

Response to rising hunger threatens climate goals – experts

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The world’s food system was under strain even before Russia invaded Ukraine. Now – compounded by the war’s effect on trade and a corresponding spike in global fuel prices – it faces two dangerous and intertwined crises.

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In the short term, Russia’s war on Ukraine increases the risk of extreme hunger for millions more people. The danger is particularly acute for low-income countries that depend on food imports. And countries such as Ethiopia and Yemen already are dealing with hunger fueled by conflict.

Over the longer term, experts are concerned that the response to these problems could lead to further use of fossil fuels and an expansion of unsustainable agricultural practices. Continuing on this path, they say, could exacerbate the climate crisis and deepen poverty and food insecurity.

Humanity now is feeling the rumblings of a “seismic hunger crisis,” the World Food Programme warned earlier this month.

The U.N. organization estimates [\[1\]](#) that it’s paying \$71 million more per month to fund its operations at the same time that the number of people facing severe food insecurity has more than doubled — from about 135 million before the Covid-19 pandemic to roughly 276 million now.

“We were already running short of the monies we were needing because of multiple conflicts around the world like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen,” David Beasley, the organization’s executive director, told NPR. “On top of that, we’ve had climate shocks, two years of Covid, economic devastation and, just when you think it can’t get any worse, Ukraine.”

Russia and Ukraine together provide roughly a quarter of all globally traded wheat and barley and half of the sunflower oil used in cooking. Russia — the world’s top wheat exporter — also is a major supplier of fertilizers and fertilizer inputs needed to produce food in the world’s breadbaskets.

Sanctions, export restrictions and a halt in shipping from Black Sea ports have squeezed global food supplies and caused prices to soar to record highs.

Those disruptions come on the back of supply chain bottlenecks caused by the pandemic and yield declines stemming from drought, extreme rainfall and other severe weather (*Climatewire* [\[2\]](#), March 16).

'Extremely bleak picture'

Dozens of countries — including some of the world's poorest and most food-deficient — depend on Russia and Ukraine for more than a third of their wheat supplies, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, gets 80 percent of its supply from Russia and Ukraine. Somalia, one of several countries in the Horn of Africa facing a severe and ongoing drought, gets almost all of its wheat from those two countries via Egypt.

More than 13 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia already are experiencing extreme hunger, according to a recent report from humanitarian aid organization Mercy Corps. It predicts that figure could double this year if seasonal rains are below average, as expected.

Conflict exacerbates the problem. Sudan, Lebanon, Ethiopia and Afghanistan also are at great risk from rising prices and supply shortages. Yasmin Faruki, a senior policy adviser for Mercy Corps, said it has had to reduce food rations to Yemen, where a civil war created a prolonged humanitarian crisis long before the war in Ukraine unfolded.

"It's an extremely bleak picture," said Faruki, who recently returned from a two-week visit to the country.

She said people were burning wood on the roadsides because they couldn't afford fuel, and that Yemeni families were living on one meal a day amid ever-increasing prices.

Yemen is almost entirely dependent on imported food aid and receives around 40 percent of its wheat and grain supply from Ukraine, Faruki said.

"Regardless of what's happening in the world, or what's getting headlines, we shouldn't turn our backs to people who are already being forgotten," she said.

"And the energy crisis is very central and tied to what's happening in Yemen and other contexts in the world where you see rising fuel prices, people not being able to put food on the table," Faruki added. "So I'd hope that we don't isolate these things."

A problem long in the making

Part of the problem stems from years of underinvestment in systems that could respond to the current shocks, say experts.

Policy responses to the war in Ukraine — such as sanctions and export restrictions — have contributed to the rapid rise in food prices. But it's the interaction between energy and food markets that is exacerbating the situation, Laura Wellesley, a senior research fellow in the environment and society program at Chatham House, said during a recent webinar.

"Extremely high energy prices are leading to extremely high fertilizer prices, which in turn have immediate knock-on impacts on food prices," she said.

The FAO estimates that an additional 13 million people could be classified as undernourished over the next year. If food prices remain high and harvests suffer from a lack of fertilizers, since natural gas is raw input in the production of fertilizers used globally, Wellesley said there is a risk that

figure could grow much higher.

And then there is the potential for shocks on harvests due to climate change, she added.

Drought conditions in the U.S. Midwest could threaten spring wheat production, according to Gro Intelligence, which assesses the impacts of climate change on global agricultural market forecasts. Drought in the Middle East and North Africa likely will increase those regions' reliance on imports.

