

# Linking Food and National Security in Africa: Lessons from Russia-Ukraine Conflict

## Abstract

This policy brief analyses the link between food security and national security in Africa, focusing on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on the continent. It highlights the importance of food security in promoting human development and national security, as two-thirds of the global extremely poor population lives in Africa. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has created socio-economic challenges and is expected to disrupt food security, particularly as these countries are major producers and suppliers of staple food commodities and fertilizers. The brief examines the lessons African policymakers can learn from the conflict, including the need to build a resilient food system and promote local agriculture and food production. The policy brief concludes by emphasizing that guaranteeing food security is crucial for national security in Africa and that African governments must prioritize access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to avoid internal conflicts and instability.

## I. Introduction

Food security refers to the availability of sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for all people to maintain a healthy and active life (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021; Suleri, 2022). Food insecurity affects people at various levels, including global, regional, national, sub-national, and household levels, and presents itself in different forms, including chronic, acute, and transient. Food insecurity exacerbates social tensions like poverty and inequality and can be a threat multiplier to national security (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021; Constain, 2022). Food security in Africa enhances human development by advancing key sectors like industrialization, education, health, and infrastructure development (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021). Without access to food, people cannot fully participate in national development activities and may turn to crime, which threatens national security. Also, security personnel without food access may lose morale and fail to perform their duties or become corrupt (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021).

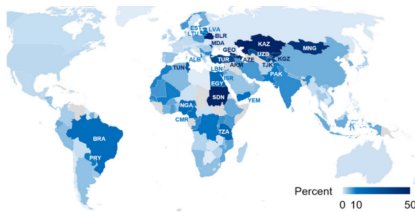
Food insecurity is a factor in political and economic insecurity in Africa (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021). In conflict-affected regions, lack of food for humanitarian support hampers peacebuilding efforts. In 2020, Africa had 282 million hungry people, more than double as compared to any other region, threatening the continent's ability to meet its development agendas and secure peace, social justice, and economic well-being (World Food Programme, 2021; World Vision, 2021). A paradigm shift in perceiving individual hunger as a national security threat would lead to more resources for food security and to reprioritizing

public spending for social development (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021). By prioritizing food security, societies can experience positive outcomes such as improved well-being and increased productivity, as food security promotes engagement in productive activities.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a major military attack on Ukraine, causing harm to civilians, as well as damaging critical infrastructure. The conflict has also impacted global trade, production, and consumption, leading to high commodity prices, tightening the fiscal space, and reducing the flow of development finance as well as posing a risk to food security worldwide (Ben Hassen & El Bilali, 2022; USIP, 2022; Atlantic Council, 2023). As a result, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is also affecting food security, which in turn endangers national security in Africa in one way or the other.

With the continent's close trade and diplomatic ties with both Ukraine and Russia, the disruption in the food supply chain has created serious socio-economic challenges affecting millions. The conflict has resulted in soaring prices of wheat, sunflower, and crude oil and further disrupted food, fuel, and fertilizer supply chains (GMO Global Market Observation, 2014). Russia and Ukraine are major producers and suppliers of fertilizers and staple food commodities like maize, rapeseed, sunflower seeds, and oil (GMO Global Market Observation, 2014; Lago, 2022; AUDA-NEPAD, 2022). It is against this backdrop that this policy brief analyzes the link between food security and national security in Africa and explores lessons from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It examines the status of food security in Africa, the uncertainty created by the conflict, and ways African countries can ensure food security and national security.

## II. Analyzing the Effects of Dependence on African Imports for Grain, Fertilizer, Vegetable Oil, and Fuel from Russia and Ukraine on Food Security



Source: UN Comtrade, IMF Staff calculations.

Figure 1: Food and Fertilizer Imports from Ukraine and Russia

The 2022 data presented in Figure 1 highlights the importation of food and fertilizer from Ukraine and Russia, which has significant consequences for Africa. The rise in fertilizer prices may result in a significant decline in short-term agricultural production for the season. Some studies estimate that the reduction in fertilizer imports could cause a minimum drop of one-third in food production across the continent (Ghenna, 2022). The decline in food production in Africa, as indicated by reduced fertilizer imports, could result in persistent food insecurity and an increase in hunger levels on the continent. This could pose a threat to the overall stability of Africa.

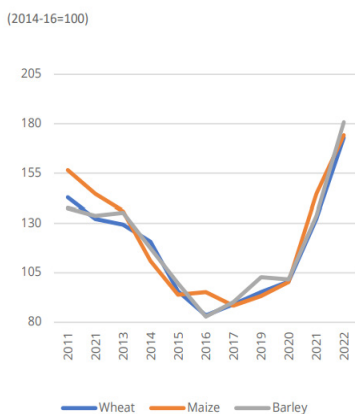


Figure 2: International grain price indices, Source: FAO

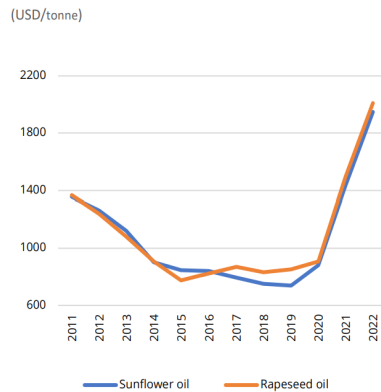


Figure 3: International vegetable oil prices, Source: FAO

Figures 2 and 3 above indicate an increase in grain and vegetable oil prices respectively, due to the impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This has significant implications for food security and the economies of Africa. The rise in prices can lead to decreased accessibility and affordability of staple foods, exacerbating food insecurity in vulnerable populations. Additionally, it can lead to inflation, affecting the purchasing power of consumers and potentially causing economic strain, which in turn could lead to an increase in crime rates. The increase in prices can also lead to a shift in demand towards cheaper, less nutritious alternatives, potentially leading to dietary changes and diet-related health issues which could threaten the well-being of the people on the continent. That being the case, it is crucial for governments and relevant stakeholders to closely monitor and address the impact of such price increases to ensure food security and stability.

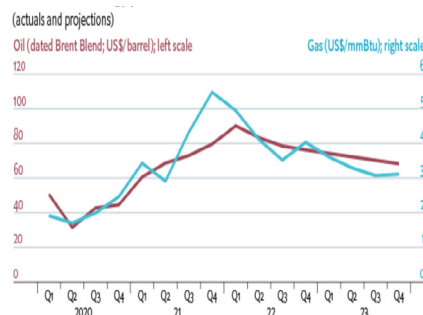


Figure 4: International Energy Prices, Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)

Increased energy prices, as indicated in Figure 4, can have significant impacts on food security and national security. The higher energy prices will lead to an increase in the cost of producing, transporting, and storing food, which can result in a rise in food prices and a decrease in food availability in Africa. This, in turn, can lead to food insecurity, especially among vulnerable populations who were already facing absolute poverty and are unable to afford three daily meals before the conflict started. Furthermore, higher energy prices can have a negative impact on national security by affecting economic stability, causing inflation and increased poverty, and can lead to social unrest. In short, the increase in energy prices indicated in Figure 4 highlights the need for proper energy management and the importance of energy security in maintaining food security and stability across the continent.

## III. Understanding the Intersection of Food and National Security

Food and national security intersect in various ways, including food security, food safety, and food sovereignty. However, in this case, the focus is on food security, which is concerned with the availability, accessibility, and affordability of sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for all people at all times. The intersection of food and national security can be seen in the context of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. The crisis has had an impact on food security and food sovereignty across the African continent with some of the countries failing to control their agricultural production systems due to disruption in both the energy and fertilizer supply chains.

The case of Kenya serves as a compelling illustration of the interconnectedness of food insecurity and national security, as evidenced by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), recent data reveals that 3.5 million Kenyans, among them one million children under the age of five and 100,000 expectant mothers, are currently grappling with food shortages and are at risk of starvation (Onyango, 2022). The current situation in Kenya is

further compounded by a number of factors, including drought as well as disruptions in global fuel prices, fertilizers and wheat, which have led to difficult living conditions that triggered social unrests against the government of the day led by the opposition parties under the umbrella of Azimio la Umoja Kenya. The weekly uprisings have resulted in injuries and fatalities, including both protestors and law enforcement officials. Such disruptions have serious implications for national security and social stability, highlighting the need for comprehensive and coordinated approaches to addressing food insecurity and other challenges.

In Africa, two-thirds of the global extremely poor population live in sub-Saharan Africa (Schoch & Lakner, 2020). In 2021, it was estimated that 490 million people in Africa will live below the poverty threshold of 1.90 PPP\$/day (UNCTAD, 2021). This highlights the lack of access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for the majority of Africans, hindering their ability to contribute to national development and resulting in economic and human security threats.

The UN World Food Programme has warned that a fourth failed rain season in the Horn of Africa could worsen the hunger crisis, affecting 13 million people in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia (Gebre, 2022). Additionally, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is expected to disrupt food security in the region, as 90 percent of wheat imports in eastern Africa come from Russia and Ukraine (Mureithi, 2022), while 80 percent of wheat imports in North Africa, Nigeria, and South Africa also come from these countries (Sacko & Mayaki, 2022). To prevent future food deficits, African governments must invest in becoming net agricultural exporters and take advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area. Figure 5 below indicates a sense of wheat import dependency on Russia and Ukraine among African countries, which is contributing to the current food insecurity on the continent.

