

Recent crises are jacking up near-term food prices and ballooning long-term hunger

World hunger is likely to increase dramatically over the next year or two as the result of three overlapping crises.

The immediate crisis has been triggered by the latest phase of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War (it began with the annexation of Crimea and the seizure of the Donbas region by Russian-backed separatists in 2014) with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The response by the United States and the European Union has not only included the shipment of military supplies and equipment to Ukrainian forces, but it has also included diplomatic and economic sanctions that have limited Russia's ability to export agricultural products like wheat.

Ukraine's ability to participate in wheat export markets has been cut off by the Russian control of Ukraine's Black Sea coastline as well the difficulty Ukrainian farmers face trying to move their production in the midst of a hot war.

Together, Russia and Ukraine were responsible for 29.4 percent of world wheat exports in the 2017-2020 crop-marketing years. It will be difficult to compensate for the absence of that large a share of world wheat exports. In addition, the Ukrainian planting of spring crops like barley and corn are certain to be reduced by the war as will the June winter wheat harvest.

The result is a dramatic increase in the prices of agricultural commodities.

The second crisis is one that we are all too familiar with, COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, we saw disruptions in the supply of chicken and hamburger to our local supermarkets, though it was toilet paper that grabbed the front page headlines. Then it was the global supply chain that put a snag in our 2020 Christmas gift-buying plans; the gifts we wanted were stuck in a shipping container somewhere between China and our favorite retail outlet.

More recently, we have seen the price of used cars and houses skyrocket because of a shortage of computer chips for cars and building supplies and workers needed to construct new homes. But the disruption of the global supply chain that affects Christmas gifts, new cars, and home construction also has a significant effect on the global supply chain for food. It involves the same workers, ships, and shipping containers.

The third crisis is not new. Hunger is a chronic problem. Though the percentage of the world's population that experiences either chronic or episodic hunger is lower than it was 5 decades ago, in absolute terms, the number of people affected by hunger has barely budged.

With the addition of the first two crises, the number of those facing hunger and malnutrition is destined to increase unless something is done to ensure that everyone has access to a stable supply of nutritious, culturally appropriate food.

Over the years, private charities have tried their best to address this problem. We have all seen the advertisements featuring emaciated children. Certainly, the funds that have been raised have made a difference for individual children and adults.

But expecting private charities to do the work of society as a whole is a recipe for failure. The idea that private entities are more cost-efficient than governments in addressing issues like hunger may be true at the individual level. At the macro level, however, private entities simply do not have the financial capacity to end world hunger in a sustained manner.

We were pleased to see that the Biden Administration is going to use \$1 billion for humanitarian assistance to respond to the crisis precipitated by this latest phase of the Russo-

Ukrainian War. Even that, however, is simply a drop in the bucket compared to the scope of the problem.

It would be nice to see the governments of the North Atlantic Community put as much immediate effort into the feeding of the world's hungry as they are in supplying materiel to the Ukrainian resistance forces.

In the long-run, even that is not enough. The Russo-Ukrainian War will end, or at least return to a series of chronic skirmishes and the panicked shipments of weapons will decline, but ending hunger is different. It will require a long-term commitment on the part of the governments of the world, with private charities serving as intermediaries in specific situations, to put an end to hunger for all people on the face of the earth.

Policy Pennings Column 1124

Originally published in MidAmerica Farmer Grower, Vol. 37, No. 370, May 6, 2022

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