



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Management

FOOD INSECURITY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY: INSIGHTS FROM ASSESSMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL UPHEAVALS

KEY WORDS: : Food Security, National Security, Political Stability

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ABSTRACT

Food security is as a situation where all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life. For this to be achieved, the following must be ensured: production, availability, accessibility, utilization, provision of nutrients, and stability of supplies. Often, these key pillars of food security are not always achieved resulting in social unrest. There are indications that, the status of food security has a bearing on political stability of nations. Consequently, the value of a secure global food supply extends beyond the mere threat of hunger and malnutrition into wider political instability. Cognizant of the risks of failing to tackle the global food supplies, the UN in 2015, came up with 17 SDGs one of which is, "ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture" which is to be accomplished by 2030. This article reviews, in geopolitical terms, the risks of civil unrest and disruptions that occurred, mainly attributable to food insecurity. These translated into unstable political systems and to some extent, toppling of regimes. It concludes that international and national communities should endeavor to put in place comprehensive, long-term strategies for ensuring food secure nations. Such strategies should be multifaceted, including policy, institutional and legal provisions like those provided for in various international accords. Areas of focus should include: enhancement agricultural productivity; improvement distribution networks; reduction farmers' vulnerability to climate change; and management of market dynamics

1.0. Introduction

According to UNDP, food is one of the basic needs and inadequate provision is a tragedy for hundreds of people in the developing world. Food security implies that people have access to food, that they have an entitlement to food by growing it for themselves, by buying it or by taking advantage of public food distribution system (UNDP 1994). Literatures indicate that the importance of the world's food supply extends beyond the threat of shortages, hunger and poverty (Brinkman et al., 2015; Marco et al., 2011). Food availability and non-availability affects domestic policy as well as national and international security. According to Brinkman et al., (2015), food insecurity is a threat and multiplier for violent conflict, especially when caused by higher food prices, which heightens the risk of democratic breakdown, civil conflict, protest, rioting, and communal conflict. In addition, Macartan et al (2017), observes that food insecurity can either be a cause or an accelerant or precipitate to civil unrest. The food-price crisis of 2007–2008 caused dozens of protests across the globe, serving as a wakeup call to the international community to take cognition of the fact that investment in agricultural development is critical to political stability and national security (Marco et al., 2011) This article reviews in geopolitical terms, the risks of political instability that occurred as a result of food insecurity. The article takes cognizance of the fact that the cause-effect relation between food insecurity and political instability is complex as there may be other underlying factors. Like all cause and effect relationships, the link between the two forces is context-specific and varies according to a country's level of development and the strength of its political institutions and social safety nets (Henk et al., 2015).

2.0. Background Information

Lack of access to affordable food has proven to trigger revolutions and spark unrest across the world (Flowers, 2016). Most of the 1 billion people currently facing food insecurity live in countries affected by conflict (Brinkman et al., 2015). The most severely affected countries in 2016 Global Hunger Index include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Somalia and East Timor. Over 100 million joined the ranks of the world's desperately hungry between 2008 and 2009 (Aywera et al., 2007)

Food insecurity can induce conflict in several ways which include but not limited to: worsens poverty levels; increases dissatisfaction in populations; increases inequalities amongst people; causes displacement and migrations; and creates humanitarian crises such as often occurs in refugee camps. For example, increased migration both, within the country or to a foreign country, spurred by food shortages as a result of wars is the first concern for many governments. Migration is viewed by many governments as a

security issue that often results in political disturbance. Further, when one area is swept into conflict, there are inevitable spillovers into neighboring countries, thus extending instability and food insecurity (Simmons, 2017). From the foregoing, conflict can thus occur at different levels thus, national, regional and globally. The violent responses to food shortages in many parts of the world, caused by food price spikes in 2007, 2008 and 2011 illustrate this. Due to the aforementioned, many developing countries treat food security as a national security issue. This is as evidenced by the protectionist agricultural policies that reflect a sense of national vulnerability often attributable to the status of food security. A few examples will suffice here:

In some countries like China, details related the status of food is considered as classified data. In its public and official statements China, issues statements insisting that it is and can remain self-sufficient in food production in the coming century (Anderson et al., 2010). Likewise, Japan and North Korea treat food security as a major policy, which must be designed to achieve comprehensive national security. In addition, the European Union, South America and the United States through World Trade Organization and other trading blocs, have come up with similar protectionists' policies of providing agricultural subsidies to their farmers with the aim of cushioning them from potential conflict. Generally, in the developed countries, the drive toward self-sufficiency is used by many leaders as a justification for subsidizing domestic producers. In these nations, a minimum level of food self-sufficiency is a prerequisite for national security, to the extent that most countries in the region restrict food imports in the interest of promoting food self-sufficiency.

Overall, when nations address food insecurity, they mitigate the famine hazard which if not addressed, often leads to conflict and political instability. This is in accordance to the provisions of Hyogo protocol (2005) which stipulate that in order to become resilient to risk hazards like violent conflict, nations must address underlying factors, like in the context of this review, food insecurity.

3.0. The Concepts of Political Stability and Food Security

According to Worldwide Governance, indicators or variables used to construct the meaning of the term political stability are varied. For instance IPD, (2016), identifies indicators of political instability as comprising intensity of: internal conflicts comprising of ethnic and civil tensions; religious intolerance; violent activities like those of underground political organizations; and social conflicts. While WMO (2016) observes that the risk of internal conflicts may occur in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict, or full-blown civil war, in which rebels/insurgents attempt to overthrow

the government and influence major government policies. Examples of such rebel groups include; Boko Haram, Al Shabab, Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS amongst others. For instance, food insecurity resulting from the Boko Haram aggression is continuing to devastate the populations in North Eastern Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (Simmons, 2017). From the foregoing, such social unrests may be attributable to many factors like poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity amongst others.

In terms of causation the link between food security and conflict run in both directions (Maxwell, 2017). Therefore, concepts of political stability and food security are often mutually dependent and reinforcing (Simmons, 2017). For instance, food security can influence the political stability of countries and simultaneously, political instability can bring about food insecurity (Maxwell, 2017). This aspect is made clear by considering the relative peace prevailing in the Western world. For over the past three decades, Western nations have not struggled to feed themselves. On the contrary, they have produced too much. Consequently they are main source of Official Development Assistance (ODA) used by the recipients, mainly in the developing countries to address food insecurity (Saswati, *et al.*, 2011; WFP, 2016). The Western world literally reaped the benefits of technological advances made during the Green Revolution and hence have not experienced civil strife or political instability related to food insecurity (UNDP, 2016). Further, the importance of the European Union (EU) as a global food producer and shaper of international agricultural policy cannot be underestimated.

On the converse, countries such as Syria, Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan have experienced or continue to experience unprecedented civil strife which impacts negatively on their food supplies. Therefore, whereas protests may reflect long-standing political failings of governments, often, it is inextricably linked to the desperate vulnerable populations exposed to hunger and famine (UNDP, 2016).

Closer home in Kenya, the country experienced acute shortage of the staple food, maize in the first half of 2017, with the price of the standard measure of maize meal increasing by more than 60%. To ameliorate the tension that became apparent, the government imported the grain and put controls on the price of the commodity. Few examples from specific geopolitical regions that experienced riots related to food insecurity are discussed hereunder.

