

World Food Crisis

Why it has little to do
with Russia's attack
on Ukraine – and how
it can be addressed

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List of abbreviations

AFSI	L'Aquila Food Security Initiative	LIFDCs	Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries
CFS	Committee on World Food Security	PoU	Prevalence of Undernourishment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
GAFS	Global Alliance for Food Security	UN	United Nations
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development	UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	WFP	World Food Programme

Abstract

The record number of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition is unfolding into a global food crisis. While Russia's war against Ukraine and subsequent export blockades have led to an aggravation of the crisis, its root causes lie in the structural fragility and injustice of the global food system, as well as drivers such as protracted and growing conflicts, soaring food prices and the increasing impact of climate change on the food security of millions of people. The article highlights how attention needs to be shifted towards the causes of food insecurity rather than short-term shocks in order to address the global crisis by expanding resilience and food sovereignty in affected countries.

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Since Russia's attack on Ukraine, there are numerous alarming reports on the global food crisis.

Since Russia's attack on Ukraine, there are numerous alarming reports on the global food crisis, which has been the subject of intense discussion since the war began. It finally garnered impressive attention, shedding light on the often-neglected topic of hundreds of millions of people still suffering from hunger in the 21st century. The number of people facing hunger has been steadily increasing for years. However, for the public debate on the food crisis to contribute to its solution, it must analytically separate cause and consequence and focus on the decisive factors in the increasingly complex food crises. Those who do so will realise that this war and the crisis have relatively little connection to each other.

An indication of this can be observed by briefly examining food prices, which have been the subject of intense discussion in Germany and worldwide. Global food prices, which rose rapidly after the Russian invasion into Ukraine, have actually been below pre-

war levels for quite some time now (FAO Food Price Index). Despite this, it is not only the United Nations (UN) that is warning of the biggest world food crisis of modern times in 2023 (UN OCHA 2023). Are these statements merely exaggerated claims by aid organisations driven by their own interests?

Fragile world food system

There is no denying that the developments are dramatic: 3.1 billion people, more than one in three people worldwide, suffer from malnutrition (FAO 2022). Estimates in 2022 indicated that 828 million people are chronically undernourished (ibid.). 258 million individuals are acutely food insecure in 58 countries and are in urgent need of assistance (GRFC 2023). 900,000 people are currently facing famine and are struggling to survive (WFP 2023). (see figure 1)

(For further clarification, see the box with definitions of malnutrition, undernutrition, acute food insecurity, and famine on page 11).

