FOOD AND ... WAR

Linkages between food and violent conflict

Violent conflicts are a major factor of poverty and food insecurity in the world, directly causing loss of life, forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, loss of land and natural resources, disruption of trade and food supply chains, and indirectly affecting present and future development prospects at all levels.

For many years, hunger and food deprivation have also been a weapon of war in the most diverse contexts and geographies. The United Nations Security Council recognised violent conflicts as a fundamental cause of food crises and hunger in May 2018, also typifying the starvation of civilians as a war crime. This aspect also contributed to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in 2020, thereby recognising the importance of food aid for the pursuit of peace.

With increasingly protracted crisis situations and state fragility, as well as the proliferation of humanitarian crises, food crises tend to become more complex, prolonged and difficult to reverse.

Violent conflicts have been the cause of the biggest food crises in recent years, as highlighted by the clear examples of Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Somalia, but also in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa where tensions and instability have greatly affected access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food.
On the other hand, the persistence of food insecurity also contributes to social tensions and conflicts, as witnessed more acutely in the Sahel countries. For example, the rise in food prices at the end of the 2000s was a driving factor of discontent and social unrest in Egypt or Tunisia, contributing to the so-called Arab Spring in several North African countries.

In many situations, conflicts are combined with other crisis factors, such as environmental factors (climate change, land degradation, drought or extreme weather events), economic factors (particularly in countries with weaker and poorly diversified economies, little productive capacity and high poverty levels) and related to human development (as food insecurity interlinks with health, education and people’s ability to develop their full potential) - as well as, at international level, with the imbalances and unsustainability of the world’s food systems.

At a global level, hunger and food insecurity have been on the rise for several years, and we are increasingly far from achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 of the 2030 Agenda.

The cumulative effects of the pandemic played a major role in exacerbating food insecurity, with several of the poorest countries experiencing multiple and interconnected shocks, including as a result of conflicts - Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, northern Nigeria and Ethiopia, South Sudan or Burkina Faso are some of these cases.

In addition to the increased need of support, many of these countries are also forgotten crises, attracting less attention from international solidarity: e.g., only 3% of the United Nations appeal for urgent humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan was funded, as of March 2022. With the war in Ukraine, insufficient funding is compounded by rising costs of food aid and humanitarian assistance operations due to the escalation in food and energy prices. In 2021, Ukraine was the main supplier of food for the World Food Programme.
The war in Ukraine and food insecurity: the perfect storm

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the resulting war are having serious adverse repercussions for food insecurity in the world, particularly for countries where the situation was already fragile or even unsustainable. Primarily, because all the crisis factors that were already getting worse and/or triggered by the pandemic were further accentuated: rise in international prices of basic food products and in agricultural production inputs, disruption in agricultural and food supply chains, rising transport and energy costs, reinforced protectionism and trade barriers, and other shock effects on international markets.

The price of food has risen exponentially since the invasion of Ukraine, with the global food price index (FAO) reaching, in March 2022, the highest value since it was created in 1990. The United Nations estimates that, in sixty years, access to basic food has never been so costly in real terms. This bill is heavier for the poorest countries, where food costs represent a larger share of household and State budgets, and capacities and financial resources are scarce to cope with these increases. Furthermore, African countries in particular are highly exposed and vulnerable to shocks in international markets, due to the structure of their economies.

The rise in prices is intertwined with lower availability of basic foodstuffs on world markets. This is largely a direct result of the war, as Ukraine and Russia supply nearly 30% of wheat and barley, as well as 1/5 of corn (19%) and 80% of sunflower oil worldwide. Before the war (2020) and for wheat alone, Russia and Ukraine were respectively the third and eighth largest producers in the world (with China and India as top producers), while Russia was the largest exporter and Ukraine the fifth, both in quantity and value of exports.

It is worth mentioning that cereals are not only the basis of human food but also of animal food, consequently producing a knock-on effect on other food products such as meat or milk, in addition to being raw material for biofuels production. Russia is still the world's largest exporter of fertilisers, this being one of the factors behind the position of not condemning Russia assumed by Brazil.

