implementable step. This represented an additional challenge for sales personnel, who by the nature of their job must visit customers. They were provided with protective equipment, appropriate disinfectant chemicals and training. The company also made an additional effort to have psychological help available and multiple forums for employees to share their experiences, thus creating a kind of virtual coexistence that aims to make the distancing physical and not social, including an agenda of Mindfulness, Training, Neuro Linguistic Programming, among others.

Conos Victoria, a family business with 28 employees, felt the impact of COVID19 in the second half of March when sales dropped drastically due to the Easter Week closure of ice cream parlors and restaurants decreed by the country's authorities. They initiated the process with the Ministry of Labor to establish a reduction in working hours for their personnel and thus alleviate the financial problems caused by the significant drop in their income. In addition to this reduction in the workday, they established changes in lunch hours so that they could maintain the appropriate distance. The company has strengthened staff training on good hygiene and health practices for its workers. They established a WhatsApp chat with all their employees where they share news and instructions on health measures for the staff. In the chat they provide quizzes on the distributed material that must be answered to ensure that everyone has understood it.

Cooperativa de Productores de Leche Dos Pinos, with more than 2,000 associates and generating 4,722 jobs in the country, responded to the commitment to take care of the health of its employees and operate in the best way to maintain its food supply to the population. In addition to the fundamental measures to strengthen the hygiene and health of its workers, as other companies did, Dos Pinos defined unprecedented economic and nutritional actions: freezing the price for three months of its wellness line products and extra fortification to support the immune system for four months by adding 30% more folic acid, iron and vitamin A in its products and 50% more vitamin C in its orange juice. Dos Pinos has maintained its uninterrupted purchase of milk from its producers, which represents 1.4 million liters of milk per day, and provides credit facilities through the development banking system.

CoopeDota, an agricultural coffee cooperative in the Los Santos area, with more than 900 members, faced the crisis from various angles. The first decision they made was of a technical nature, by drawing up a Risk Matrix in which the potential risks of contagion by the coronavirus were identified area by area and classified in order of priority. Based on the matrix and the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health, the first guidelines were drawn up and implemented, many of which required investments in protective equipment for individual use or adaptation of spaces for public attention and common offices. They reported a budget increase of more than 100% for cleaning and personal hygiene implements, and on several occasions they had difficulty in obtaining them due to significant variations in their price. The difficulty of implementing protocols that modify behavioral patterns was a challenge both internally and externally, which entailed an additional investment of time to validate compliance in a timely manner. The

interdisciplinary work between the internal teams of Occupational Safety, Human Resources and Company Doctor led to the formulation of Coopedota's COVID19 Prevention Protocol, a robust document of general knowledge and mandatory compliance for all those involved in the operation of the cooperative.

The transnational fresh fruit exporting companies, which employ tens of thousands of people in the rural areas of our country, developed intense training campaigns aimed at their personnel and their families, strengthening the messages of the health authorities. In all fruit packing plants, various measures were implemented to facilitate safe work, such as demarcation of areas for social distancing, use of masks, installation of screens to protect workers in areas where it was not possible to maintain the mandatory distancing, and disinfection in all areas and equipment, including administrative areas. **Del Monte**, for example, a company with operations in more than 10 of the country's cantons and 45,000 jobs in its pineapple and banana plantations, set up a Health Commission in each work center to evaluate suspected cases and provide appropriate attention according to established protocols. Similarly, the **Dole** company, which employs more than 8,400 people in rural areas of the country, defined measures for the distancing of all its personnel from the farms. While we see how public transportation in the metropolitan region is a critical point of contagion of users, Dole has demarcated seats in order to maintain the distance and protection of workers from their homes to the packing plant. The units are disinfected daily by spraying, and alcohol gel is provided for hand disinfection at the bus entrance.

FIFCO (Florida Ice and Farm Company), a producer of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and bakery products under Musmanni franchises, was also affected by a substantial reduction in sales with the closure of bars and restaurants and the prohibition of mass events. Their first priority was to take care of the health of their employees and their families. To this end, they created an initiative called "FIFCO Segura" to coordinate and create the necessary protocols so that everyone in FIFCO had access to the resources to safeguard their health and to ensure compliance with all the guidelines issued by the Government in health matters. Specifically, they implemented teleworking for 100% of the employees who can work from home, created health assessment protocols for each work center, provided personal protective equipment especially for those who must travel or be on the street attending customers, and finally identified and isolated employees sensitive to the virus and carried out an education and information campaign for all workers in each of the countries where they operate. They launched a novel initiative known as "La Pulpe Digital" to provide a digital platform to their customers so that they can connect directly with consumers, a pilot that began with more than 150 customers.

As well as these stories, I could continue sharing many more about the different ways that the agri-food sector has faced this crisis; entrepreneurs found innovative opportunities to develop their business in a better way and maintain their operations. And in the face of the crisis, it is commendable to note that all the companies showed their support and solidarity towards their employees, the communities and the population in general affected by this pandemic due to the loss of jobs generated by the closure of operations throughout the country. Many companies made significant donations of their products to support food distribution campaigns to health centers, emergency commissions, hospitals and elderly care centers. Costa Rica stands out in the world for its magnificent response to the COVID19

health crisis and the companies in the food sector have demonstrated their ability to respond quickly and in a timely manner. It only remains now to wait for new guidelines from the authorities to reactivate the economy while we continue to protect health.

"In the midst of difficulty lies opportunity", Albert Einstein. As of today, COVID is considered endemic, that is, a disease that is here to stay. Therefore, the actions that were implemented as a reaction to the crisis must move towards permanent prevention actions. The different academic institutions as well as trade organizations such as ICAFE, CORBANA and CACIA, with the support of INTECO, have already begun to develop HARPC (Hazard Analysis and Risk-based Preventive Controls) matrices to reduce the risk of COVID19, under the basic protocol that starts with hazard analysis, preventive controls, validation, verification, monitoring, corrective actions and record keeping. As with any new hazard, education and training is critical to ensure successful mitigation and thereby minimize community transmission of this virus.