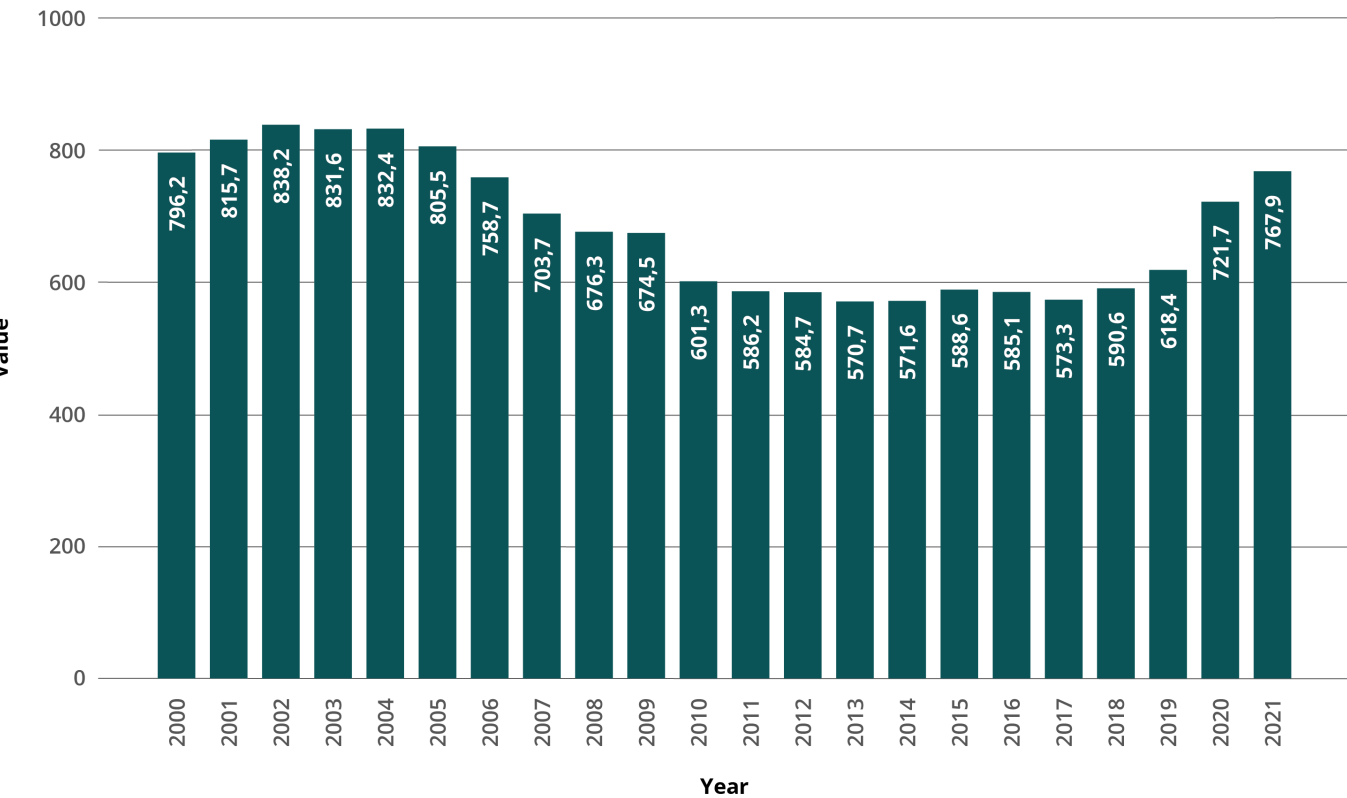


Figure 1: Number of undernourished people in million worldwide between 2000 and 2021
Source: FAO

