

Is the Russian Ukrainian war endangering the food security in the world?

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Is the Russian-Ukrainian war endangering food security in the world?

Russia has been blocking wheat exportation from Ukraine since March 2022, which jeopardizes the world food supply. Russia and Ukraine are some of the biggest wheat exporters in the world. In 2021, Russia produced more than 75 000 tons of wheat and Ukraine produced 33 000. Hence, Ukraine's nickname is the "breadbasket" of the world. The Russian blockade has potential knock-on effects. The poorest and most vulnerable people are suffering greatly as a result of rising food prices, according to David Malpass, President of the World Bank Group¹. The World Bank is expecting a food crisis reminiscent of the 1970s, with "*every 1% increase in food prices risks nearly 10 million additional people living in extreme poverty*"², said the President.

As the world is trying to prevent a global food crisis, Russia is continuing the war with Ukraine using food as a weapon, to react to sanctions imposed by other countries. The war has already impacted the global market with the rise in prices, but with the blockade of wheat shipments in the Black Sea, the world is now facing food shortages that affect particularly poor countries. As a result, to address the crisis, countries are looking for other suppliers and turning to international organizations for backup.

In this fold, first, we are going to see how the blockade is used as a 'food weapon' by Russia, and the consequences this weapon has had in the world since the start of the war. Secondly, we will address how the world is trying to reduce the damage caused by the war on food safety. This could be seen in the efforts made by countries at a national level, and efforts made by international organizations to provide aid to vulnerable parties.

1. "Food weapon" as a war strategy used by Russia?

1.1. What is a "food weapon"?

"*Food is a weapon*"³, the American secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz, stated in 1974. Using food to put pressure on the other party of a conflict is not new. In 1980, the United States (U.S.) government imposed a cereal embargo against the Soviet Union after it invaded Afghanistan. During the Cold War, neither diplomacy nor military actions were effective. So, "the food weapon" seemed like a good alternative back then. But soon after imposing the embargo, the U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, realized the limitations of the "food weapon", explains Marie-Hélène Labbé, a doctor in Political Sciences, in her article *L'embargo céréalier de 1980 ou les*

¹ World Bank Group, "World Bank Announces Planned Actions for Global Food Crisis Response."

² World Food Programme, "War in Ukraine: WFP Marks Three Months of Meeting Surging Food Needs"

³ Peter Wallensteen, "Scarce Goods as Political Weapons: The Case of Food."

*limites de l'« arme verte »*⁴. The food embargo had a “boomerang effect”⁵, it did not only impact the food safety of the Soviet Union but also of the U.S. The American government would only sell 8 million tonnes of cereals to the USSR that the contract of 1975 obliges them to deliver. The rest of the agricultural exports are placed under embargo. Public opinion and other countries supported Jimmy Carter’s decision to impose an embargo on the USSR. But shortly after, the US senate refused to use public funding to support the embargo, and the new Canadian government decided to put an end to the embargo. As an effect, the American farmers were badly affected. Therefore, the embargo had what Labbé called the “*boomerang effect*”. Jimmy Carter wanted to use the embargo as a means of pressure on the USSR to withdraw from Afghanistan. But to efficiently achieve that, the American president should have put an embargo on the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)⁶, according to Labbé, so the USSR would not have other suppliers to turn to⁷.

More recently, in June 2017, Qatar was put under an embargo by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates⁸ (UAE). With practically no local agriculture, Qatar depends on its foreign transport networks to maintain its food supply. When word of the embargo spread, the 2.6 million citizens of the nation - many of whom flocked to the supermarkets - were naturally concerned about their ability to obtain food. New food supply channels were eventually formed, mainly with the aid of Turkish and Iranian allies. This attempt to damage the nation's supply networks for raw materials is simply one manifestation of the continuous conflict between Qatar and its neighbors in the Arabian Peninsula⁹.

1.2. Is “food weapon” efficient during the war?

The food embargo is one of many forms of economic sanctions, it is an instrument of foreign policy. Some tools used by States to put pressure on other countries to change their behavior. In his review of Zachary Selden's book, *Economic Sanctions as Instruments of American Foreign Policy*, William H.T Kaempfer¹⁰, an Economist and author, criticizes the fact that Seldon does not mention that international economics is not just about imposing severe financial penalties on a target to persuade it to alter some of its problematic policies. But also, sanctions are crucial instruments used by governments to pay off special interests, send messages to allies, make symbolic statements, and inform various interest groups in the target countries whether their activities are opposed or supported.

However, sanctions might not be as efficient as the American government wants them to be. Peter D. Feaver and Eric B. Lorber, Political Science experts, in *The Sanctions Myth*, argue that

⁴ Marie-Hélène Labbé, “L’embargo Céréalié de 1980 Ou Les Limites de l’Arme Verte.”

