The Ukraine crisis is a wake-up call for improved global food security analysis – Insights from G7 Principles

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CASA

Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness

CASA aims to drive global investment for inclusive climate-resilient agri-food systems that increase smallholder incomes. The programme makes the case for increased agribusiness investment by demonstrating the commercial and development potential of sourcing models involving empowered smallholder producers and by tackling the information and evidence gaps holding back investment.

Introduction

Adding the Ukraine conflict into the broader impact of climate change brought many low-income grain consuming nations to a point of food security crisis since the beginning of the conflict at the end of February 2022. In theory, there are food security monitoring systems that should have allowed us to better be able to predict when crises like this are going to take place. Yet whilst there are a diverse range of information systems on food availability, they lack sufficient interconnectivity to provide international donors, policy makers and governments with the clear and objective data they need to make appropriate policy decisions. This is in part due to resource constraints but also partly due to the political ambitions of these stakeholders, who often align information generation with institutional or domestic political priorities. Building on a series of policy papers and discussions held at the G7 in 2021, this Research Brief argues that the crisis in Ukraine is a wake-up call for the world on the fragility of the global food system to market and climate related shocks, particularly in the light of climate change. It proposes that from both a human rights and migration perspective there needs to be greater transparency through more integrated information systems and standards on global food security.

The Canary in the Coalmine

More than six months into the war, the crisis in Ukraine is having a significant impact on global food security. The country is a major exporter of grains, particularly to price sensitive, low income markets in North Africa and South Asia. Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Morocco all import more than a million metric tonnes per year with many other countries buying significant proportions of their cereals from Ukraine. Due to the conflict, the USDA estimates that in 2022 Ukraine will harvest half of the 80 million metric tonnes that it produced in 2021, much of which still remains in Ukraine even with more recent moves to open seaways for export. Russia, the world's largest exporter of cereals and amongst the largest exporter of fertilisers, is increasingly being subject to sanctions. This affects both exports of food and fertiliser products directly, as well as the availability of finance and other inputs to the production process indirectly. Russia has banned wheat exports to some countries and its delivery infrastructure on the Black Sea is also significantly affected by the war in the region. Even if Russia keeps exporting to some countries who are not imposing sanctions, it is a possibility that these products might be weaponized against those who are seen as not supporting their political aims.

Against a backdrop of dramatically rising energy costs since mid-2021, the Ukraine crisis is pushing global food prices rapidly higher with the FAO estimating that by April 2022 they were 37% higher than the year before. The global food system is a highly developed, integrated market-based structure that acts to rapidly adjust production and prices to demands. External shocks such as conflict, political upheaval or climate which can dramatically change demand or supply in specific markets can be readily offset by short term increases in prices and redirection of existing supplies. In the longer term, changes in farming and food production processes can increase or decrease output or create new trade routes to bring the global system into balance. However, in the meantime, the world is facing sustained higher food prices as countries substitute wheat for rice and other staples, including into animal feed rations, which further pressurises low income consumers in the world's most vulnerable places. The compounded food and fuel price spikes are driving inflation globally with many of the most advanced economies beginning the process of putting their economies into recession to bring this under control, further reducing the availability of funding for food aid.

The global system is also increasingly under pressure from climate change, which makes it less resilient in the face of other market or geopolitical challenges which come at the same time. The Ukraine crisis is the canary in the coalmine for global food systems because it highlights multiple other pressures that will increasingly become systemic as the impacts on agriculture from the climate crisis continue to build. With climate change affecting major food production regions across the globe, countries will no longer be able to substitute one region for another. For example, increases in energy prices have been coupled with drought in both producer and importing countries in 2021 that has reduced cereal output. Hopes that India's increasing wheat production in 2021 would make up much of the shortfall have been dampened by high temperatures scorching the crop that have led to an export ban. Other major producers such as Canada, whilst also suffering drought, produce a product

that is higher in protein and more expensive than many lower income markets can afford and for which their production systems are not suited.

