



Ukraine crisis: How and why it could cause hunger crises globally to worsen

The quick read:

The crisis in Ukraine has caused food [prices to skyrocket](#) globally in the last few weeks with some [forecasts](#) estimating up to a 20 percent increase. This is adding pressure to the already devastating hunger crises across the world and causing fears of food shortages.

Over 161 million people across 42 countries are already suffering from acute hunger. More than half a million people are experiencing famine-like conditions in parts of East Africa and the Middle East, and 10.5 million people are facing high levels of hunger and malnutrition in the Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Ukraine and Russia are important players on the global food export market. Russia is the top wheat exporter with a share of almost 16 percent of the global market, while Ukraine is the third largest exporter of wheat at almost 10 percent of the global market. Importantly, for a number of countries with high levels of hunger Ukraine and Russia have an outsized impact, as they import a significant share of their wheat from Ukraine or Russia. For example, the hunger hotspot of [Eritrea imports all its wheat supply from those two countries alone](#).

The most important problem, however, is affordable access to food, not its availability. People in low-income countries cannot afford the prices of goods like bread which, in many countries, is made from imported wheat. The reason? Supply chain disruptions and climate-driven disasters, like the drought in South Sudan, coupled with conflict, have driven prices up when wages have been unable to keep pace.

In the short-term, donor governments must bridge the gap between what people can pay and higher prices and deliver much needed aid to people facing severe hunger in the Middle East and Africa who will be even more impacted by the rise in food prices. In the long-term, governments must support the development of sustainable, resilient and local food systems, based on small-scale production and family farming that would form the very foundation of people's food security. The current crisis underscores the urgency and importance of this.

The long(er) read:

What is happening?

Global agricultural markets went into hyper-drive when the Ukraine crisis erupted. Despite the fact that the world's reserves of wheat are healthy – that is, there is no immediate problem of the global supply suddenly outstripping demand – the influential Chicago futures market in wheat [increased by 50% in a matter of days](#). There are also fears that there will be no planting this summer in Ukraine due to the crisis, which would put further pressure on food prices.

Food prices were already high before the Ukraine crisis with an increase in wheat prices of [80 percent between April 2020 and December 2021](#). The FAO Food Price Index which tracks the international prices of food items, [has risen to a new all-time high](#), exceeding the previous top of 2011. Additional price hikes and food inflation are likely, with inflation extending to fertilisers and energy.

Although the volatile wheat market eased, it remains high, and for people living in countries that depend on wheat exports, and for the entire global humanitarian food system, that is potentially catastrophic. The world will be tracking poverty and hunger spikes directly as a result of this market phenomenon, from the day the crisis in Ukraine began.

This will intensify or worsen hunger crises in countries like Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan and many others. Globally, the increase in food prices will be felt more acutely by those who already bear the brunt of hunger: women, children and vulnerable communities.

Oxfam notes that on March 11 an Extraordinary Meeting of G7 Agriculture Ministers said: “We will not tolerate artificially inflated prices that could diminish the availability of food and agricultural products. We will also fight against any speculative behaviour that endangers food security or access to food for vulnerable countries or populations. Therefore, we are closely monitoring markets affecting the food system, including futures markets, to ensure full transparency.” This commitment should be implemented now.

Who imports and who relies on Russian and Ukrainian wheat exports?

To feed their people, 14 low or lower-middle income countries import more than 50 percent of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine, some of whom are already facing famine-like conditions. Almost [50 countries depend on Ukraine and Russia for over 30 percent](#) of their wheat import needs.

Eritrea and Somalia are almost entirely dependent on wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine. Eritrea sourced the entirety of its wheat imports in 2021 from both Russia (53 percent) and Ukraine (47 percent). Somalia sourced more than 90 percent. Yemen sources almost half of its wheat needs from those two countries.

What has been the situation so far?

Food prices are already high due to supply chain disruptions and the economic downturn following the Covid-19 pandemic. Many countries do not have the resources to respond to multiple crises situations created by the pandemic, the impacts of the climate change and long, drawn-out conflicts, combined to the crisis in Ukraine causing volatility in food markets. There are no sufficient safety nets in place to support people in vulnerable situations.

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The current global food system is broken. The world saw a similar food price crisis in 2007 and 2008. The FAO Food Price Index rose by nearly 40 percent in 2007, compared with 9 percent the previous year. Oxfam [shed light on how hunger was driven by people not being able to buy food, not because there was not enough food](#). However, politicians and decision-makers focused on scaling up production, both to stabilize prices and meet population growth. These decisions have failed to address the global food system's structural deficiencies, instead offering 'business as usual' while more and more people go hungry. It is crucial that they learn from past mistakes.

In recent years, the world has witnessed record harvests of grain production, and [almost 3 billion tons of cereals](#) is estimated to be produced in 2022. Increasing global production is not the solution. Farmers produce more than needed to [feed the whole planet](#). Inequality and poverty are the main drivers of hunger – people cannot afford to put food on the table.

While Covid-19 has shown how fragile the global food system is to external shocks, the Ukraine crisis shows how much low-income countries depend on the world market for their basic food supplies, basing their food security on a handful of grain exporting countries. This dependency on food imports makes these countries – already low on foreign reserves – extra vulnerable to market disruptions and price increases.