⁵ Marie-Hélène Labbé, “L’embargo Céréalié de 1980 Ou Les Limites de l’Arme Verte.”

⁶ It is an economic alliance that included the Eastern Bloc countries as well as a number of other communist states from 1949 to 1991 and was led by the Soviet Union.

⁷ Marie-Hélène Labbé, “L’embargo Céréalié de 1980 Ou Les Limites de l’Arme Verte.”

⁸ Natalie Koch, “Food as a Weapon? The Geopolitics of Food and the Qatar–Gulf Rift.”

⁹ Natalie Koch, “Food as a Weapon? The Geopolitics of Food and the Qatar–Gulf Rift.”

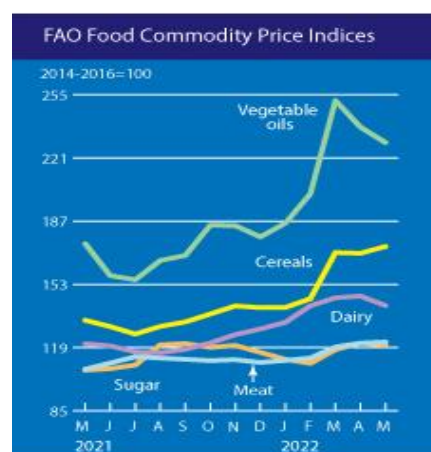
¹⁰ William H. T Kaempfer, “The International History Review 22, No. 3: 742–44.”

sanctions are most effective when used as part of a well-thought-out strategy. When used as an alternative, they fall short¹¹. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Union (EU), the U.S., and Canada have agreed to impose economic sanctions on Russia. For instance, complete Russian assets are frozen, higher tariffs are imposed. Economic sanctions could be seen as less threatening compared to military action and are used to de-escalate the conflict. However, according to John Mueller, an American political scientist in the field of international relations, “*sanctions may have contributed to more deaths during the post-Cold War era than all weapons of mass destruction throughout history*”¹². The economic sanctions have quickly backlashed, with Russia blocking cereal shipments in Ukraine, that were destined to Europe and Africa.

1.3. What are the consequences of the “food weapon” on the world?

The European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, in her speech at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos 2022 said: “*We are witnessing how Russia is weaponizing its energy supplies. And this is having global repercussions. Unfortunately, we are seeing the same pattern emerging in food security*”¹³. She explained how Russia is blocking grain ships from departing the ports of Ukraine, leaving so many countries in distress, such as Somalia and Lebanon. She further asserted that Russia was using its food exports as a sort of extortion, withholding supply to drive up prices globally, or exchanging wheat for political favors.

The food market was deeply affected by the war. Global food prices have reached their highest since March 2022. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) food index, prices of a basket of food commodities were 12% higher in March. Wheat and vegetable oil are among products that have known a rise in their prices¹⁴.



“FAO Food Price Index | World Food Situation | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,” 2014.
<https://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>.

¹¹ Peter D. Feaver and Eric B. Lorber, “The Sanctions Myth on JSTOR.” 742.

¹² John Mueller “Sanctions of Mass Destruction on JSTOR.” 44-45.

¹³ Ursula von der Leyen, “Ursula von Der Leyen’s Speech to Davos 2022 in Full.”

¹⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “FAO Food Price Index | World Food Situation | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.”

Moreover, the war impacted oil and gas prices, which had an impact on the supply chain. As a result, countries that depend heavily on food imports are the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Higher food prices imply a higher cost of living, which was already on display during the pandemic. After the pandemic's economic toll, the world economy is still some way from recovering¹⁵. According to Johnny Wood's essay¹⁶ in the World Economic Forum, rising inflation and supply-chain interruptions have led to price increases that have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Additionally, some countries are not able to tackle inflation, and cannot support the buying power. Lebanon, for example, is already facing an economic crisis that is exacerbated by the Russian-Ukrainian war, inflation has reached 201% in 2022¹⁷, compared to 151% in 2021¹⁸. In Egypt, food inflation reached 25.8% in May 2022¹⁹. The country is one of the biggest buyers of wheat in 2021. Egypt imported \$2,47 billion worth of wheat²⁰, mainly from Russia and Ukraine. The representative of the Egyptian government, Nader Saad, stated that Egypt has only two months left of wheat reserves. With the blockade of wheat shipments and the rise in prices, the government might put an end to bread subsidies²¹. The situation is also threatening the food security of many countries, especially those with a low Global Food Security Index (GFSI). As we can see in the table below, Syria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen came last in the GFSI ranking, with a very low rate of affordability and availability. The countries are unable to afford food safety.