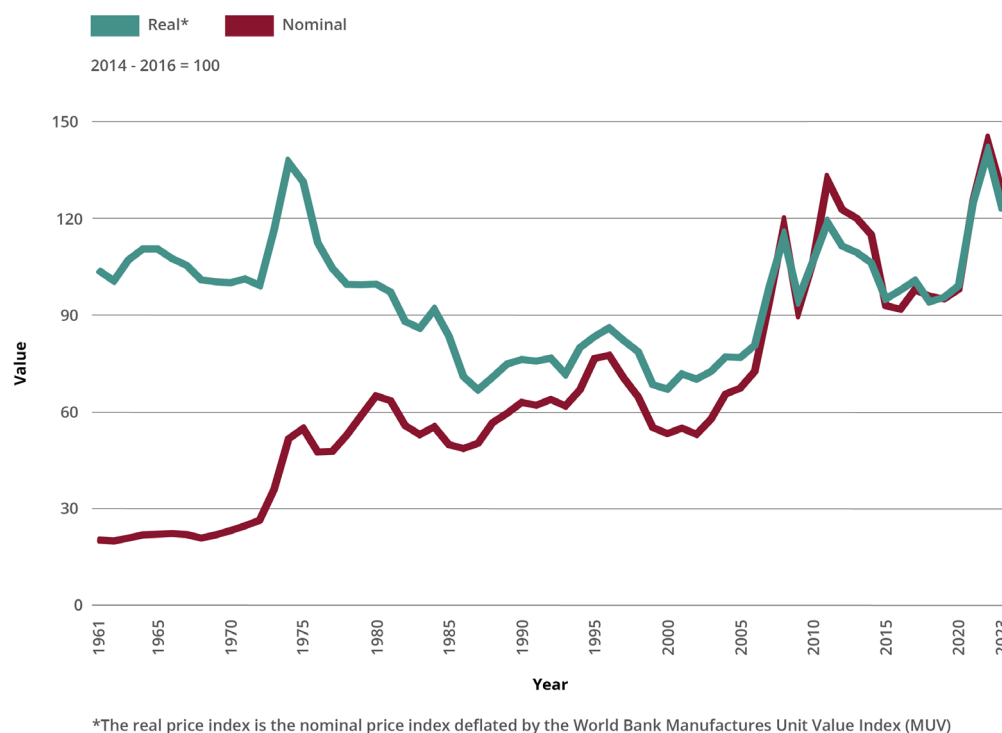


Figure 2: FAO Food Price Index in nominal and real terms
Source: FAO

FAO Food Price Index

Month/Year	Food Price Index
2021	
December	133.7
2022	
January	135.6
February	141.2
March	159.7
April	158.4
May	158.1
June	154.7
July	140.6
August	137.6
September	136.0
October	135.4
November	134.7
December	131.8
2023	
January	130.2
February	129.8
March	127.0
April	127.7
May	124.0
June	122.3

Table 1: FAO Food Price Index
Source: FAO

Therefore, it becomes even more crucial that since the outset of the war, the attention of politicians and the media has been directed towards the rapidly increasing world hunger. The Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea, which caused a virtual halt to exports of up to 20 million tonnes of wheat and maize stored in Ukrainian silos (Deutsche Welle 2022), had an immediate impact on the FAO's global Food Price Index, which reached an all-time high of nearly 160 points in March last year (see table 1). Russia turned Ukrainian exports and global hunger into a weapon. But how was it possible for a single country's lack of exports to trigger such an escalation in food prices and prompt crisis summits? Take wheat, for example: While Ukraine holds significance as an important wheat producer, it ultimately ranks only seventh in terms of global wheat production.

To comprehend the destructive consequences that a sudden halt in exports can trigger, it is imperative to

shift the focus of the debate towards the structural flaws and injustices of an extremely fragile world food system and broaden our perspective. Firstly, the world food system has been in crisis for years. Secondly, it is important to distinguish which of the four pillars of food security has collapsed in the hunger regions and why: availability, access, utilisation or stability?¹

There continues to be an abundant production of food per capita worldwide.

While utilisation (ensuring adequate nutrition under hygienic conditions) and stability (long-term food security) are seldom subjects of controversy, questions of availability and access to food are often mixed up in the debate or even considered to be synonymous. However, this is misleading. Global food availability has not been a major concern until today: Despite challenges such as population growth, inefficient cultivation methods (resulting in food losses and monocultures) and unsustainable diet habits (such as land-intensive

¹ The four pillars of food security were defined by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The organisations involved in the CFS are the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

cattle feed production to support the unsustainably high global meat consumption per capita) and despite the utilisation of bioenergy on a significant scale, there continues to be an abundant production of food per capita worldwide (Mbow et al. 2019). The primary predicament lies in the distribution of food and the subsequent issue of access, which form a fundamental problem in addressing global hunger.

The world food crisis is an "affordability crisis", not an "availability crisis".

These problems have various causes, but two in particular. Firstly, there has been a sharp increase in the number and duration of conflicts,

resulting in dire consequences for access to markets, fields and production sites. The deliberate use of hunger as a weapon exacerbates this situation (ALNAP 2022). By no coincidence, the biggest hunger crises in the world are currently smouldering in conflict areas such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen. Secondly, millions of people lack access to food due to the sharp rise in food prices. The world food crisis is thus an "affordability crisis", not an "availability crisis".

This is reflected in the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Food Price Index. War-related price increases on world markets alone cannot explain the current world food crisis because they are already in the past. As early as December 2022, the Food Price Index had dropped again to 132 points, slightly lower than pre-war levels in Ukraine (see table 1). The export blockade of Ukrainian grain in the Black Sea ended in July of the previous year due to UN mediation within the framework of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, putting an end to the price escalation experienced in the preceding months. Thus, when certain UN organisations continue to refer to record prices to this day, they only present a partial truth. However, a critical aspect remains: Food prices were already approximately 40 % higher before the war compared to two years earlier, and nearly twice as high as in 2005, reaching an all-time high (see figure 2).

