

The impacts on global food security and nutrition of the military conflict in Ukraine

Briefing note by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition

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1. Food security and nutrition crises

The war instigated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has major implications for global food security and nutrition (FSN). The war has triggered new crises in food systems on top of existing challenges that were already undermining the global community's goal of achieving Sustainable Development Goal #2: "Zero hunger".

Most immediately, the war has sparked a major humanitarian emergency in Ukraine that is violating people's right to food and livelihood. Many towns and regions in Ukraine are experiencing a breakdown of the enabling environment for FSN, including the deterioration of health services, water and energy services, care of children and the elderly, social protection, and education systems. Over 10 million Ukrainians have fled their homes, 4 million of whom have left the country as refugees, while many hundreds of thousands remain trapped in makeshift shelters, without access to the necessities of life, including safe and nutritious food, water, and medicine (WFP 2022). Ninety percent of those displaced are women and children (UNICEF 2022).

The crisis is also causing enormous disruptions in global trade, including food markets. Together Russia and Ukraine are among the top three exporters of wheat, maize and sunflower oil, and Russia is a major exporter of energy and fertilizers, while Belarus, siding with Russia, is also a significant exporter of fertilizer (FAO 2022). Ukraine's farming, food production and export operations have come to a virtual standstill, while exports from Russia and Belarus have been sharply curtailed due to extensive sanctions and the unwillingness of insurers to provide insurance for cargo vessels in the Black Sea. The 2022 sowing season in Ukraine has already been deeply affected due to extensive and targeted damage to farm and food systems infrastructure, and severe environmental pollution from the use of weapons. Even if the war were to end soon, its implications for global food markets will last until at least the coming year.

With the global grain market overwhelmingly concentrated in just a handful of major exporting countries, the removal of Ukraine and Russia's exports from world food supplies means that the impact is being felt widely and deeply throughout the world. The main buyers of grain from the Black Sea region are largely in the Middle East and Africa, with some 30 countries relying on Russia and/or Ukraine for over 30% of their wheat imports (FAO 2022). Global grain prices rose sharply in response to the crisis, and over a month into the conflict, the markets for key staple grains are experiencing a massive price increase and excessive volatility, in particular wheat, maize, and soybeans (IFPRI 2022). Countries that depend on food imports, are facing higher import bills as a result, which is a major problem especially for low- and middle-income countries. At the same time, higher fertilizer and energy prices have resulted from the disruption to oil, natural gas and fertilizer exports from Russia and Belarus, which is pushing up the cost of farming around the world and hence elevating food prices (FAO, 2022). Moreover, higher energy prices increase the incentive to substitute land used for staple crops with land used for biofuel crops.

As was experienced in 2008 and 2011, higher and more volatile food prices translate into higher rates of hunger and malnutrition (FAO *et al.* 2021; HLPE 2012), especially for the poorest segments of society in low-income countries, who typically spend over 60% of their income on food (FAO *et al.* 2021). Price volatility also invites financial speculation on commodity markets, which can amplify trends (UNCTAD 2012) as well as extend negative impacts on nutrition for many years (Webb 2010).

The unfolding food crisis will exacerbate other crises that are also affecting FSN and food systems in profound ways. The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions that undermined FSN (HLPE 2021), with up to 161 million additional people experiencing severe hunger in 2020 (FAO *et al.* 2021) and many countries depleting their capacity for social protection spending (IMF 2022). The second year of the pandemic also saw an increase in global inflation, including higher food prices that already reached their highest levels since the 2008 and 2011 food crises in early February, before the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. In the backdrop is the global environment and climate crisis, which is creating major challenges for food systems, and weakening the capacity to provide food security and nutrition for all (IPCC 2022).

2. The need for a coordinated global policy response

A globally coordinated policy response is urgently needed to address the immediate humanitarian crisis and to build food systems that are more resilient to diverse shocks that are becoming increasingly frequent. This response must prioritize the food security and nutritional needs of those who are most affected by hunger and malnutrition, due to the multidimensional and intersectional aspects of inequality and vulnerability (for example, age, gender, location, and social group).

