



Africa's Coming Food Crisis – And How To Help Alleviate It

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Earlier this month, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme issued a grim new report examining the increasingly precarious state of global food security. Its conclusions were simple, and stark: Africa is facing a full-blown food crisis as regional stocks dwindle and global disorder mounts.

Of the more than twenty "hunger hotspots" identified by the study, the overwhelming majority are located in Africa. They include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where some 26 million people are expected to be in food crisis by this summer, as well as Nigeria, where 12% of the population – roughly 19.5 million people – will be. Other regional states, such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia similarly have millions facing a food emergency.

The causes are manifold, and include persistent regional drought conditions, civil strife and weak governance. But it's undeniable that Russia's war in Ukraine has made matters much, much worse.

In late February, when Vladimir Putin launched his "special military operation" against Russia's western neighbor, the world price of wheat was already at the same level it was when the "Arab Spring" broke out over a decade ago, some \$840 per bushel. Today, the price is significantly higher: over \$1050 per bushel. The "ripple effects of the Ukraine war have been reverberating globally," the UN study notes, "steadily increasing food and energy prices, and deteriorating macroeconomic conditions."

The results are potentially catastrophic. According to World Food Programme estimates, "every percentage point increase in global food prices will push 10 million more into extreme poverty around the world," with the largest increases expected in Africa. In other words, countries on the continent are hurtling toward humanitarian disaster on a grand scale.

Western nations are scrambling to respond. Last month, the Lithuanian government proposed a naval "coalition of the willing" designed to lift Russia's blockade on Ukrainian grain exports. "Time is very very short. We are closing in on a new harvest and there is no other practical way of exporting the grain except through the Black Sea port of Odesa," Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told England's *Guardian* newspaper. "There is no way of storing this grain and no other adequate alternative route. It is imperative that we show vulnerable countries we are prepared to take the steps that are needed to feed the world."

The Lithuanian plan involves a non-NATO "escort" operation, in which ships from supporting countries would assist Ukrainian commercial vessels in running the *de facto* blockade created by Russia around ports such as Odessa. The British government has now backed the idea in principle.

But even if such blockade busting does take place, it won't be a long-term fix. That's because, due to the conflict, Ukraine's agricultural plans have been massively scaled back. Already in March, Ukrainian Agriculture Minister Roman Leshchenko was warning publicly that – against the backdrop of the unfolding war – his government had cut its projected agricultural output for the current year by half. Since then, the situation has gotten worse still. As a practical matter, this means that later this year, and early in 2023, is when vulnerable nations are likely to feel the real food pinch, as the Ukrainian exports on which a great deal of the Middle East and Africa depends simply don't materialize.

Without good solutions, foreign governments have taken to throwing money at the problem. In late May, the U.S. proffered an extra \$215 million in emergency food aid to a number of regional nations, including Algeria and Mauritania, bringing the total of American emergency food assistance to Africa since the start of the Ukraine war to nearly \$2.6 billion. What has so far been missing, however, is a regional coordinating mechanism capable as serving as a strategic reserve to ensure the continent's food supply – and surge vital resources where and when necessary. Africa, in other words, desperately needs a regional food bank.

With the proper structure, regional leadership, and underwriting from foreign donors (including the United States and European nations), such an initiative could go a long way toward strengthening the continent's most vulnerable countries against the coming economic and societal shocks caused by food scarcity. The very real alternative, in the words of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, is "a hurricane of hunger" – and far greater instability in what is already one of the world's most volatile regions.