Global dependencies

Several factors contribute to this medium-term and sustained price increase, including the consequences

of the Covid-19 pandemic, bottlenecks in supply chains, heavily increased transport and logistics costs, the parallel rise in oil, energy and fertiliser prices (FAO 2022). Simultaneously, as prices increased, the number of hungry people began to steadily

It is worth noting that the fight against hunger had achieved great successes over the years, often unnoticed by the public.

rise once again. It is worth noting that the fight against hunger had achieved great successes over the years, often unnoticed by the public. Between 2003 and 2014, the number of the then

838 million hungry people worldwide dropped by more than 268 million, despite the global population increasing by nearly one billion people during the same period (see figure 1). The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 to end global hunger by 2030 seemed within reach. However, current projections predict a further increase in the number of hungry people, potentially surpassing the record set in 2003, if the current trend continues.

However, high food prices are not inherently problematic, as they can also serve as production incentives, promoting increased supply and agricultural attractiveness. So why do they still possess the potential to trigger the world food crisis that has been smouldering for years?

Among the countries most severely impacted by hunger, 47 of them are categorised as Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries (LIFDCs), meaning they are net food importers (FAO 2021a) (see figure 3). Additionally, 38 of these countries are net energy importers, the latter with partly dramatic consequences in light of the current energy crisis (UNCTAD 2017). This import dependency leaves them vulnerable to external shocks and fragile in their ability to navigate through price fluctuations, as evidenced by previous crisis-ridden price rises in 2008 and 2011. These states, which were once considered breadbaskets of their regions, have been transformed into food importers due to misguided government policies and decades of ill-advised guidance from the Global North, including institutions like the World Bank, promoting an overly liberal market economic model based on labour division (Weltagrarrat 2008).

² According to the Integrated Food Security Phase (IPC) classification system, the highest level of hunger crises is a famine. This technical term is linked to specific conditions. See box with definitions on page 11.

