

Opinion – The War in Ukraine and Food Security in Africa

Written by Matthew Rochat

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MATTHEW ROCHAT, DEC 14 2022

Over the past 35 years, Africa is the only continent where the absolute number of people who are chronically undernourished has gone up. To put this into perspective, nearly 20% of Africans, representing approximately 238 million people in total, face persistent undernourishment. The problem of hunger is particularly drastic in the Horn of Africa region, where the COVID-19 pandemic, civil conflict, and one of the worst droughts in four decades have exacerbated the problem. In this region, over 80 million people are confronted with food insecurity and nearly 37 million are facing an acute hunger crisis.

In South Sudan nearly 75% of the population is dealing with a crisis of severe food insecurity. In northern Ethiopia, civil conflict has presented an added obstacle to commercial and humanitarian relief efforts, where nearly 20.4 million people are in severe need of food assistance. In Kenya, approximately 3.5 million are facing either an IPC Phase 3 crisis or IPC Phase 4 emergency in 2022, representing a 10% increase from 2021. In Somalia, nearly half of the population is facing acute food insecurity, including over 1.5 million children under the age of five. In the final months of 2022 it is estimated that 213,000 Somalians are facing a catastrophic IPC Phase 5 famine.

With the major escalation of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in February of 2022, the crisis of food insecurity in the Horn of Africa has gone from bad to worse. Russia and Ukraine are at the center of global agriculture markets and their conflict has major implications for food security around the world and especially in Africa. For starters, Russia and Ukraine are among the world's largest producers and exporters of cereal crops such as wheat, barley, and corn. In the past five years, they collectively represented 13% of the world's overall wheat production and 30% of global wheat exports. Russia and Ukraine are the third and fourth leading exporters of barley, and together they make up 20% of the world's barley production. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Ukraine is also the world economy's third largest exporter of corn, supplying 16% of global corn exports.

In addition to these essential commodities, Russia and Ukraine also represent major producers of sunflower oil, and combine for over 50% of the world's production and 75% of exports. Russia's economy is also a key supplier of critical agricultural inputs such as energy and fertilizer. In terms of energy, Russia is the global economy's leader in natural gas exports, second in petroleum exports, and the third largest source of coal, representing 20%, 11%, and 15% of each of these global exports, respectively. In terms of fertilizer production, Russia accounted for 15% of world exports in 2020, and was the top exporter of nitrogen fertilizers, second in potassic fertilizers, and third in phosphorus fertilizers. Not only does the War in Russia-Ukraine have major implications for food security on a global level, but it has particularly significant consequences for African countries who are heavily dependent on food sources from these two countries and are among the most susceptible to price fluctuations in global agricultural markets.

Given that most countries in the Horn of Africa rely heavily on the import of essential staple crops from Ukraine and Russia, in some cases as much as 90% of wheat imports, we can see that the ongoing nature of the Russia-Ukraine War has the potential to make the world's worst food crisis even more dire. It is also worth pointing out that, though the Horn of Africa is highly vulnerable at present, other regions of Africa are also facing extreme food insecurity crises that have been amplified due to the ongoing war. As the protracted conflict grinds on, disruptions in agricultural production will continue to perpetuate problems of insufficient food supply throughout Africa. In recent months, a deal

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brokered by the United Nations and Turkey has allowed some grain exports safe passage from Ukrainian ports, but this arrangement remains fragile and fraught with uncertainty.

However, African countries and leaders are not powerless, and should utilize this crisis as an opportunity to mobilize support for policy change. Although the Russia-Ukraine War has exacerbated food insecurity and undernourishment in Africa in the short run, it can serve to bolster Africa's food security interests in the long run. This begins with an acknowledgment that Africa is home to 600 million hectares of uncultivated arable land, representing nearly 65% of the global total. Moreover, 70% of Africa's population make a living from agriculture. Despite the continent's remarkable factor endowments, crop yields are far below their potential. With this as the starting point, the Russia-Ukraine War has brought added awareness to the bizarre phenomenon whereby the world's most fertile continent is importing \$35 billion worth of food each year. In other words, why is a continent that is exceedingly abundant in both arable farmland and youthful agricultural workers dependent on external sources to feed itself?

Similar to the way that European countries have come together to initiate the gradual process of reducing dependency on Russian energy in response to the recent conflict, so too can Africa begin to wean off its external dependency on essential agricultural commodities. In effect, Russia's War in Ukraine can empower the leaders of the African Union's 55 member states to overcome the collective action problem and pursue a bold strategy that begins on their home soil, promoting food security through greater agricultural independence.

Indeed, calls have been growing louder and louder for Africa to reduce its dependence on food imports. Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank, emphasized this point in a recent interview, declaring the urgent need to "intervene now and support Africa to produce the food." This pressing sentiment was also echoed by African Union Commissioner of Agriculture Josefa Sacko of Angola in the opening remarks of an African Union conference on October 10, 2022. She impressed the need to "act with urgency and at scale in responding to the current food insecurity and nutrition crisis exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine."

By 2050, the population of Africa is expected to double, reaching nearly 2.5 billion. If the continent's current food security is in serious distress at present, it is only going to get worse in the decades to come if nothing changes and the continent remains overly reliant on outside sources for nourishment. For all the investment in roads, bridges, ports, trains, and otherwise that has taken place in recent decades spurred on by China's Belt and Road Initiative, it is imperative that African leaders prioritize the most essential. As one of the world's most agriculturally productive countries, China can also utilize its expanding influence in Africa to invest in the agricultural sector and provide technical support for African farmers to increase crop yields. Without an abundant and reliable food supply, Africa will not be able to unleash its growing, youthful workforce to unlock its economic development potential.

African policymakers and leaders would do well to take the words of Winston Churchill to heart that one should "never let a good crisis go to waste." In this way, the current crisis of acute food insecurity, exacerbated by Russia's War in Ukraine, presents an opportunity to reform the continent's agricultural policy to ensure greater self-sufficiency, particularly for essential grains such as wheat, corn, and rice along with other caloric staples such as yams, cassava, bananas, and plantains. For essential foodstuffs, African countries can harmonize a policy that ensures that most food produced on the continent stays within the continent. While some extra-continental imports of key staples may be necessary in the short-term, the long-term aim should also be to protect these essential industries by reducing imports. Leaders of the African Union can utilize the urgency of the moment to spearhead an agenda that puts Africa's food security need unapologetically at the forefront. Before becoming the "next breadbasket of the world," African leaders are right to prioritize their food security needs at home.

About the author:

Matthew Rochat is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California Santa Barbara and a Graduate Fellow with the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies.

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His current work focuses on political economy, foreign policy, and economic development. His dissertation looks at the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa.