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COULD DISRUPTIONS TO EASTERN EUROPEAN WHEAT SPUR DISPLACEMENT IN AFRICA?

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The war in Ukraine is having far-reaching repercussions on many countries around the world, including in Africa, where it is affecting food security, job markets and energy prices. This article investigates the early impact of the war on food shortages across Africa and what it could mean for displacement in the continent and beyond.

The war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, which include a ban on exports, are a stark reminder of the globalised interdependencies and inequalities of the world economy. Geographically far removed from the conflict, countries in Africa are nonetheless feeling its impact in their food security, energy prices and job markets, with many highly dependent on food imports. The Russo-Ukrainian War is having ripple effects beyond Europe and could lead to crisis and displacement outside of the continent, affecting some African countries more than others.

Why is wheat so important for Africa?

For various reasons, the majority of African countries are highly dependent on imports of basic food items for their survival – not only wheat, but also corn, rice, etc. According to [some experts](#), the majority of Africans obtain their caloric intake from cereals, with most diets poor in proteins and micronutrients. This crucial reliance on wheat and other grains is partially the result of limited means for local production, but also the result of a complex system of land ownership.

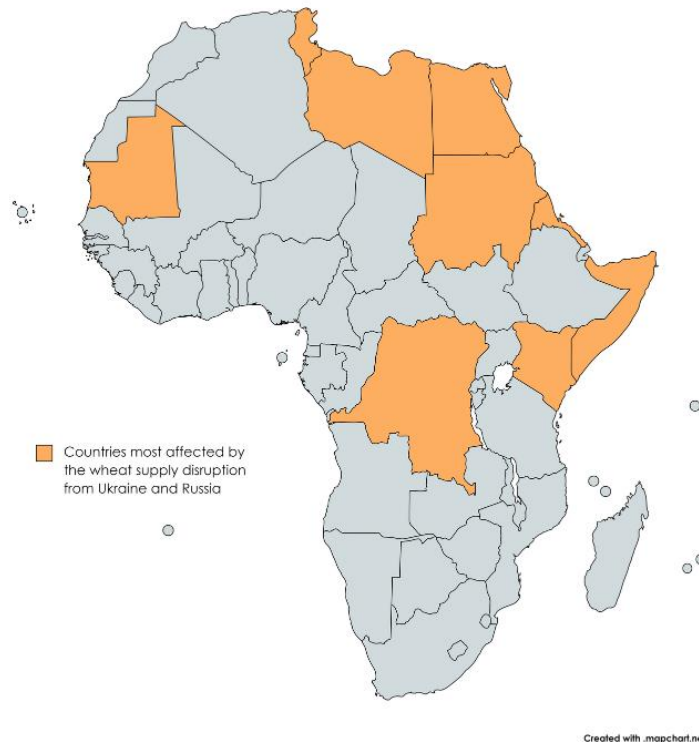
In sub-Saharan Africa, different countries adhere to different land rights regimes. Some lands are not formally owned by farmers, while many areas fall under a traditional ownership scheme, aimed at serving a specific local community. About [two-thirds of all cultivated land](#) in sub-Saharan Africa is thought to be under customary land tenure. This means that small farming communities have minimal capacity (and sometimes lack incentive) to respond to changes in the global market. These structural limitations in farming and national production are among the reasons why most African countries are less likely to become self-reliant in the

short-term – and be more sensitive to price and supply changes than countries with larger reserves and access to alternative suppliers.

North African dependence on Russian and Ukrainian wheat

Egypt is the largest importer of wheat globally, with a combined 85 percent of its supply provided by Russia and Ukraine. With production and shipping of wheat from Ukraine disrupted, and sanctions imposed on Russian exports, prices of wheat have soared. Although [Ukraine has 30 million tons of wheat in storage](#), and a promising harvest due this summer, exports to Egypt, which are shipped mostly through Black Sea ports (currently under Russian blockade), have been halted. This comes amid rising inflation in Egypt– [surging past 12 percent in March 2022](#) – and a [devaluing](#) of the local currency. Consequently, the prices of basic goods such as bread have [increased](#). Egyptian authorities report that, given the country’s sensitivity to increasing prices, it is now forced to rely on its current stocks more heavily, which are forecasted to last between 2 and 4 months.

Egypt is currently looking for alternative suppliers, both locally and internationally, and considering a reduction of its bread subsidy system. The topic of bread subsidies in Egypt is a major source of contention between citizens and the government in Egypt since the [1950s](#). Bread represents a staple food item for many Egyptians, a third of whom live below the poverty line. From a government perspective, bread subsidies cost around [USD 2.8 billion](#), a number that is projected to increase with the rising prices of wheat. The price of subsidised bread has been nominally stable since the 1980s. Talks of bread subsidy changes in a context of economic crisis risk creating social unrest.



In **Libya**, the situation is even more dire, adding to the economic hardships experienced since the start of civil wars in 2011. The Russo-Ukrainian War has exacerbated food insecurity, as Libya imports [75 percent](#) of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia and holds only limited reserves. Disruption to wheat supply has led to increases in bread prices and could add to the public pressure the Libyan Government is experiencing.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, **Tunisia** imported 80 percent of its wheat supply from Ukraine. The war has driven wheat prices to the highest levels in [14 years](#), with many families struggling to afford bread and other wheat-based staples. Bread is one of the goods heavily subsidised by the Tunisian Government and [shortages at bakeries](#) have already been reported across the country. Worse still, Tunisia suffers from [low storage capacity](#) (currently limited to three months) and as it also subsidises fuel, has had to raise fuel prices twice in March, due to rising oil prices. This change is particularly important to highlight as rising fuel prices lead to price increases in other goods and, especially in the case of Tunisia, add to the government budget deficit.