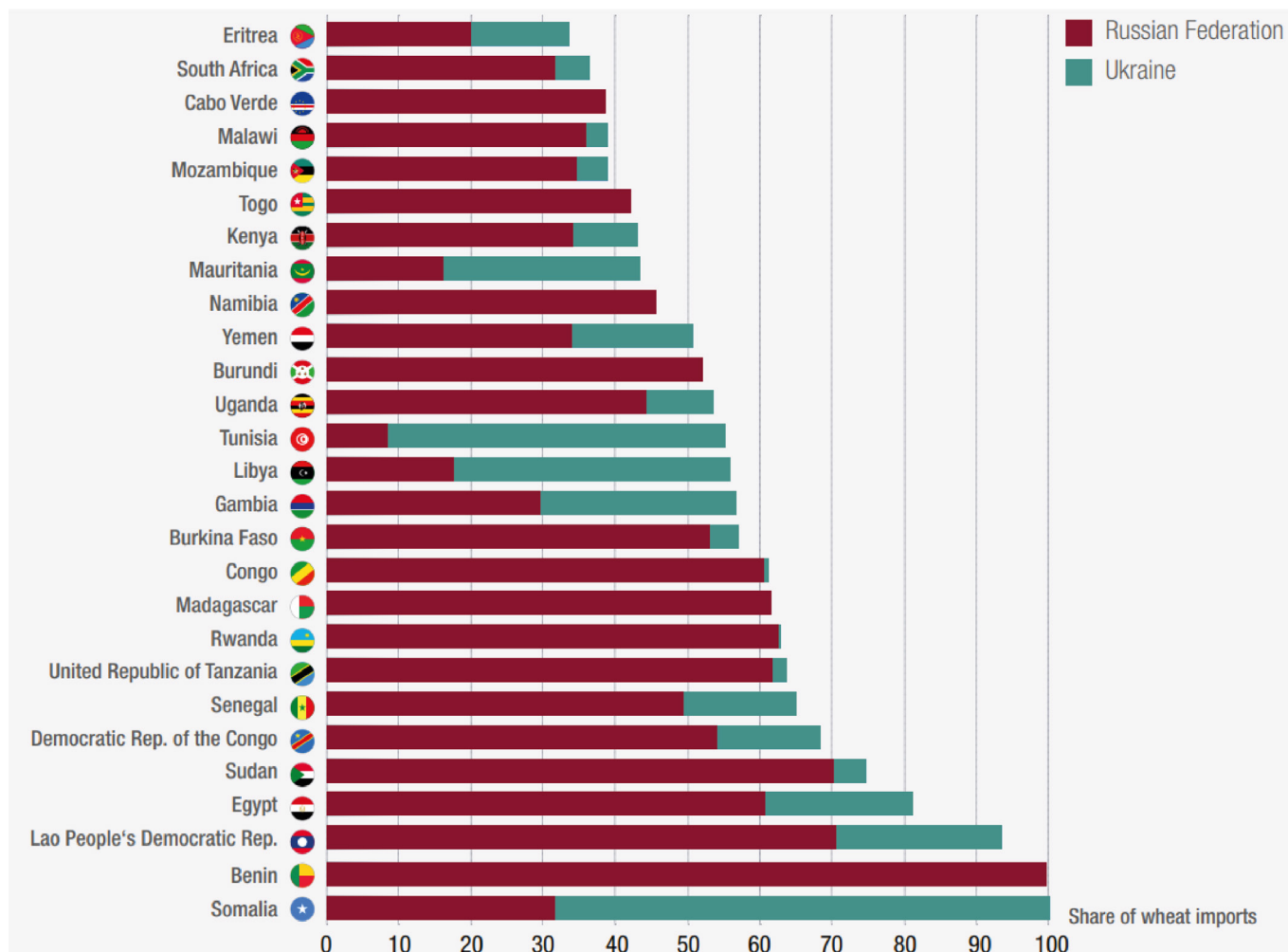


Figure 3: Wheat dependence in African and least developed countries in percent
Source: UNCTAD

This economic model not only led to today's much debated dependencies of the German economy on Russia and China but has also created dependencies of the Global South on (often highly subsidised) grain imports from industrialised countries. Another aspect of this model is the influence of global financial markets. In 2008, the world food crisis was largely a byproduct of the financial crisis, as global financial investors sought safe havens and invested heavily in the grain markets for speculative purposes.

Again, in the autumn of 2022, millions of hungry people became the pawns of the financial markets in the course of interest rate hikes in the United States. While international food prices have since significantly decreased, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD),

Egyptians, Lebanese, and Ethiopians continue to pay more than twice as much for food as they did just a few years ago. The cause of this disparity was the sharp appreciation in the exchange rate of the US dollar resulting from interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve, which made imported food unaffordable in the respective national currency for millions of people (UNCTAD 2022).

Crisis of food sovereignty

The world food crisis can be understood as a crisis of food sovereignty (see figure 3). However, it is important to note that this concept does not necessarily align with the hopes of the dissociation theory, intensively discussed in the 1970s, on the supposedly

necessary decoupling of the economies of the Global South from the world market (Senghaas 1977). Instead, it revolves around the objective of enhancing the resilience of states in the face of external shocks. In the food sector, this entails establishing a solid foundation of local or regional self-sufficiency with basic commodities.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, the realisation of food sovereignty in many developing countries faces opposition from two significant trends. Firstly, there are internal problems in the affected countries, including inequality, inadequate governance, poor infrastructure and insufficient investment by the countries themselves in once crucial rural development (Welthungerhilfe 2022). Twenty years ago, African states made a commitment through the Maputo Declaration to reinvest at least 10 % of their public budgets in rural development (AUDA-NEPAD 2003). To date, however, only a handful of countries have achieved this ambitious goal.

To establish food sovereignty and overcome the world food crisis, it is imperative to tackle the climate crisis at the same time.

Secondly, climate change is already posing new agricultural and humanitarian challenges for entire regions. Anthropogenic climate change caused by industrialised countries resulted in three times more climate-related disasters, such as floods, storms and droughts, between 2010 and 2020 than in the 1980s, often with devastating consequences for harvests and livelihoods³ (UN OCHA 2023). In the Horn of Africa, where the numbers of hungry people have soared again, it has hardly rained in many countries for five years. To establish food sovereignty and overcome the world food crisis, it is imperative to tackle the climate crisis at the same time – starting with mitigating its consequences for world food supply.