With the diverse range of challenges facing different parts of food systems, including international trade, food production, sustainability, and public health, governments may be tempted to respond in ways that are in their national interest in the short term, without consideration of the global public interest. Such policies will have severe impacts on those who are worst affected by the crisis. While export restrictions, for example, are often put in place to keep domestic food prices low, they lead to higher and more volatile international food prices, which affects the poorest people in low-income and food-import dependent countries. Responding only to the most immediate challenges, such as ramping up food production at all costs by expanding lands under cultivation, or increasing water and agrochemical use, could set back goals on longer-term challenges, including the need to protect biodiversity, regenerate soils and reduce carbon emissions.

Coordinating policy responses in the immediate term can build stronger trust in international food markets, to ensure the food that is currently available quickly gets to where it is needed most to prevent hunger and malnutrition in the most affected populations. A coordinated approach helps to ensure a holistic response and that agencies facilitating the provision of emergency food assistance – such as the World Food Programme (WFP) – are sufficiently funded to carry out their mandates effectively.

Longer-term responses to these crises require governments to harmonize strategies to build more resilient food systems, including those that prioritize diversity – in production systems, markets, and diets – to better manage growing risks such as war, climate, and disease, that threaten food systems and FSN, and that make food systems more adaptive, sustainable, and just, including in the face of shocks.

The CFS can play a lead role in coordinating policy responses to the current crisis. Current CFS policy products provide important guidance. The Framework for Action for FSN in Protracted Crises (CFS 2015), outlines key considerations for the response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as well as in the many other countries facing conflict, which is a major driver of food insecurity globally. CFS policy recommendations, including on Price Volatility (2011), Social Protection (2012), Food Losses and Waste (2014), Climate Change (2012), and Agroecology and Other Innovative Approaches (2021), among others, also provide essential guidance on addressing both the immediate and longer-term aspects of the crisis. CFS policy products, including on Food Systems and Nutrition (2021) and on Governance of Land (2012), as well as Responsible Investment in Agriculture (2014), all provide guidance on making food systems more resilient, just, and healthier. Building on its past work, and drawing on HLPE inputs, the CFS can also take a role in developing a framework for action on global food crises more broadly, and in calling for immediate action.

3. Recommendations

Short-term priorities to address the immediate crisis

- Significantly increase funding for immediate humanitarian assistance, including through WFP, for populations facing conflict-related hunger and famine in Ukraine and in other countries.
- Provide financial support and government backing of insurance services to benefit low-income, food import-dependent countries, including countries reliant on imports from the Black Sea region, to enable them to source food imports.

- Refrain from imposing food export restrictions, and exempt purchases by the WFP from any export restrictions that may be in place (as already considered in the WTO).
- Refrain from excessive stock holding, hoarding and panic buying of food grains, including at the national level.
- Monitor commodity futures markets to ensure that excessive speculation on food commodities is not taking place.
- Provide financial support to governments of countries whose funds for social protection measures are depleted, including support for rebuilding of basic services central to creating an enabling environment for FSN in conflict-affected regions, including for health and education.
- Consider a time-limited moratorium on the production of biofuels from edible crops.
- Provide financial assistance to restore and/or replace essential agriculture and food system infrastructure damaged in the war.

Medium- and longer-term priorities to build more resilient food systems and policy response frameworks to prevent future crises

- Invest in increasing and diversifying food production capacities at the national level where it is possible to do so sustainably, to build greater food system resilience.
- Invest in effective social protection systems that can expand rapidly in response to need and protect the food consumption and nutrition, especially for poor and vulnerable people.
- Invest in building nutritionally resilient populations, through improved diet quality, health systems and water access, who will be better able to withstand short-term food supply or price shocks.
- Invest in more climate resilient and less energy intensive forms of agricultural production, such as agroecology, that do not rely on excessive use of chemical fertilizers and fossil fuels and are less vulnerable to energy price fluctuations, to facilitate a smooth and equitable transition to diverse, healthy, and adequate food supplies.
- Increase the capacity of local and regional markets to meet food demand by investing in more diverse distribution systems, including infrastructure that supports territorial markets.
- Take measures to encourage diversification of diets to reduce demand for imported grains and grain-based livestock products, including support for local and small-scale producers to increase the production and consumption of culturally and ecologically appropriate foods.
- Redouble efforts to minimize food loss and waste.
- Strengthen and globally coordinate stronger regulations and information sharing on food commodity markets to prevent speculation that can amplify food price volatility.
- Deepen international policy coordination via the development of a CFS Global Food Crisis Response Framework.

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