4.0. Specific Geopolitical Upheavals

4.1. Asia

The greatest risk for regime stability is the hazard related to urban riots often attributable to food shortages or sudden price spikes. An example of this phenomenon occurred in India where rising food prices led to urban riots directed at India's ruling political party the Bharatiya Janata Party that almost caused them their political stakes (George, 2011). Further, in Indonesia, a sharp increase in the price of rice in 1998 and between 2007 and 2008 made it difficult for a majority of people to afford which resulted in riots in the Eastern parts of the country. In 1998, after the food riots intensified in Indonesia, the then president, Suharto ordered the military to move against anti-government activists and accused plotters for country's "disintegration." Similar upheavals occurred in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka and Moscow and other cities in Russia. For instance, in 1991, president the then president of Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev had to make appeals to the farming states to deliver promised food shipments to Moscow without delay. This was amid threats of food raids on farms as the country ran out of the basic food commodities such as of meat, butter, cooking oil and sugar.

Due to the foregoing, most of the Asiatic countries advocate for self-sufficiency policy regarding their status of food in spite of the contrary existing on the ground. China, for instance rejects the Lester Brown (2008) thesis that China needs to import massive amounts of grain from the world market in the coming century is partially rooted in a persistent fear within the Chinese government that food insecurity could potentially provoke widespread anger

against the Communist Party and perhaps lead to civil unrest (Brown, 2008). "Thus, the sensitivity that many Asian governments have about food security may be linked to fears of social instability and perhaps even political revolution (George, 2011).

4.2. Arab States

Also at risk are a number of Arab states including Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen, all of which have experienced major upheavals since 2008 (Berazneva, *et al.*, 2013). Longstanding economic and political motives for the 'Arab Spring' uprising are well established, but there is evidence that the rising food prices were another significant catalyst (Saswati, *et al.*, 2011). For instance, in the summer of 2008 just before the riots began, long queues and tension was evident over bread shortages that demanded the army to be called in to bake and distribute bread to Egypt's poorest.

In Syria, four years of severe drought from 2007 – 2010 devastated the agricultural sector and triggered massive change in the countryside. Farmers abandoned their land and migrated to cities in search of jobs that didn't exist. The ensuing social and economic disruption helped to fan the flames of political conflict that ultimately led to the 2011 outbreak of civil war (Simmons, 2017). From the foregoing, food security is therefore an issue of regime survival or regime change.

According to the Nomura Research Institute in 2011, the top twenty five countries most vulnerable to rising food prices include Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. In the twenty four months that preceded the outbreak of the respective revolutions in the Arab world, food prices rose by over 32% in Egypt and about 11% in Tunisia. The first protest of the 'Arab spring' occurred in Tunisia in December 2010 and were dismissed initially as simply another round of bread riots which a number of regimes responded by making adjustments to food prices and offered increased subsidies (Henk *et al.*, 2015). Literature indicates that the rising food costs and food shortages contributed to the Arab nations' unrest (Berazneva, *et al.*, 2013). Here, people's standard of living deteriorated in most Arab countries, especially in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen which ultimately ended with massive civil disobedience. Over time, food security has continued to worsen in most Arab states as the proportion of people without enough money to buy food continues to increase. Political instability still dominates the landscape in countries such as Syria and Yemen which are still experiencing civil strife.

4.3. Latin America

In Latin America, food insecurity contributed to the political instability and or threatened the national security and political stability of countries as detailed hereunder:

Latin America and Caribbean countries like Argentina, Haiti and Brazil, Mexico have gone through political instability due to factors related to food insecurity. Argentina experienced a series of riots and related episodes of looting in food stores and supermarkets at different times. In 1989 during the last part of the Raúl Alfonsín presidency the riots related to food shortages were intensified. The riots were caused by the rampant hyperinflation and food shortage, and were associated with protests and demonstrations. The first riots started in Rosario, the third-largest city in the country, when people demanded supermarkets to give away food; they quickly spread to other cities, including Greater Buenos Aires (Auyero *et al.*, 2007). The national government announced a state of emergency, president Alfonsín resigned and president elect Carlos Menem took office six months in advance. The beginning of 1990 saw a new, albeit much smaller wave of riots, mainly February and March, in Rosario and Greater Buenos Aires. The economic crisis had not reduced, which resulted in many businesses opening up albeit with physical barriers. The riots were contained quickly, again with delivery of food assistance to the poorer neighbourhoods. Further, the 2007 riots in Mexico, after corn prices spiked and made the staple food product (tortillas) unaffordable for most of the people, and resulted in what is commonly referred to as the 'tortilla riots' in most of the urban

centres in central American. In Haiti, the food price spike of 2007-2008 saw the FAO index rise from 130 at the start of 2007 to above 2010 in 2008 (FAO, 2011). The price increase contributed to the collapse of regime of Haiti in 2008. Here, the Senators impeached the Prime Minister after more than a week of riots over food prices. Most affected was the price of rice, their staple food.