The impacts of climate change pose devastating risks. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2014), climate-related food insecurity and malnutrition may be one of the most dangerous threats to livelihoods in the coming years, due to the large number of people at risk (Tirado et al. 2015). The IPCC reports demonstrate the broad scientific

evidence of how the effects of global warming are linked to an increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters. Small changes in the global average temperature can have an enormous impact on the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change points out their severe consequences for the agricultural sector and, ultimately, for food security.

The extent to which climate change is already causing natural disasters and influencing food crises and emergencies has been extensively documented. Over the past 50 years, the number of registered natural disasters has increased fivefold due to climate change, the increase in extreme weather disasters and improved monitoring. Despite today's significantly improved early warning systems, these disasters cause an average of US\$ 202 million in damage worldwide and claim the lives of 115 people on average – per day (WMO 2021). The overwhelming majority of these disasters (83 %) were caused by weather extremes and climate-related events such as floods, storms and heat waves in the last ten years.

The humanitarian implications are undeniably devastating. As early as 2019, approximately 108 million people worldwide were dependent on humanitarian aid due to floods, storms, droughts or fires. Estimates suggest that this number could nearly double by 2050 due to climate-related disasters and the socio-economic impacts of climate change (IFRC 2019). Oxfam has revealed in a study that famines in climate crisis areas have more than doubled in the last six years. These include not only droughts but also floods and extreme weather events (Oxfam 2022).

The impact of climate change on agriculture and agricultural productivity is also an important factor in this context: “Disasters have the potential to affect all dimensions of food security and nutrition – food availability, access, utilization and stability. The association between extreme events and food security and nutrition indicators corroborates this.” (FAO 2021b, 36).

Climate change has already led to global production losses in agricultural crops and livestock.

According to FAO estimates, climate change has already led to global production losses in agricultural crops and

³ Statement by Climate Researcher Mojib Latif, Helmholtz-Zentrum für Ocean Science Kiel, in an interview with German Newspaper Augsburg Allgemeine Zeitung. Available at: <https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/panorama/Wetter-Klimaexperte-Latif-Die-Hitzewellen-sind-nicht-mehr-normal-id54971236.html>.

livestock worth more than US\$ 116 billion in 2008-2018 (FAO 2021c). According to a recent study by Stanford University, global agricultural productivity is now 21 % below the level it would have been without the effects of climate change (Ortiz-Bobea et al. 2021).

Researchers and humanitarian practitioners both argue thus that the profound linkage between climate change and food security requires policies that integrate both goals and create mutual benefits (e.g. El Bilali et al. 2020, ACF 2021). "The strong link between climate risk and food security suggests that improving climate risk management must be part of the strategy for achieving SDG 2" (Hansen et al. 2022, 2). Failure to adequately adapt to the impacts of climate change is already costing lives and livelihoods in affected regions around the world through climate-related disasters. The vulnerability of food systems must therefore be addressed through transformative strategies. These include more regional supply and utilisation chains, resilient and locally adapted plant seeds, a change in global diets (especially a reduction of meat and dairy products) and the provision of sufficient financial resources (Dicker et al. 2021).

Climate change also poses major challenges for humanitarian organisations.

Beyond that, climate change also poses major challenges for humanitarian organisations themselves. On the one hand, the impacts of climate change contribute to further

pressures in finances, resources and capacities of the already-overburdened humanitarian system. In addition, climate-related crises call for a focus and/or shift towards anticipatory and resilience-building measures that at times exceed the mandate of humanitarian agencies and require cooperation with development organisations. This challenges the traditionally-reactive approach of humanitarian aid and the assessment of needs during a crisis. Against the backdrop of climate change, anticipatory measures and early needs assessment based on forecasts must be increasingly employed in operations (Eriksen et al. 2017).

A matter of funding

Reclaiming the food sovereignty of heavily import-dependent countries requires great internal efforts on the part of the countries themselves, as well as the creation of external trade policy and financial

scope. However, in the area of financial support, the trends are concerning.