Those risks are part of a new reality fueled by climate change, according to a report Wellesley co-authored on the war's threats to food and energy security.

While the war in Ukraine is multiplying the impact of high prices and food insecurity, Wellesley said, those threats are a function of years of unsustainable production and access to food.

There are things, however, that countries can do in the short term to try to slow the damage.

Among them: keeping trade flows open and not putting up protectionist export bans; swapping synthetic fertilizers for organic ones; and working to reduce food waste and encourage healthier, more sustainable diets that don't depend on meat, which requires high volumes of grain for feed.

Countries also could work to boost crop yields on existing land and reduce the amount of grain used in alternative fuels, such as ethanol, according to the World Resources Institute. According to calculations by WRI [3], if the U.S. and Europe cut in half the amount of grain used in the production of corn-based ethanol they could compensate for the grain exports lost from Ukraine.

But in many places, governments are taking a different approach — looking to relax long-term climate action in favor of achieving short-term food and energy security.

Some policymakers in Europe, for example, are considering easing environmental protection measures to allow for increased crop production. The European Union's commissioner for agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, has said increasing food production within the bloc should be a priority in light of the war.

Both the U.S. and E.U. are working to expand the use of crop-based biofuels.

"It's a classic near-term crisis triggering certain behaviors that put the long-term goals on the back burner," said Craig Hanson, vice president of food, forests, water and oceans at the World Resources Institute.

"It's a false dichotomy," he added. "You don't have to sacrifice the long-term to meet the near-term need."

Need to break the cycle

Expanding the area on which food is grown won't necessarily lead to higher production — particularly if fertilizer prices remain high, the Chatham House report states. And it could lead to negative impacts, since agriculture is both affected by climate change and a source of the emissions that drive it.

Around 23 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture, forestry and other land use. Expanding cropland into forests or grasslands, which naturally absorb excess carbon in the atmosphere, could release millions of tons CO₂, exacerbating climate change and loss of biodiversity,

according to WRI. A recent study [4] in *Nature* found that about half of new cropland area in the past two decades replaced natural vegetation and tree cover.

If humanity responds to world events by clearing forests and plowing up nature, “then we set back the ability to deal with climate change,” said Tim Benton, who heads the environment and society program at Chatham House.

It’s a challenge not unlike the one facing the energy sector, where oil and gas companies — particularly in the United States — are pushing to increase production to bring down prices and supply Europe as it seeks to end fossil fuel imports from Russia.

How world leaders respond to the current challenge will determine how power and food are produced in the future — and how much those systems align with efforts to reduce planet-warming emissions.

That said, experts said the world can’t simply produce its way out of either an energy crisis or a food crisis.

“There has never been so much investment in agriculture in absolute dollar terms, and there’s never been so much production,” said Harry Verhoeven, a researcher focused on the links between water, energy and food security at Columbia University’s Center on Global Energy Policy.

“Yet, as we’ve seen over the last 10 years, it hasn’t stopped the number of desperately hungry people, or chronically hungry people, from going up,” Verhoeven added.

The divergence of those trend lines matters, he said, because it means that producing or investing more isn’t going to solve the problem.

There are other structural reasons — discrimination, marginalization, markets not working for people — that are causing people to go hungry, said Verhoeven. Availability of food is not the same as accessibility.

“We need to stop conversion of natural ecosystems as soon as possible. The climate science is very strong on that,” said Hanson of the World Resources Institute. “So this is a real risk that this food shortage will relax the urgency on tackling climate and lead people down what I would argue is the false solution of expanding crop growing area and grazing area.”

In an emergency, it’s hard to say no to immediate measures that can increase supplies and lower prices, Wellesley said.

But that approach runs the risk of perpetuating a broken system, she added.

A broad range of experts have warned that ignoring climate change now can lead to worse environmental conditions in the future — setting the stage for future conflicts and the far-reaching effects that follow.

“The fact is that we will be in this situation over and over again,” Wellesley said. “And at some point, you need to break that cycle and realize that what we’re doing to supposedly mitigate the worst impacts is actually exacerbating the situation.”

Sara Schonhardt

P.S.

• Climatewire. 04/18/2022 06:38 AM EDT:

<https://www.eenews.net/articles/response-to-rising-hunger-threatens-climate-goals-experts/>

Footnotes

[1] https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000138231/download/?_ga=2.161620853.874128913.1649945836-1828679894.1647273532

[2] <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2022/03/16/climate-and-russia-could-combine-to-create-a-food-crisis-00017523>

[3] <https://www.wri.org/insights/ukraine-food-security-climate-change>

[4] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00429-z>