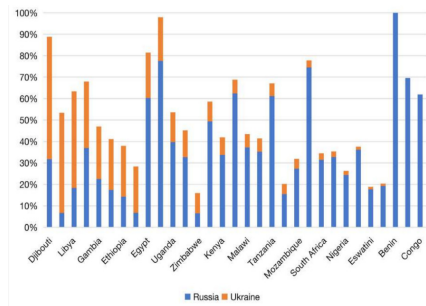


Figure 5: Africa's wheat import dependency on Russia/Ukraine  
Source: Ghenna (2022) based on calculations from the ITC Trade Map

The disruption of oil prices and an increase in fuel prices due to Russia being the world's third-largest oil producer (IEA, 2022) may also result in higher food prices in Africa, particularly in urban centers, and lead to socio-economic hardships and political instability. On the other hand, ongoing crises, conflicts, poverty, and threats in some African countries may escalate the vulnerability of marginalized communities to engage in violent extremism and terrorism.

Programme's Executive Director, David Beasley, that "without food security, you will have no other security."

The lack of food security in Africa poses a threat to various aspects of national security, including political stability, military readiness, social cohesion, and economic growth, which in turn might have implications on international as well as regional security. A shortage of food can lead to competition for resources, which in turn can cause internal conflicts and criminal activities. Economic stress, poverty, and food insecurity can also lead to engaging in criminal behavior and exploitation of vulnerable populations. Furthermore, food-related crimes, such as food fraud and counterfeiting, as well as social instability, can arise. The lack of access to food and its affordability can result in higher crime rates in impoverished neighborhoods.

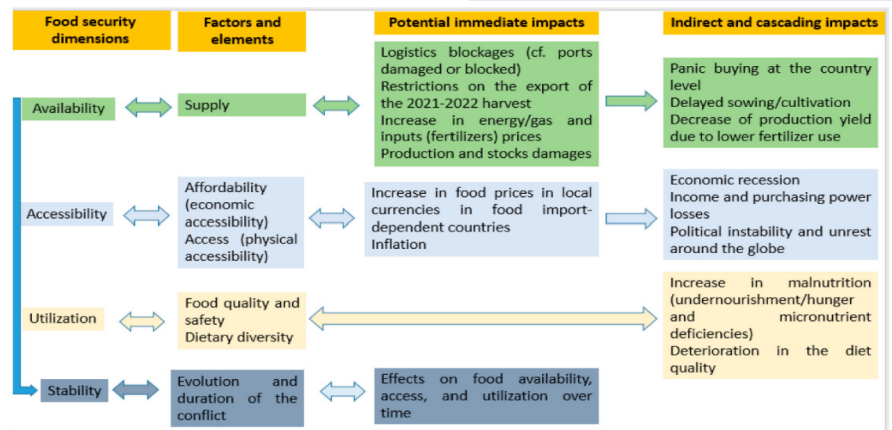


Figure 6: Short and Long-Term Impacts of the Russia-Ukraine War  
Source : Ben Hassen & El Bilali (2022)

The interconnectedness of food security and other socio-economic factors highlights the significance of ensuring food security in Africa for the preservation of national security. Figure 6 presents the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on food security and highlights the need for African governments to prioritize access to food for their citizens. This is in line with the statement made by the UN World Food

Therefore, African governments must take deliberate measures to address the challenges to food security, including increasing food production and reducing dependence on imports. This will ensure that the continent can fully realize its potential in agriculture and secure its food supply, contributing to the overall stability and security of the continent.

|         | 2007-09<br>average<br>(\$ bn) | 2017-19<br>average<br>(\$ bn; base) | 2029<br>projection<br>(\$ bn) | growth from<br>base to 2029<br>(%) | 2010-19<br>average<br>growth (%) | 2020-29<br>proj. average<br>growth (%) |
|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Exports | 7.3                           | 9.7                                 | 9.4                           | -3.1                               | 1.8                              | -0.6                                   |
| Imports | 19.8                          | 27.5                                | 40.1                          | 45.8                               | 2.6                              | 3.5                                    |

Figure 7: Agricultural Trade in Africa, Source: Oxford Business Group

Sub-Saharan Africa’s agricultural sector contributes a significant portion to its GDP, accounting for approximately 23% (Goedde & Ooko-Ombaka, et al, 2019). Despite the importance of this industry, the continent’s food security remains threatened as evident from the trade balance of agricultural exports and imports shown in Figure 8. The data depicted in the figure reveals that Africa is not fully utilizing its vast arable land to meet its food demands, which results in a persistent reliance on food imports. This trend is projected to worsen in the future, with food import levels expected to increase by 2029 if proactive measures are not taken to reduce the dependency. The current Russia-Ukraine conflict serves as a cautionary tale and highlights the need for Africa to address its food security challenges.