Where are the hunger hotspots?

Case Study: East Africa

How many are hungry?

Over 21 million people in East Africa are experiencing extreme hunger.

Why?

Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia are facing one of the worst droughts in 40 years. South Sudan has suffered a fifth consecutive year of severe flooding, disrupting the lives and livelihoods of 835,000 people, and halting farming. These events have worsened an already dramatic hunger situation caused by conflict, COVID-19 and the recent locust infestation which was the worst in 70 years in Kenya and the worst in 25 years in Ethiopia and Somalia.

Rising food prices are exacerbating the food security crisis faced by these communities. In January 2022, food prices for basic staple grains in Somalia were more than double what they were the previous year. Across the whole region, reduced harvests have squeezed supplies and increased prices.

[One mother in South Sudan](#) said she and her children escaped the flood waters inundating their home in Ganyiel, and now says, "The biggest issue I am facing with my children is hunger."

Impact of Ukraine crisis?

Both Ukraine and Russia are important suppliers of wheat and wheat products to countries in East Africa. Disruptions in the supply chain will likely push more people to the brink of hunger.

Case Study: Yemen

How many are hungry?

More than 17 million people - over half of Yemen's population - do not have sufficient food to eat, and there are pockets of famine-like conditions.

Why?

Four million people have fled their homes and farms and left their jobs as a result of seven years of conflict. Because of population growth, locust infestations and uncontrolled extraction of groundwater, the country no longer has sufficient cultivable land to feed its population. Yemen has long imported over 90 percent of its staple foods, mainly wheat and rice.

Impact of Ukraine crisis?

From 20 December 2021 to 6 March 2022, 42 percent of Yemen's wheat was shipped from Ukraine according to a shipping source consulted by Oxfam. As a result of the Ukraine crisis, one of Yemen's main grain importers told Oxfam that global prices of grain have increased, and they are struggling to secure wheat in international markets because there has been such a drastic increase in demand. During the first week of March 2022, wheat prices increased by almost 20 percent according to an Oxfam survey with Yemeni retailers and traders in Sana'a.

Case Study: Syria

How many? 12.4 million are facing a hunger crisis.

Why?

Syrians used to fear dying of war, now they fear dying of hunger. Food prices have doubled in the last year, and 6 out of 10 Syrians – that is 12.4 million people – are struggling to put food on the table. This is the highest number of people going hungry since the start of the conflict.

In Damascus, people often queue for hours to get subsidised bread at state bakeries. They sometimes wait up to six hours –nearly a full working day. We hear stories of families going to bed early to avoid the pangs of hunger.

One Syrian woman told Oxfam: "It makes no sense for us to think about tomorrow, if we cannot even figure out what to put on our table today to feed our children."

Impact of Ukraine crisis?

Syria relies heavily on Russia for its wheat imports. While data is difficult to obtain, the crisis in Ukraine has seen the Syrian government starting to ration food reserves, including wheat, sugar, oil, and rice amid fears of shortages and price surges.

What needs to be done?

SAVE LIVES NOW: Rich governments must immediately cover the funding gap in the 2022 UN Humanitarian appeals for East Africa and the Middle East. Increased funding for food assistance and agriculture is urgently need to save lives and avert a looming hunger catastrophe. The UN ask for the two regions (including Ethiopia, Somalia, and regional refugee appeal for the Horn of Africa and Yemen, along with the [regional response for Syria](#)) is currently 99 percent underfunded. Increased food assistance needs and higher costs of

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providing humanitarian assistance as a result of price hikes means that these appeals are even more urgent, and may increase.

DON'T BREAK PLEDGES: [Donor governments must not divert aid, resources, or political interest already committed to existing food crises.](#) All people suffering crises, whether new or protracted, have equal rights to survive and ultimately rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

REGULATE THE MARKETS: Governments should avoid export bans and identify measures to rein in and re-govern the markets. Transparency of the markets must be increased, and new rules implemented to prevent excessive financial speculation from fuelling food price volatility.

TRANSFORM FOOD SYSTEMS: We need a food system that works for everybody. This means a food system that can stand against shocks such as the climate crisis and rapid food inflation on international food markets and does not contribute to environmental destruction. Governments must provide the public funding necessary to create fair, gender-just, and sustainable food systems, particularly focusing on agroecological production which is inherently less dependent on imports of feed and agricultural inputs, and more resilient to climate change impacts.

SAFEGUARD FOOD SECURITY IN TRADE POLICIES: International trade rules should support the development of local and regional food systems and avoid unfair competition with big agriculture conglomerates. Regulating domestic food industries of high exporting countries is needed to ensure exports do not threaten the development and stability of local and regional markets.

DEVELOP UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION: There is an urgent need for every government to implement universal and adequate social protection measures to support their people, ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable people have social protection. Action should include unconditional cash or food transfer scheme which are widely rather than narrowly targeted, regular and predictable, and automatically triggered by price rises.

Need more information?

Oxfam spokespersons are available for comment.

Photos from hunger spots are available upon request.

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