| Global ranking ▲ | Country ▲ | Overall score | Affordability ▲ | Availability ▲ | Quality and Safety ▲ | Natural Resources and Resilience ▲ |
|------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 105th | Zambia | 38.0 | 29.0 | 40.4 | 42.0 | 46.4 |
| =106th | Haiti | 37.8 | 27.8 | 40.2 | 44.2 | 45.2 |
| =106th | Syria | 37.8 | 34.0 | 30.1 | 53.2 | 43.3 |
| 108th | Ethiopia | 37.6 | 24.5 | 47.5 | 41.6 | 39.4 |
| 109th | Malawi | 37.3 | 23.6 | 40.9 | 37.1 | 55.9 |
| 110th | Sudan | 37.1 | 31.8 | 31.6 | 52.4 | 41.4 |
| 111th | Mozambique | 35.9 | 42.9 | 30.4 | 33.8 | 35.2 |
| 112th | Yemen | 35.7 | 39.3 | 27.6 | 37.4 | 42.1 |
| 113th | Burundi | 34.7 | 24.0 | 33.7 | 45.7 | 44.8 |

Source: "Global Food Security Index (GFSI)," 2021
<https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/food-security-index/Index>

¹⁵Johnny Wood, "These Charts Show Food Prices Have Increased Sharply."

¹⁶Johnny Wood, "These Charts Show Food Prices Have Increased Sharply."

¹⁷ World Population Review, "Inflation Rate by Country 2022."

¹⁸ Central Administration of Statistics, "Central Administration of Statistics - Economic Statistics."

¹⁹ Trading Economics, "Food Inflation - Countries - List."

²⁰International Food Policy Research Institute Egypt (IFPRI), "The Russia-Ukraine Crisis Poses a Serious Food Security Threat for Egypt."

²¹ Susan Reidy, "Egypt Suspends Wheat, Flour Exports for Three Months."

2. How is the world trying to face the food shortages caused by war?

2.1. Developing national production

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) defines food security as *“the state in which people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for a healthy and active life²²”*. The Global Food Security Index (GFSI) considers the issues of affordability, availability, quality, and safety to identify which countries are more vulnerable to food insecurity. If we take Egypt as an example, in 2021, it ranked 62 out of 113 countries, with a score of 66.5 out of 100 in affordability, 60 in availability, and 60.7 in quality and safety²³. Those indicators show that Egypt is doing slightly better than most of the African countries, which makes it less vulnerable to the knock-on effects we mentioned before.

Egypt has been developing food safety programs to ensure its food safety. For instance, the partnership between the Egyptian government and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) works to reduce poverty and improve food and nutrition security²⁴. In an article written by the IFPRI-Egypt, one of the policies to face the food crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war is to ban exports of staple foods, including wheat for three months, to limit pressure on existing reserves²⁵. But this policy would be effective only in the short term, as other countries like Yemen rely heavily on food exports coming from Egypt. In the long term, the Egyptian government is trying to improve food self-sufficiency, by boosting domestic production. To achieve that, the government is working on improving water systems to expand arable lands. According to the GFSI, Egypt has more than 70% of its agricultural area equipped for irrigation²⁶. However, expanding food production might be unsustainable. The farming system is not adapted to face climate change and water shortages. The IFPRI suggests that Egypt should prioritize reducing food waste and wheat consumption because it could *“serve the dual purpose of improving Egypt’s self-sufficiency while also addressing malnutrition by shifting consumption from wheat to a more diverse set of food groups²⁷”*.

Given these points, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict could be seen as an opportunity for vulnerable countries to develop a more sustainable food system and get full independence from Russia. It’s also an opportunity for local markets to develop and play a bigger role in food production. For instance, the Rural Pact conference held in June 2022 brought together local authorities, social and economic partners, as well as EU, national, and regional politicians²⁸, to show the strategic role of rural areas in climate and food security. The event emphasizes empowering rural areas to more sustainable farming. The SALSA (Small farms, small

²² UNCCD, “The Global Food Security Index.”

²³ Economist Impact, “Global Food Security Index (GFSI).”

²⁴ IFPRI, “What We Do.”

²⁵ IFPRI, “The Russia-Ukraine Crisis Poses a Serious Food Security Threat for Egypt.”

²⁶ Economist Impact, “Global Food Security Index (GFSI).”

²⁷ IFPRI, “The Russia-Ukraine Crisis Poses a Serious Food Security Threat for Egypt.”

²⁸ The Rural Pact Conference, “The Strategic Role of Rural Areas for Climate and Food Security.”

businesses, and sustainable food and nutritious security) project has been operating in 25 regions across 14 European countries to boost food availability at the national level. The project is helping small farms produce locally rather than export to other countries²⁹.

