

Chapter 7, Problem II: Update on the Right to Food

Over the past few years, the right to food has come under significant pressure as a result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to the World Bank, the pandemic led to severe and widespread increases in global food insecurity, affecting vulnerable households in almost every country. The increases in food insecurity during the pandemic were largely not a product of food shortages. Rather, they resulted from job losses, supply disruptions, and inflation affecting key agricultural supplies, including fertilizers and seeds. They compounded the negative trends that were already evident from climate change and the decreased biodiversity in food and agricultural products due to the homogenization of the global diet.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further aggravated these trends. Before the war, Russia and Ukraine together supplied about thirty percent of the world's wheat, with thirty-six countries, including some of the world's most impoverished, relying on these two states for more than half their wheat imports. Because wheat is a global commodity, the increase in food prices resulting from the war have jeopardized food security not only in the countries that were most reliant on Russian and Ukrainian imports but around the world.

On April 13, 2022, the leaders of the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Food Programme issued a [joint statement](#) warning that “[t]he fallout of the war in Ukraine is adding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that now enters its third year, while climate change and increased fragility and conflict pose persistent harm to people around the world.” “The threat is highest for the poorest countries with a large share of consumption from food imports,” the statement says, “but vulnerability is increasing rapidly in middle-income countries,” as well. In May 2022, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [underscored](#) that these price increases were causing significant food insecurity, especially in poorer nations, and warned that some countries could face long-term famines if Ukraine's exports were not restored to pre-war levels.

In July 2022, Turkey negotiated a deal with Russia to export more grain from Ukraine. Others have focused on longer term and systemic correctives to address the root causes of the food crisis. For example, the chief economist for the World Food Programme, Arif Husain, has [identified](#) several measures that states might take to improve food security around the world:

- “Provide adequate humanitarian and other forms of assistance to the world's vulnerable
- Keep trade flowing to minimize disruptions to supply chains
- Disincentivize knee-jerk policy reactions, such as export restrictions and import subsidies
- Strengthen market transparency [t]o minimize the risks of price hikes due to speculation
- Encourage diversification of agricultural imports
- Ensure an affordable supply of fertilizer.”

Separately, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri, [emphasizes](#) the need for more coordinated global action. Fakhri notes that efforts to address food insecurity must consider not only the need for more production but also the methods of production, so as to avoid reproducing the past production practices that have contributed to food scarcity. “[T]he fundamental problem,” he says, “is not that farmers’ access to chemical fertilizers has been disrupted by the war in Ukraine [but] that so many farmers rely heavily on chemical fertilizers in the first place.” Fakhri also criticizes the treatment of food as a commodity, which leads to market concentrations and distributional problems. He proposes that food policy be more integrally connected with, and a defining feature, of trade policy.

Notes and Questions

- Does human rights law provide a suitable framework for analyzing and trying to address the problem of food insecurity? What is its value added, relative to other policy or legal frameworks that might be used with or instead of it?
- If you were working for a human rights organization focused on food insecurity, what strategy would you adopt to address the problem? In what venues would you act, whom would you try to involve in your efforts, what concrete steps would you press them to take, and how would you harness the law to support your positions?