

Food crisis in Africa

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The FAO is sounding the alarm on the food crisis. Humanitarian NGOs, including OXFAM, say in a statement that it is “the worst situation in a decade” and Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, speaks of a “hurricane of famines”.

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In this global food crisis, Africa remains the most vulnerable continent. Although there are many reasons for this crisis, they all have one thing in common: political choices that run counter to the needs of the population.

Speculation and rising prices

Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine has exacerbated the food crisis in West Africa, but it did not trigger it. Prior to the war, there were severe tensions over food supplies caused by speculative actions on the Chicago stock exchange, one of the world’s leading markets for agricultural products.

Over the past four years, the number of malnourished people in West Africa has increased dramatically. It has almost quadrupled to nearly 38 million people.

The continent has emerged considerably weakened economically from the Covid-19 health crisis. Unlike the West, African countries have not had the fiscal space to adopt stimulus policies, or even to fund social measures to mitigate the crisis.

In Africa, the share of household budgets spent on food is very high. For example, in Nigeria, the most populous country, it accounts for 59% while in France the average is 13%. Increases in food prices, especially when they are significant, become an obstacle to the possibility of feeding oneself properly for a large part of the population. In Burkina Faso, sorghum has increased by 37% and millet by 50%. Overall, food prices are higher than in 2008, the year of the food riots in some thirty countries. To this must be added the price of fuel, which has doubled on the continent.

Declining production

Agricultural activity is hampered by the multiple armed conflicts in the region, caused by jihadists and community militias. The number of displaced people is estimated at around 6.7 million. This means that there is a lack of manpower for the work in the fields. In the Sahel, cereal harvests are down by 12% compared to 2021, and for some countries the drops are even greater: - 15% in Mali, -18% in Mauritania and -36% in Niger.

At the same time, the Sahelian states, faced with the security challenge, are giving budgetary priority to the army. In ten years, security spending has increased by 339% in Mali, 288% in Niger and 238% in Burkina Faso.

As for humanitarian organisations, they are confronted with a prioritisation of donor aid for Ukrainian refugees and they too must face price increases. A tonne of wheat paid by the WFP (World Food Programme) has risen from \$290 to over \$400 with the announcement of the Indian embargo.

The problems experienced in West Africa are also present in the Horn of Africa. Countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia are experiencing difficulties in feeding their populations. Again, with high inflation, the cost of a food basket has increased by 36% in Somalia and 66% in Ethiopia.

Harmful policy choices

This situation is not due to any fatality but mainly to the consequences of the policies of the leaders of rich countries, by refusing to take the necessary measures against global warming, by crushing African countries under the weight of debt, by developing a policy of plundering natural resources and by favouring agrofuels. A first immediate solution would be to “take the quantities of maize produced for agrofuels, 140 million tonnes in the United States, i.e. half, 85 million tonnes, and redirect them to the food market to cover the missing quantities and reduce the pressure on cereal prices”, as a researcher at CIRAD, the French agronomy agency for development, points out, quoted by the weekly magazine *Le Point*. [1]

A common sense measure that would save thousands of lives. Adopting it would require a little political courage to go against the profit-seeking production model.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Sylvie Rantrua, “Crise alimentaire, inflation : le Sahel en état de siège”, *lepoint.fr*, 6 May 2022.