One of the basic human rights is to have access to food

Food insecurity is a major driver for human migration, with the World Food Programme in 2017 calculating that a 1% increase in food insecurity compels 1.9% more people to migrate per 1,000 population. Whilst people forced to move want to stay as close as possible to their homes, food insecurity in neighbouring countries often forces migrants to continue moving to find food and income generating opportunities. Although European and other high-income regions are targets for many migrants, the vast majority remain in countries closer to their homes. Where large numbers of people are forced to migrate due to conflict, the climate crisis or political instability, the logical solution is to ensure that neighbouring countries are sufficiently supported with food and income generating assistance. Keeping people close to their homes retains social and cultural ties and makes physical return easier and cheaper. Investing in finding and feeding people wherever they are hungry is not only the right thing to do, it is the most politically economic approach. If this is not achieved, people will have no option but to continue migrating towards richer countries where these essentials are likely to be found - and directly into increasingly hostile migration policies. Jordan is a good example, with the country of 10m people hosting 1.5m people from Syria, 2m Palestinians alongside large numbers of other migrants from regional conflicts. Many of these people live in host communities and will increasingly see Jordan as their permanent home, highlighting the importance of aligning humanitarian and development interventions - including food information systems.

It is an unfortunate truth that who gets food aid is driven by the political agendas of donors as much as by need. The cost to overcome global hunger was estimated by the UN in 2008 to be $30 billion per year, but the US contribution to the Ukraine war alone is already estimated to be $40 billion. The largest current food crises globally, located in Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa are now largely being ignored by the world because the political situation on ground does not reflect the political priorities of the rich countries who provide the majority of food aid. Information provides transparency and transparency increases the pressure on donor governments to act. Liberal democracies have effective advocacy organisations and an ability to engage society to lobby political leadership - but only if they have clear and objective information. Many countries with food insecurity (including all of those highlighted above) do not have this engagement with civil society and can more easily avoid acting on famine even if they are aware of it.

Strengths and weaknesses of global food security information systems

Multiple systems exist to provide information to policymakers, donors, advocacy organisations and other stakeholders on the state of food security, agricultural markets and crop production. They provide a range of frequency of information from real time to annual covering different ranges of countries and include both primary and secondary information. Of the 26 systems reviewed by the Landscape Analysis undertaken by CASA in 2021 and 2022 for the G7, nine were considered agriculture information systems, presenting information on crop conditions, food prices and agricultural market information. The remaining 15 systems have a focus on providing food security status or forecasts. Only a few of these systems generate the analysis needed to determine core food security information for both current and forecasted food insecurity in a consistent and comparable manner. The remainder are 'information aggregators' which predominantly combine and visualise information from other primary data providers.

Food security information systems have made great progress over the past decade, with significant investments from the likes of FEWSNET, WFP, FAO, IPC and others. International standards have been developed and analysis has become more robust.

However, there is considerable overlap between systems, both in terms of countries covered and information provided, which can lead to redundancy as well as conflicting information. In particular, the IPC, FEWSNET and The Hunger Map are all aiming to provide similar types of information, although their approaches to analysis and presentation are different. As well as overlaps, there are areas where gaps in information exist that impact on strategic decision making. While FEWSNET,

IPC, and VAM regularly incorporate vulnerability and causal analysis in their systems, a consistent weakness is the examination of underlying and structural causes of food insecurity, which is necessary to inform more development-oriented interventions. The analysis of conflict in a robust and consistent manner as a driver of food insecurity remains to be a critical gap, particularly in cases of extreme food insecurity and borderline famine situations. Food security information systems rely on strong nutrition and mortality data but they do not generate this data themselves, instead they rely on intensive and expensive data from national governments and other international stakeholders. Clearly, this information is very hard to come by in precisely the areas where it is most needed - in conflict areas with limited humanitarian access. The analysis of more chronic food insecurity is yet to be regularly implemented, which leaves gaps in vital information for policymakers. There is also, finally, a geographical gap, with no one system covering all of the countries of concern. The emergence of economic and climate challenges is leading to an increase in food insecurity and more countries becoming food insecure who are not on global monitoring systems.

