Opinion – The Tenuous Links Between 'Food' and 'Migration' Crises

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The impending global food crisis has sparked fears in many EU policymakers' minds of a fresh 'migration crisis'. Concerns that severe food shortages could lead millions from Africa and the Middle East to head to Europe, in a similar fashion to 2015–2016 are prevalent. Yet, the instinctive response of 'hungry people' is first to look for food within, not beyond, their country's borders. Other policymakers' fears are slightly more nuanced. They emphasise that the soaring food and energy prices could lead to instability, which, in turn, could prompt new mass migration to the EU. Indeed, research evidence suggests that there is a strong correlation between spikes in food and energy costs, socio-political upheavals, and ensuing international migrations. However, underneath the former neo-Malthusian approach, and the latter's relatively more sober understanding lies a bitter truth: food insecurity makes headlines only when 'the hungry' cease to be the 'usual suspects'.

It is naïve to believe that the first thing that crosses a hungry person's mind is to leave their own country. To begin with, even in the poorest of countries those who emigrate are not the absolutely destitute. Rather, they are those who have the resources to embark on an expensive journey. Furthermore, food insecure people will try several different coping strategies before those who can afford it decide to emigrate. In the 2007–2008 global food price crisis, households cut back on a wide range of non-food expenditures and ate fewer meals, comprised of cheaper and often less nutritious items. Those residing in urban centres relied more on street food, which was frequently cheaper than cooking at home due to economies of scale. Instead of sending their young and able-bodied ones abroad, households opted for safeguarding their productive assets and human capital by, for example, taking on extra work. There was extensive use of savings and credit to buy food and the importance of migrant remittances in household finances increased.

The Overseas Development Institute notes that less than 5% of surveyed households in 2007–2008 reported resorting to potentially damaging behaviour, such as emigration, selling or pawning productive assets, or taking up socially unacceptable activities (e.g. begging, prostitution, theft). Indeed, food insecure people will exhaust all options before they – those few who have the means – make the hard decision to leave their country.

This relationship between food insecurity and migration changes if one adds socio-political upheavals to the equation. Acute spikes in food prices can generate tensions and instability, which, in turn, may force people to emigrate. The 'Arab Spring' is a typical case in point. However, this scenario is not as straightforward as it sounds. Consider pre-war Syria: a country marked by poor governance and unsustainable agricultural and environmental policies. Beginning in the winter of 2006–2007, Syria and the greater Fertile Crescent experienced the worst 3-year drought on record. The country's agricultural system in the north-eastern 'breadbasket' region, which normally generated over two-thirds of Syria's crop yields, collapsed, forcing the country to import large quantities of wheat for the first time since self-sufficiency was declared in the mid-1990s.

Between 2007 and 2008, wheat, rice, and animal feed prices more than doubled. Small and medium size farmers and herders saw their production wiped out; nutrition-related diseases among children skyrocketed; and school enrolment dropped by as much as 80%. A mass internal migration of rural farming families to urban centres followed. By the end of 2010, Syria's total urban population had grown to 13.8 million, a more than 50% increase in only 8

years. This population shock to the country's urban areas was left unattended and put further strain on Syria's resources. Overcrowding, ghettoization, rampant inequalities, unemployment, and criminality were neglected and became the fuel in the developing unrest, which soon turned into an all-out war with the tragic consequences that we are, by now, familiar with. Economic, political, social, as well as environmental factors come together and shape people's lives in complex ways.

All these factors are at play in the ongoing global food crisis; a crisis that is about food supply – unlike the one in 2007–2008 which was about food availability. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have accelerated the breakdown of a fragile food supply system that is reaching frequent tipping points. One of the main problems is the hyper-concentration of food markets and supply networks. Consider this: in the USA, four slaughterhouses account for approximately 80% of all the meat that is processed in the country. So, if many staff are unable to work due to sickness (such as in a pandemic), this will obviously result in major shortages. By the same token, although Ukraine accounts for less than 2% of the total amount of grain produced in the world, together with Russia it accounts for 30% of what is traded globally. A war between the two disrupts the entire system. Add to this the fact that most grain goes into producing protein, add the increasingly expensive 'raw materials' – such as energy and fertilisers, that go into its production – and add further the impact of climate change on grain crops … the mix becomes explosive. Explosive for whom though?

Policymakers in the developed world are normally fine with a certain number of people going hungry at any given time. This applies internationally, as well as domestically. Undernourishment, severe food insecurity and malnutrition are more prevalent in developing countries where 90% of the world's stunted children reside. Developed countries, especially those with high socioeconomic inequalities, are not immune to food insecurity either though. An estimated 60 million people, or 7.2%, of the population in high income countries used food banks in 2013, where household food insecurity typically ranges from 8% to 20% of their population (data from Pollard and Booth 2019).

In the current global food crisis, however, it is not just the 'usual suspects' that are going hungry. In the UK, food prices are a concern for more than three-quarters of Britons. The number using a food bank (where food is given freely, or at very low cost, by charities and similar organisations) has increased from around one in ten in 2021, to nearly one in six this year. Food insecurity is now more prevalent not only among those on lower incomes, but also for younger people, people with children, and for Asian, Black, African and Caribbean people. Similarly, on a global scale, food insecurity now impacts more people not only in low, but also in middle income countries.

Lebanon and Turkey are two of the worst-hit countries where food inflation recorded a 332% and a 94% increase respectively between June 2021 and June 2022, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. What makes these two countries special to EU policy circles is the fact that they play the role of 'migration buffers' for Europe. Indeed, Lebanon and Turkey are the two largest refugee-hosting countries in the world: the former in per capita and the latter in absolute terms.

In sum, global food crises and mass international migrations are not directly correlated. Narratives that attempt to forge a link between the two conceal an unsettling reality: food insecurity has crossed our backyard and is now sitting comfortably in our living room.

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