

Ukraine-Russia war likely to drive more global and local food insecurity

Given that food insecurity was already rising before the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russian conflict in February this year, the problem is likely to be further exacerbated in the coming months - both locally and globally.



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This is likely to push millions more around the globe into food insecurity, putting additional pressure on nutrition programmes and potentially erasing many of the gains these have made over the past few decades.

According to Tiger Brands Foundation operations manager Karl Muller, the war is already having a noticeable impact on food price inflation in many emerging markets and developing economies and the effect will be most severely felt by the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

“We’ve already seen how the high price of oil – a direct consequence of the conflict – is already having a negative impact on the price of food in South Africa. At the same time, data shows that underprivileged households spend a much higher proportion, about three times as much, of their total income on food as non-poor household. The current situation is therefore to likely put additional pressure on the poor,” Muller says.

“Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, crude oil prices soared to a 14-year high. It is important to remember that the energy price dynamics affect food prices through various channels, as fuel is an important input for agricultural production. Thus, increasing fuel costs have a direct effect on farmgate prices.”



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He notes that with energy being necessary for food processing, high prices further add to the cost of households' diets, while higher fuel prices also result in increasing transport costs, which can further add to the upward pressure on the cost of importing food and transporting it to distribution points.

Access to food

Ukraine and Russia account for 29% of global wheat exports and 62% of sunflower oil exports, and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) notes that the main expected effect of the conflict on global food security comes through the impact on global grain and energy markets. International food and fuel prices have increased sharply since the onset of the conflict, which will ultimately affect local food prices and, as a result, access to food.

This is particularly alarming in the South African context, explains Muller, given that poor consumers in South Africa spend a large part of their food budget on bread and cereals (32%), meat (21%), and vegetables (13%), followed by dairy (8%) and beverages (7%). These figures were released by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) in March 2020.

“Unfortunately, South African consumers are likely to be profoundly impacted by the European conflict, as the country is a net importer of wheat, sourcing about 30% of our wheat imports from Ukraine and Russia, according to figures from the BFAP. It is, therefore, predicted that supply chain constraints will have a ripple effect on staple food in South Africa,” Muller points out.

In the wake of the situation, the South African government recently assured citizens that there was no need to panic about any impending food shortages, as there are currently enough supplies locally. South Africa is said to have benefitted from good harvests of a range of crops and fruits and has already imported a large share of products that the country is dependent on, such as wheat and rice.



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Pressure on nutrition programmes

However, a major global concern is that the Ukraine-Russia war could also put additional pressure on nutrition programmes, in some cases potentially undoing much of the progress in the area of hunger eradication.

The WFP is currently feeding 138 million people in more than 80 countries, including Ethiopia, South Sudan and Nigeria. It is now estimated that as many as 13 million more people worldwide will be pushed into food insecurity as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Muller adds that this also remains a huge concern for South Africa, where millions of the most vulnerable rely on nutrition programmes as a means to survive and as their only source of proper nutrition. Steeper food prices and less access to

food is likely to put a lot of pressure on nutrition programmes.

“The war might have the consequence of slowing down, in some instances even setting back, decades of gains made by nutrition programmes around the country and perhaps around the world, particularly those that aim to provide nourishment to vulnerable learners,” Muller says.

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