

174th Session of the FAO Council

Item 4: Global food security challenges and drivers

As the world was beginning to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine rattled the already volatile food and energy markets, amplifying the impact of existing drivers and posing new challenges for global food security. Encouraging signs of economic recovery from the pandemic and projections of a decline in poverty and hunger were tempered by rising and more volatile food and energy prices. Building on the Council document CL 172/5 (April 2023), the present document (CL 174/4) provides an update on the global food security situation. Drivers of hunger and food insecurity are presented, including conflicts, economic slowdowns and downturns, and climate variability, as well as the impact of urbanization. Current and longer-term threats to global food security are also identified. The last section of the document presents an update on the impacts of the war in Ukraine.

No progress has been made on global food insecurity, according to the most recent assessment presented in the 2023 edition of The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI). Hunger and food insecurity remain far above pre-COVID-19-pandemic levels and are far off track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2. Global hunger, measured by the prevalence of undernourishment (SDG Indicator 2.1.1), remained relatively unchanged from 2021 to 2022, affecting around 9.2 percent of the world population in 2022, compared with 7.9 percent in 2019. It is estimated that between 691 and 783 million people in the world faced hunger in 2022. Considering the midrange (about 735 million), 122 million more people faced hunger in 2022 than in 2019, before the global pandemic.

The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity at the global level (SDG Indicator 2.1.2) remained unchanged for the second year in a row after increasing sharply from 2019 to 2020. About 29.6 percent of the global population – 2.4 billion people – were moderately or severely food insecure in 2022, of which about 900 million (11.3 percent of people in the world) were severely food insecure. Worldwide, food insecurity disproportionately affects women and people living in rural areas.

Since 2017, the SOFI report has identified and analysed the major drivers behind the increasing trends of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in the world. Strong evidence has emerged pointing to conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic slowdowns and downturns as the three major drivers external to agrifood systems that are behind the food insecurity of millions of people. The adverse effect of these drivers is exacerbated by poverty and inequality, which are structural causes of food insecurity, and by the unaffordability of healthy diets, a driver internal to agrifood systems.

These drivers are not only behind structural, long-term chronic food insecurity. Conflict, economic shocks and weather extremes are also the main drivers of the current high levels of acute food insecurity situations that require urgent humanitarian response. This can be expected, as chronic and acute food insecurity are not unrelated phenomena; in fact, shocks and protracted crises that drive acute food insecurity can occur so often and repeatedly that they provoke deterioration in chronic, more long-term structural food insecurity.

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine are manifestations of these major drivers on a global scale. The COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to contain it unleashed one of the worst global economic recessions in decades. The war in Ukraine has had significant economic repercussions in terms of global food, agricultural inputs and energy prices.

In the last ten years, conflicts, climate extremes and economic shocks have been increasing in frequency and intensity and are more often occurring in combination in several countries. Most chronically undernourished people live in low- and middle-income countries affected by multiple drivers. Countries

affected by multiple drivers have shown increases in the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) that are up to 12 times larger than the increase seen in countries affected by only a single driver.

There is no doubt that the major drivers of food insecurity will continue, requiring countries to take actions to build resilience against them. However, urbanization is a megatrend that must be factored into our efforts to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms. By 2050, it is projected that almost seven in ten people will live in cities, but even today the proportion is about 56 percent. New global estimates show that while food insecurity is higher in rural areas (affecting 33 percent of adults), it is also very high in peri-urban areas (28 percent) and urban areas (26 percent).

Urbanization is increasingly driving changes in agrifood systems across the rural-urban continuum, creating both challenges and opportunities for food security and access to affordable healthy diets. Urbanization is leading to rising and changing food demand and shifts in patterns of food supply – especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, the two regions exhibiting the highest urbanization rates.

Mr Máximo Torero Cullen, Chief Economist