Despite increasing hunger, between 2017 and 2020, global humanitarian food assistance dropped from US\$ 10.8 billion to US\$ 8.0 billion (GRFC 2022). Funding for the food security cluster in the humanitarian action plans was only 47 % covered in 2021 despite an absolute increase in funding in this area (GNACF 2022). As a result, resources per person in high or acute food insecurity have dropped significantly despite high-level initiatives such as the High-Level Task Force on Hunger Crisis Prevention set up by UN Secretary-General Guterres.

Germany plays a unique and somewhat ambivalent role in this context. On the one hand, the Federal Government demonstrates great commitment to addressing global food crises. This is exemplified by the establishment of the Global Alliance for Food Security (GAFS) during the G7 Summit in Elmau in 2022, initiated by the German Federal Government. GAFS brings together influential organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Bank, regional development banks, the European Commission and the African Union, in order to enable quick responses to food crises around the world. In addition, GAFS aims to strengthen the sustainable transformation of global agricultural and food systems in the medium- and long-term (Bundestag 2022). In financial terms, Germany has further increased its overall humanitarian commitment as the world's second-largest donor, and nutrition issues remain a focus of German humanitarian aid and development cooperation.

Nevertheless, policy initiatives such as GAFS appear to be limited in effectiveness and coordination with similar initiatives. Additionally, Germany's financial commitment was already on tenuous grounds since 2022. The Federal Government's budget draft did not anticipate any further increase in German funding in the food sector. However, in November of the same year, the Bundestag's budget committee approved an additional "food billion" at the eleventh hour. While this decision was highly praised for its substance, it posed a challenge in terms of timing due to the rigid German budget law, which stipulates that all expenditures must be made by December 31st of a given year.

The late transfer of funds of such magnitude within the German budget framework can only be effectively facilitated by large UN organisations through internal transfers. While these organisations are recognised for their important work, the timing of such budget decisions no longer allows for following criteria based on which actor can provide the fastest and most effective aid in a given context.

The combination of German budgetary bureaucracy combined with a dramatic shortage of staff in the humanitarian sections of the Federal Foreign Office (Südhoff and Hövelmann 2023) has resulted in a situation where only 11 % of German humanitarian aid in 2022 was implemented through non-governmental organisations while around four-fifths of the funds are channelled to UN organisations each year. In 2022, about one-third of this was allocated to a single UN organisation, which has raised concerns among government representatives about the evolving dependency relationships.

The budget outlook in Germany raises concerns regarding the funding for humanitarian aid.

Moreover, the budget outlook in Germany raises concerns regarding the funding for humanitarian aid. Once again, it was the Bundestag that corrected the planned reduction of the budget for humanitarian aid and raised it from 2 billion euros to 2.7 billion euros in 2023 in the Federal Government's draft budget. The prospects for the 2024 budget draft that is currently being discussed are even grimmer. The budget draft published in June 2023 foresees a 22 % drop in the budget of the Federal Foreign Office (and thus inevitably of German humanitarian aid) in 2024 (Spiegel 2023).

It, therefore, seems at least questionable whether Germany will also regard the proclaimed Zeitenwende (turning point) in security policy as well in the sense of the concept of "human security" (Prezelji 2008; Commission on Human Security 2003), including the global food security, which is endangered as never before. Similarly, the humanitarian world is also experiencing a barely noticed Zeitenwende: The need for emergency relief worldwide is 20 times higher today than it was 20 years ago – and emergency relief has never been more underfunded.

It is essential to think of human security in a holistic and reinforcing way.

In the course of the change of times and the new German "National Security Strategy"⁴, it is therefore essential to think of human security in a holistic and reinforcing way. However, critics of the Zeitenwende warn of a dangerous tension, and this concern is not limited to recent budget debates in Germany. With the Zeitenwende, "the conditions for the implementation are also deteriorating for global goals, such as the foreign policy climate agenda and the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in the United Nations", analyses Brzoska (cited and translated acc. to Brzoska 2022).