The G7 Principles

The G7 countries are building on their commitment in the 2015 G7 Elmau Broad Food Security Commitment to 2030 with an updated series of commitments in late 2021[1]. These include:

1. To promote the production of food security and nutrition analysis that is evidence-based, politically and institutionally neutral, contextualised, multifactorial, responsive to the information needs of national governments and donors, in order to better inform response
2. To strengthen a global network of food security information systems that are designed for (i) effective and efficient interoperability, (ii) distinct added value, and (iii) to improve equity and inclusivity within the food system, building on existing structures
3. To promote continued development 1) of national and regional food security information systems, particularly those adhering to international standards for comparability, interoperability, and reliability and 2) regional and national data gathering activities that promote data standards, interoperability, and the open sharing of public data to increase accessibility
4. To further support existing initiatives that aggregate information, monitor agricultural commodities and conduct analysis of the underlying causes of disruptions to food production and distribution and the effects of climate change on this key sector for food security
5. To maximise efforts to put the humanitarian-development nexus into practice, at all levels
6. To promote stronger linkages between information systems and action, including prevention and the early release of funds based on early warning and pre-agreed trigger indicators
7. To encourage global food security monitoring systems to innovate, including with advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, data science, and others; additionally, to encourage engagement with all relevant expertise, in multilateral organisations, governments and other actors, while also ensuring the responsible use of data under the overarching "do-no-harm" principle
8. To promote key institutions that aim to enhance collaboration (including between humanitarian, resilience and development actors), common standards, and knowledge sharing among leading food security information systems; and challenge them to put into practice the vision and its themes, for the world, in particular the most vulnerable, to benefit from enhanced evidence-based action

As can be seen from these principles, there is agreement amongst the largest economic actors globally to strengthen early warning information systems both in quality and collaboration and to use

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g7-principles-for-improved-global-food-security-monitoring-and-analysis-for-action/g7-principles-supporting-a-vision-of-improved-global-food-security-monitoring-and-analysis

these systems to generate and act upon evidence in determining how to act at a policy level. The call to focus attention on the humanitarian/development nexus highlights the importance of looking at food security as a single conversation at any place and point in time and not a response that transitions from one kind of intervention to another. Implementing these principles is essential for building policy responses that are both accurate and fair to food insecure peoples across the world, whatever their politics.

What are the changes necessary?

Whilst there is significant information infrastructure now in place, there are still actions that can be taken to improve the functioning of these systems both in gathering and analysing information but also in ensuring that it is put to the most equitable use.

Financing

There is an opportunity to establish better inter agency networks and collaboration between parties interested in developing and promoting food security information systems. One way forward would be to commission a study that conducts a critical evaluation of the costs and benefits of the existing systems, eventually resulting in the selection and support of a limited number of specialized and integrated systems.

Rationalizing donor financing for agriculture and food security information systems will enable them to be more strategic, sustained, efficient, and effective towards creating a global public good that can deliver core and essential information. And conversely, if donors stop financing systems in an ad hoc and fragmented manner, they would reduce redundancies, inefficiencies, and critical information gaps.

Interoperability

Linking existing information systems at regional and national level more effectively has the potential to improve operational efficiencies, bringing more consistent use of standardised metrics and approaches and avoiding existing duplications and contradictions. Developing systems and analysis not just for acute food insecurity, but also for chronic food insecurity as well would improve the range of food vulnerable people covered by information systems. Making stronger linkages between acute crises and their underlying/structural causes can inform development-oriented interventions in agriculture, policy, and economic growth, providing an integrated and more comprehensive response to ingrained societal challenges.

Stakeholder actions

Leverage the influence of the international donor community to lobby for a global institutional mandate and structure for a public good (such as the SDG custodial model) that can provide core and essential agriculture and food security information.

There are critical data weaknesses that can be addressed immediately by key donor partners. These gaps include in particular nutrition/mortality data with SMART surveys and conflict analysis which will add important context to decision making.

Commitment

The world has a great opportunity to work together to create a global public good, but this needs collaboration to develop a common vision for something that can deliver core and essential information required to achieve SDG 2.

Conclusion

Improving the transparency of information on who needs food where has significantly improved over recent years, but now faces the headwinds of realpolitik with entrenched perspectives of how aid should be managed and who should be supported. Whilst these may not all be resolvable in the near term, there is a strong basis for further collaboration to iron out immediate efficiency issues and to start to crystalise the formation of information as a global good. The need for accurate, timely and transparent information has always been present, but the Ukraine crisis has illustrated how quickly policy decisions need to be made when faced with global geopolitical and climatic events on food systems. A system that provides the world with this information will be essential in strengthening global food systems to react to the multi-regional climate events that are already upon us.

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