4.4. The Balkans

Another geographical destination where food security has/had implications on socio-political stability is in the Balkans. These comprise: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, and the European part of Turkey. These are low-income food deficit countries (FAO, 2010). Consequently, they have suffered for long from political instability and armed conflict. The Balkan conflict is as a result of deep rooted ethnic tensions exacerbated by competition for scarce resources such as land required for food production, among other causes. Some of the riots are hereby elucidated; in 1991, Albanian president Ramiz Alia directed the use of army troops to end days of food riots in the country. In the Albanian capital, Tirana, security agents had to guard bread distribution center due to the panic buying and rioting. The situation got worse when the then Prime Minister Ylli Bufi, announced that the strategic reserves of grain supplies would last for only a few days. This caused political instability in the nation.

Due to the forgoing experience, there is emphasis on intensive investment in Balkan food security domain, by respective governments. This is considered effective approach because it has reduced political conflicts and the cost of peace-making and peacekeeping. That is why there is relative peace in the region, unlike what it was a decade ago.

4.5. The African States

Food riots across Africa featured in response to the food crisis of 2007-2008 (Berazneva, *et al.*, (2013). Armed conflict in Africa is concentrated in four regions: North Africa and the Sahel, West Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. In North Africa, countries most affected comprise, North Eastern Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Senegal, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. These countries are food insecure hence vulnerable to intermittent conflict as alluded to under section 5.0. Between 2008 and 2011, the main trigger of the violence was and continues to be price hikes which resulted in riots that started within urban centers and escalated in the whole of the Northern Africa, toppling of regimes (Berazneva, *et al.*, 2013). These riots spilled over to the Middle East between 2010 and 2011 with similar consequences. Although the scarcity of food triggered the riots, literature indicates that, often the onset of such conflict is a response to the impacts of the past, in this case the dictatorial regimes that existed in these countries at that time (Macartan, 2010; Berazneva, *et al.*, 2013).

Other countries that have experienced similar challenges in Africa include Madagascar, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR) and DRC Congo. In Madagascar, the spiraling prices of their staple food, rice, resulted in political upheaval that saw the incumbent president Mark Ravalomana replaced by the then mayor of Antananarivo Andy Rajoelina in 2009. In Rwanda, the collapse of coffee prices led to a sudden drop in income for small farmers and contributed to the complex forces of causation that contributed to the 1994 genocide (Uvin 1996, Messer *et al.*, 2006). Many Rwandese could not access food due to its unavailability and economic meltdown. While in Somalia, South Sudan, CAR and DRC Congo, social and agricultural disruption have affected the availability of food as these nations have been engaged in protracted conflict hence heavily rely on ODA. Agricultural disruptions include amongst others the ravages caused by climatical factors like the one that occurred in Somalia between 2011 and 2012 with the attendant famine that resulted in loss of livelihoods.