The German and similar international forecasts regarding financial issues of humanitarian and food aid evoke similar grim memories of past food crises and their subsequent ineffective initiatives. In the 2008 food price crisis, the adoption of the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative (AFSI) aimed to promote proactive and sustainable rural development. Already in 2015 in Elmau, under the German G7 presidency, the G7 countries committed to relieving 500 million people from hunger by 2030. However, these commitments were accompanied by limited political and financial follow-through, diminishing their overall impact.

Structural world food crisis

This illustrates the significant risk of narrowing the focus of the global food crisis debate to the immediate context of the Ukraine war. The prevailing narrative emphasises the impact of war and the threat of export blockades on presumed record prices. However, once public attention shifts to the next issues and crises, the underlying structural global food crisis, characterised by persistent increases in food prices, conflict-driven food crises and climate-related weather disasters, runs the risk of being quickly forgotten. In reality, the number of people suffering from hunger increased by over 200 million since 2018, and according to forecasts, the biggest global food crisis of modern times has only just begun.

4 The new German "National Security Strategy" was published on June 14, 2023. Available at <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/>.

Definitions

The definitions are based on the glossary of the report "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022", which uses the definitions agreed upon by FAO, WFP, IFAD, WHO and UNICEF.

Available at: <https://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/2022/en/>

Hunger

Hunger is an unpleasant or painful physical sensation caused by an insufficient intake of food energy. The term "hunger" is often measured synonymously with chronic malnutrition and/or the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU).

Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU)

Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) is an indication of the proportion of the population that does not have enough food energy for a healthy, active life. It is the FAO's established indicator for monitoring hunger at the global and regional levels, as well as SDG Indicator 2.1.1.

Undernourishment

Undernourishment is defined as a condition in which a person's usual food intake is insufficient to provide the amount of food energy needed for a normal, active and healthy life. Chronic undernourishment is often defined as synonymous with hunger. The PoU indicator is used to measure hunger.

Malnutrition

Malnutrition describes a physical condition caused by an insufficient, unbalanced or excessive intake of macronutrients and/or micronutrients. Malnutrition includes undernourishment but also overweight and obesity. Malnutrition in the form of undernourishment may be the result of quantitatively and/or qualitatively insufficient food intake and/or insufficient absorption and/or insufficient biological utilisation of the consumed nutrients as a consequence of recurrent diseases. These include underweight for age, too small body size for age ("stunting"), dangerous emaciation for body size ("wasting") or a lack of vitamins and minerals ("micronutrient deficiency").

Food Security

Food security describes a condition in which all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences and enables them to lead active and healthy lives. Based on this, there are four dimensions of food security: availability of food, economic and physical access to food, utilisation of food and stability over time. The concept of food security has also evolved over the years to recognise the central importance of agency and sustainability.

Acute Food Insecurity

Acute food insecurity exists in a particular area at a particular time and is severe enough to threaten lives or livelihoods or both, regardless of the causes, context or duration. The term is relevant to the strategic targeting of interventions that focus on short-term goals to prevent, mitigate or reduce severe food insecurity.

Food Crisis

A food crisis occurs when the level of acute food insecurity and malnutrition rises sharply at the local or national level, increasing the need for emergency food assistance. This definition distinguishes a food crisis from chronic food insecurity, although food crises are more likely to occur in populations already suffering from prolonged food insecurity and malnutrition. A food crisis is usually triggered by a shock or combination of shocks that affect one or more of the pillars of food security: food availability, access, utilisation or stability.

Famine

Famine is a technical term – it is only officially declared when a set of specific criteria for food insecurity, mortality and malnutrition are met. The definition of famine / IPC Phase 5 is based on the Integrated Food Security Phase classification (IPC). To declare a famine, an area must have a daily mortality rate of more than two people per 10,000 or four children under five per 10,000, more than 30% suffering from malnutrition, more than 20% of the population facing extreme food shortages.

Food Sovereignty

According to the Nyeleni Declaration for Food Sovereignty, 2007, the term describes the right of a population to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced sustainably and with respect for the environment. It stands for the right to protection from harmful nutrition and the right of a population to determine its own diets and agricultural systems. Food sovereignty puts the people who produce, distribute and consume food at the centre of food systems, not the demands of markets and corporations.

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