North African countries are not the only countries where food security is affected by the conflict in Ukraine. [32 percent](#) of total African wheat imports come from Russia and 12 percent from Ukraine. Throughout Africa, [25 countries](#) import more than a third of their wheat from

Ukraine and Russia. Countries that are heavily dependent on wheat imports from Eastern Europe – such as [Somalia, Sudan, Mauritania, Congo, Kenya and Eritrea](#) – have naturally experienced fallout from the conflict. In **Sudan**, for example, the price of bread has nearly [doubled](#), with some bakeries forced to close following a 60 percent drop in wheat imports since the beginning of the war two months ago. Disruptions to wheat supplies are clearly having major repercussions on food security across the continent.

How food insecurity impacts migration

Recent disruption to the wheat supply not only threatens the livelihood of communities, it is also fuels migration aspirations. Food insecurity affects migration behaviour within countries, regions and internationally. Migratory movements first occur within a given country or region, with the poor typically the first to suffer, leading to an [increase in rural to urban migration](#). However, the reverse also occurs, with migrants impoverished by soaring costs of living [leaving the city for their family farms](#) – where labour for food production is needed to secure livelihoods. While comparatively little is known about the actual composition of this mix of migrants flowing in each direction, it can be assumed that many move towards fast-growing urban areas. And, when they do, this places additional pressure on essential services like housing, water, jobs and food supplies, potentially aggravating tensions within communities.

[Studies](#) from sub-Saharan African countries have shown that food insecurity also affects international migration processes. That is, the more acute the level of food insecurity experienced, the higher the propensity to migrate. Looking at food shortages in isolation, the current disruption to supply is more likely to lead to increased desire to migrate in countries where wheat plays a sensitive role in the sustenance of the population. However, in the long-run, reduced food security typically leads to a lower probability of migration [by the poor](#), due to prevailing material constraints – even though the desire to leave may continue to be present.

It is also important to highlight that the changes in the global wheat supply and increasing food prices are compounded in Africa by economic, political and environmental hardships experienced across the continent, further amplifying the struggles citizens experience on a daily basis – and fuelling the desire/decision to migrate. Should the disruption of wheat supplies continue, states in North Africa might need to cut basic food subsidies, which, in the past, has led to widespread protests and even, as [some have argued](#), to the Arab Spring that saw the toppling of regimes, civil wars and sizable displacement [across the region](#) (and to Europe).

Cautionary tales from recent crises

Evidence from the Horn of Africa in 2017 has shown that people facing insecurity tend to seek out the closest possible safe refuge. The food crisis experienced in the region as a result of civil wars in South Sudan and Somalia, further exacerbated by drought, did not lead to large influxes of migrants from the Horn of Africa to Saudi Arabia (a main destination of migration from the region). Instead, there was a marked increase in migration to urban areas within the affected countries and the immediate region. These movements to the closest city or across the closest international border are usually prevalent where migrants cannot afford to travel farther afield, at least at first. Proximity to the migrant's home is also important for [language, religious and ethnic affinities](#).

Recent evidence from Central America also underscores the link between food insecurity and emigration. In 2014, the El Niño drought caused food insecurity and led to a [significant increase in irregular migration to the US](#) from countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. It is estimated that 90 percent of US-bound emigrants leaving Guatemala and Honduras, and 76 percent leaving El Salvador, during this period did so due the drought and subsequent unemployment and violence. Many were receiving food assistance already before their departure. These movements also directly affected local agriculture and livestock, which then further impacted food production.

In the Middle East, the worsening economic situation in 2011, and the subsequent social unrest, led to the toppling of several regimes and mass displacements across the region and to Europe. The 2011 Arab Spring protests were at least in part fuelled by subsidy cuts and rising food prices. In Egypt, similar protests broke out in 1977 and 1984 when the Egyptian Government cut bread subsidies, with a series of such 'bread riots' going on to affect several states in the region during the 1980s. Recently, the price of unsubsidised bread in Egypt had increased by up to [50 percent](#) before price controls were imposed, in a country where a [third of the population live below the poverty line](#). Experts have warned that a crisis similar to that currently unfolding in Lebanon could occur in Egypt, where over [100 million](#) people would be affected.

These crises and many others should be seen as cautionary tales in understanding the impact of food insecurity on displacement, particularly for countries that are highly dependent on short-term food supplies imports, and therefore vulnerable to food insecurity. There is increasing evidence showing that food insecurity is an important factor in both the aspiration and decision to migrate, not least due to its fuelling of political and social instability. Reducing

dependence on a small number of suppliers, increasing supplier diversification and working towards greater self-sufficient production could improve outcomes for many communities.

To this end, there is already evidence of quick pivoting by African states to offset rising food insecurity, and in the process help to avert displacement. Egypt, for example, has stated its intention to engage with wheat suppliers from the US, Kazakhstan and the EU. Many other North African countries are similarly aware that their stability depends on securing sufficient cereal reserves and maintaining low food prices. In this environment, the EU and other suppliers could emerge as key players in supporting African governments to maintain social cohesion and protect households from soaring food prices – and avert another [regional upheaval](#).

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