#### IV. Lessons Learned from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict for African Policymakers

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of food security in times of conflict. African policymakers can learn several lessons from this conflict, such as the need to build a resilient food system that can withstand political and economic shocks, the importance of reducing dependence on food imports, and the need to promote local agriculture and food production. These lessons are particularly relevant given the increasing frequency of conflict and instability in many African countries (Smith, 2018).

Moreover, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine highlights the importance of food security for national security and should serve as a warning for African policymakers. The disruption of food supplies and the sharp increase in food prices in Africa demonstrate the potential for food security to play a major role in national security (Jones, 2019). As such, African policymakers must prioritize food security and take steps to build a resilient food system that can withstand the shocks of geopolitical conflicts. This will not only help ensure food security for the region’s population but will also contribute to the stability and security of the entire African continent (Brown, 2021).

Furthermore, to ensure food security in times of global conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, African policymakers must prioritize building resilience in the region’s food systems. This means strengthening the capacity of local communities to produce and access food, promoting food self-sufficiency, and investing in infrastructure and technology that can support the food system even in times of crisis. In addition, policymakers must also take steps to reduce the risk of food price spikes and food shortages, which can be destabilizing and contribute to internal instability.

#### V. Policy Recommendations

Therefore, to mitigate the risks of food insecurity which can in turn lead to national security threats, the policy brief recommends African countries to:

- ★ Diversify food sources to reduce dependence on a few countries for food imports.
- ★ Implement programs to mitigate the impact of food insecurity in conflict-affected regions and address socio-economic challenges.
- ★ Encourage and support the development of local agriculture industries in African countries to reduce dependence on imports and ensure food self-sufficiency.
- ★ Invest in the development of infrastructure for the storage, transportation, and distribution of food to improve the resilience of the food supply chain.
- ★ Promote sustainable agriculture practices and conservation of fertile lands to enhance food production and maintain food security in the long run.
- ★ Encourage the development of safety nets and food assistance programs for the most vulnerable populations to mitigate the impact of food insecurity.
- ★ Collaborate with international organizations, non-government organizations, and other stakeholders to address the root causes of food insecurity and work towards achieving global food security.
- ★ Provide support for small-scale farmers and rural development programs.
- ★ Promote investment in agriculture production to become net agricultural exporters

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, food security is a crucial aspect of enhancing national security among African countries. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine highlights the need for the continent to ensure that its citizens have access to affordable, nutritious food for a healthy and productive population. Adequate food access will also minimize the potential for internal conflicts caused by supply chain disruptions. To address this, developing short and long-term strategies to secure Africa's food supply by utilizing uncultivated arable land will be a significant step toward food security in the region. Such efforts will fortify the food supply chain and national security system, mitigating vulnerabilities that can lead to social, political, and economic instability. Failure to address food insecurity can also provide opportunities for terrorist organizations to exploit the situation and compromise national security. Therefore, the Russia-Ukraine crisis emphasizes the vulnerability of some African countries to external and multidimensional shocks and highlights the interconnection between the energy sector, agricultural development, and human security with national security interests. Ensuring food security on the continent is crucial to maintaining stability and preventing threats to national security. In addition, the crisis has highlighted the interplay between food and national security and how geopolitical conflicts such as the ongoing war in Ukraine can disrupt food security and affect not only the parties directly involved but also other parts of the world, particularly Africa.

## About the Author

Seleman Yusuph Kitenge – ADEL Alumnae Seleman Yusuph Kitenge works as a Communications and Advocacy Officer at the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD. He is a veteran of a decade of campaigning on youth development, peace, and security issues. He was also part of a small team that prepared Tanzania's National Strategy on Preventing Violent Extremism. He is currently pursuing a

Master's in Humanitarian Action, Cooperation, and Development at the Open University of Tanzania and a Master of Science in International Relations, Strategy, and Security at Neapolis University Pafos in Cyprus. Seleman is also pursuing an Advance Course in Intelligence Management at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Homeland Security from Galilee International Management Institute in Israel (2022), Post Graduate Diploma in Management of Foreign Relations from the Center for Foreign Relations (2016), a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with Honours from the Open University of Tanzania (2015), and a Diploma in Public Sector Financial Management from Tanzania Public Service College (2011). He is a recipient of numerous national, continental, and global recognition for his engagements in peace, security, and development matters.

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Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau  
 Tel. +43 (1) 3583080  
 E-Mail: [office@aies.at](mailto:office@aies.at)  
 Website: [www.aies.at](http://www.aies.at)

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