In Ukraine, the physical destruction and damage of the economic and social fabric caused by the war compromised the 2022 harvests and will substantially affect agricultural seasons in the coming years. Even after the end of the conflict, the recovery from a scarcity situation and reestablishment of productive systems will be slow, since these involve diverse issues ranging from the availability of seeds to land security, the existence of safe infrastructures and technological equipment, and available human resources.
Blockades of Black Sea ports and sanctions against Russia also function as an impediment to trade. In the case of Russia, its prominent role in energy markets – being the world’s largest exporter of natural gas and the second largest exporter of oil – also contributes to the rise in energy prices which is reflected throughout the entire food chain, from agricultural production to distribution and transportation.

In addition, this shortage is further aggravated by “food protectionism” measures implemented by many countries, namely European, with the retention of internal stocks of foods (such as cereals), the limitation of production quotas for international markets and the imposition of further export restrictions to ensure food availability in their countries. It is necessary to consider the risk that these emergency measures could be prolonged in time and greatly affect the availability of food for the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the medium term.

Many countries that are most dependent on these imports and that are already suffering with food insecurity are hit hardest and fastest by rising prices of vegetable oils and cereals and the disruption in Russian and Ukrainian exports.

The situation is particularly serious in Northern Africa and Eastern Africa countries, where recent years have been marked by higher prevalence of drought. East Africa imports 84% of the wheat it consumes and depends on Russia and Ukraine for 90% of these imports, which were practically suspended with the conflict, while domestic production and national stocks are insufficient to meet demand. Egypt is the world’s biggest importer of wheat, and it imports all of its sunflower oil from Russia and Ukraine, which re-exports to neighbouring countries that are now facing shortages and prohibitive prices. In the Horn of Africa, the acute hunger crisis due to extreme drought is compounded by dependence on food products from Russia and Ukraine, the situation being especially acute in Somalia, where decades of instability add to this perfect storm.

Do we still have time?

At a time when many of the most vulnerable and least developed countries are still trying to recover from the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneously address the historical costs of their debt burden and current rising inflation, the war in Ukraine has further hindered the prospects for recovery. International attention and financing should therefore be directed not only to Ukraine, which urgently needs this support and should receive it, but also to the multiplier and indirect impacts of the war in countries already affected by combined crises and food insecurity.

The medium-term effects of the war will contribute to a geoeconomic reconfiguration of world food markets. Increased production of agri-food products in other parts of the world - notably in South America, Europe or the United States, as already being envisaged - could contribute to overcoming the current shortage but will mainly benefit those who have better conditions and financial resources to acquire them.

This means, on the one hand, that protectionist trends should be countered by advocating for a freer and fairer trade system, based on rules that do not further penalise those already being left behind – which requires overcoming logistical constraints, releasing stocks and lifting export restrictions, as well as focusing on market regulation. The European Union plays an important role in the world’s food systems and its response must go beyond supply chains or trade policies, through a comprehensive and coherent policy mix encompassing finance, development, emergency response, security impacts, etc.

It also means, on the other hand, that the international solidarity space should be upheld and safeguarded, by channelling support to those most affected and doing everything possible to reverse the ongoing humanitarian disaster in several places. Aid to Ukraine must derive from additional commitments and financing rather than from diversion of development aid funds to be allocated in other crisis and conflict-affected countries. International institutions and bilateral governments should contribute to strengthening development cooperation and social protection through food and financial assistance. The funds made available, including by international financial institutions, must meet the needs and requirements of the current food emergency and not contributing to the unsustainable escalation of the debt burden in the most affected countries.
When taking measures for the future, it is important to ensure that recovery or economic stimulus packages are not based on factors that already perpetuated inequalities and imbalances in agrifood systems, but rather focus on prevention and promotion of food and nutritional security. Considering the current food and energy dependence, responses to the multiple effects of war could potentially also drive a faster transition to cleaner energy, to agricultural production that uses less chemicals, to increased investment in local productive capacities and to a reshaping of global food systems towards greater resilience, justice and sustainability.

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