Nevertheless, such policies are hard to implement, especially in a short period. Therefore, countries like Egypt are still in need of the help of other countries to ensure their food safety.

2.2. Looking for other suppliers other than Russia

Matthew Hollingworth, the Emergency Coordinator for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Ukraine, outlined the food emergency in Ukraine. He stated that the conflict had turned what is typically known as the "breadbasket of the world" into a significant humanitarian issue. If the situation in Ukraine continues unabated, severe hunger is anticipated to increase by 47 million people in the more than 120 countries where WFP works, added Hollingworth³⁰.

Since March 2022, the WFP has been operating in Ukraine, organizing food and cash distributions all over the country. Also, the WFP is working through local partners, businesses, trade networks, and institutions to help Ukrainians and hopefully restore public and private institutions. Hollingworth said that the WFP *"will invest in food systems, support more impactful social protection policies, replace or reinvent agri-business and jobs devastated by the destruction in the east of the country, and be part of the alliance to ensure Ukrainian food, and farmers can still feed the world"*³¹.

Moreover, the WFP is providing emergency relief to countries that are considered hunger hotspots. According to the May 2022 Hunger Hotspots report³², Afghanistan and Somalia are new additions to this alarming category since the January 2022 edition, while Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen remain on the highest alert as hotspots with catastrophic conditions. In Nigeria, the WFP distributed specialized nutritious food to homes, and cash to stimulate local markets³³. The WFP is also setting up a strategic plan for the next four years (2022-2025), to help people meet their urgent food and nutrition needs, have better nutrition, health, and education, and have improved and sustainable livelihoods³⁴.

More recently, Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has been attempting to arbitrate between Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea, which it shares with both the warring parties. The Russian and Turkish defense ministers spoke about a prospective grain

²⁹ The Rural Pact Conference, "The Strategic Role of Rural Areas for Climate and Food Security."

³⁰ WFP, "War in Ukraine: WFP Marks Three Months of Meeting Surging Food Needs | World Food Programme."

³¹ WFP, "War in Ukraine: WFP Marks Three Months of Meeting Surging Food Needs | World Food Programme."

³² WFP, "Hunger Hotspots FAO-WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity June to September 2022 Outlook | World Food Programme."

³³ WFP, "Situation Report - Nigeria | World Food Programme." 2022 "Situation Report - Nigeria | World Food Programme."

³⁴ WFP, "WFP Strategic Plan 2022-25 | World Food Programme."

export route from Ukraine that would allow grain-laden ships to leave blocked Ukrainian ports. The Turkish defense minister stated that “*all measures that can be taken regarding the safe shipment of grains, sunflower, and all other agricultural products*”³⁵. The declaration is being made as the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey meet in Ankara to discuss UN-led attempts to establish a safe corridor.

Other than Ukraine, other countries are the biggest wheat producers, as we can see in the table down below, China comes first with 135 million metric tons of wheat produced this year, then comes India producing 103 million metric tons of wheat this year. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, wheat exports have been blocked in the Black Sea. India announced a ban on its wheat exportations, to face the rise in prices and the heatwave that hit the country recently³⁶. While the global market relies on India to relieve the pressure on wheat needs, India’s crop could be smaller since the sudden rise in temperatures in mid-March.

Largest Wheat-Producing Countries

| Rank | Country | Values in Metric Tons |
|------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | China | 135,000,000 |
| 2 | India | 103,000,000 |
| 3 | Russia | 77,000,000 |
| 4 | United States | 50,784,000 |
| 5 | France | 40,000,000 |
| 6 | Canada | 34,000,000 |
| 7 | Ukraine | 28,000,000 |
| 8 | Pakistan | 26,100,000 |
| 9 | Australia | 24,000,000 |

Source: Mala, Alisa. “Largest Wheat-Producing Countries.” WorldAtlas. WorldAtlas, June 20, 2020. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-wheat-producing-countries.htm>

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine has brought to the fore so many issues, from energy dependency to food safety. This has led the world leaders to react and start looking for alternatives. As the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky urged the leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) “to do everything to end the war before winter³⁷”, the war is still going on, causing more damage at both the national and international levels. Although efforts are made to reduce the damage, food safety is far from being secured. War is not the only cause of food insecurity, climate change has a huge impact on food production and distribution.

³⁵ Jazeera, “Russia, Turkey Discuss Grain Export Corridor from Ukraine.”

³⁶ Reuters, “India Bans Wheat Exports to Try and Tame Prices as a Scorching Heatwave Curtailed Output.”

³⁷ Deutsche Welle, “Ukraine: G7 Leaders Slam ‘Brutal’ Russian Strike on Mall — as It Happened”

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