In Africa, regional initiatives to address food insecurity are currently being implemented in some countries in Africa by

organizations like the Billy and Melinda Gates Foundation; Kofi Annan led Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). All provide a framework for action aimed at ensuring that every African country has a national strategy for agricultural development. For example, in order to deliver on CAADP's provisions, African countries need to implement the Maputo accord of 2003 to spare 10% of their national budgets on agricultural development within five years (FAO, 2004). Most of the African countries are far from attaining the Maputo accord. For example, the national budgetary allocations for some of these countries are: Kenya, 5.8%; Tanzania, 7.2%; Uganda, 6.5% and Rwanda, 6.2%, way below the 10 percent stipulation (NEPAD - <http://www.nepad/foodsecurity/agriculture/about>).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is evident that food insecurity is amongst the precursors of national insecurity and political instability. In the contemporary settings, more than ever before, food security is likely to emerge as a major security concern due to climate change and variability. However, all is not lost because many countries already consider food security to be an essential ingredient of their national sovereignty or national security. Therefore the rehabilitation of agriculture is a central condition for reducing violence (Soya *et al.*, 1999). Climate change should be an integral part of planning by nations in their quest to achievement of food security. Further, the linkage between food security and political stability is an area that requires serious scrutiny. These linkages have implications on the kind of strategies that should be adopted to bring about desired social change where all countries enjoy political stability.

Regarding market dynamics, many poor countries that rely on the global food supply system to attain their food security are at the mercy of the terms and conditions dictated by donor nations (Marco *et al.*, (2011). This has implications on food security of the recipients. Such trading blocs include African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA), World Trade Organization (WTO), New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have trading relationships have collateral political effects that in turn have long-term implications on nations' security and political stability (Henk *et al.*, 2015). The aforementioned trading blocs amongst others should operationalize some of the agreements in international protocols such as the resolution that stipulates that special and differential treatment be integral part of trade agreements for developing countries (Laborde, *et al.*, 2011). This, it is envisaged will enable developing countries to effectively take account of their development needs, including food security.

Further, assistance should address immediate needs but also capacity building. For example, technological and institutional capacity, and regulatory changes such as policies, should guarantee sustainability. Nations should transform the role of the state from an active participant in the market and, in many cases, an extractor of economic rents in form of high tax, to an enabling factor that facilitates progress and equity (Brinkman *et al.*, 2015). A case in point is like the fear of investing in Kenya because of the high tax levied on investments. This does not create a conducive investment environment which it turn, perpetuates poverty and hence food insecurity. Further, there is need to learn a lot more about conflict dynamics and food security. Here, resources should be devoted to gathering, analyzing information on potential conflict specificities and food security mapping. This creates early warning datasets that empower stake holders to respond appropriately when need arise. In a nutshell, ensuring food security, for all nations, especially those in protracted political and social unrest should therefore be a long-term endeavor that requires adequate resources, comprehensive strategy and patience.

In addition, policy makers should prioritize food security in their planning. In some counties concerns over food price inflation have resulted in various government policy changes, including planning for strategic reserves, imports bans and provision agricultural

subsidies. Thus, governments should recognize that measures that undermine agricultural productivity and ultimately take needed food off the market must be done away with. For example, the food crises in most of the developing countries are mainly as a result of failure to develop agricultural sectors and difficult terms on the global food markets. The latter entails distortion of agricultural market dynamics by developed countries when they provide subsidies for their farmers. These agricultural subsidies lead to under-development in rural areas of the developing and least developed countries (Henk *et al.*, 2015). This ultimately creates a dependency syndrome which is entrenched hence undermining ability of the local communities to produce food, making then chronically food insecure (Ibid). Meanwhile subsidized food increases overconsumption in developed countries which does not equally augur well for the global food security and nations' political stability as elucidated to in this review. Nations should be cognizant of the fact that hasty interventions such as: banning of exports and of food commodities; importation of the commodities; price controls; reducing import tariffs and taxes; increasing subsidies to lower prices; as well as releasing food reserves to increase supplies are often not sustainable.

Finally, governments should also be cognizant of the role of improved governance as a step in ameliorating concerns of food insecurity. Bad governance impedes economic progress and productive investment vital in all sectors including agriculture. This seems to be the 'norm' in the developing and Least Developed Countries (LDC), with consequence of national insecurity and political turbulence. Consequently, there should be international, regional and national high-level political commitment to provide good governance geared towards agricultural development.

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