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Food Security as a Driver of Sustainable Peace: The Case of Kenya

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One-fifth of Africa's population suffers from severe food insecurity: a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. As of 2020, about 20 percent of the population was undernourished, and nearly 400 million were moderately food insecure.[1] Kenya is among the worst affected countries in Africa; projections indicate that the crisis is likely to worsen. Kenya's undernourishment rate has been rising, and malnutrition is the single most important contributor to child mortality. Kenya's food security crisis is at odds with the historical significance of agriculture to the nation. Agriculture accounts for about a third of the country's GDP and employs about 70 percent of the rural workforce.[2] It is dominated by smallholder farmers, who are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Climate variability and persistent droughts, high domestic food production costs, high global prices, low purchasing power, and displacement of farmers have all contributed to rising food insecurity. The potential impact of food insecurity on human rights, public safety, and peace are significant.

The Government of Kenya claims that it seeks to reduce food insecurity in line with the African Union (AU)'s Malabo Declaration—a commitment by African governments to end hunger by 2025. Yet implementation of related plans has been sluggish and improvements scarce. The government is nowhere near meeting the targeted 10 percent budget allocation stipulated in the Malabo Declaration.

The devolution of governance in 2013, which saw the creation of 47 governors and their teams taking up the reins of power in newly created counties, was expected to improve food security through more effective delivery of services. However, that has also failed to deliver much-needed progress. After a brief discussion of food insecurity in Africa and its consequences, this paper focuses on the root causes behind the current crisis in Kenya's food system and speculates on possible consequences for peacebuilding. The final section recommends actionable points for governments, the African Union, international partners, civil society, and other stakeholders in their effort to improve food security and galvanize long-lasting peace.

The State of Food Security in Africa

Africa is still plagued with serious local and transnational challenges, which impair its ability to achieve food security.[3] Food security exists when people have secure access to sufficient "safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active healthy life."[4] Africa scores poorly in all indicators regarding food security targets; nearly one in five people living in Africa is undernourished, the highest prevalence of all world regions.[5]

The current pressures on food systems in Africa include political instability, conflict, and displacement, macroeconomic imbalances such as public debt, unproductive farming practices, environmental degradation, poverty, population growth, gender inequality, inadequate education, unemployment, poor governance, and lack of access to farms and rangeland and other natural resources, as well as poor economic policies to support food production.[6] Changing climate and climatic shocks, surging food and fuel prices, and the Russia-Ukraine war have compounded the food security crisis in Africa, which is still dealing with adverse economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] The food security crisis spans the continent from Mauritania and Burkina Faso in the West to Somalia and Ethiopia in the East. Countries and regions where food insecurity has been prevalent and also ranked low in the Global Food Security Index including the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central Sahel, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mozambique, and East Africa. Alarms have been sounding in the Sahel, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia in the Horn of Africa—the worst affected countries, where projections indicate that food insecurity will rise beyond the region's already high levels.[8]

In 2018, the highest level of food insecurity was recorded in East Africa (63 percent), where about half of all undernourished people in Africa live. While hunger has been decreasing in most regions, Africa is not currently on track to meet the AU target of ending hunger by 2025. The undernourished population has been declining, but the rate of decline has been uneven across the continent. For example, Africa's Western and Northern regions have had much more success in reducing hunger than the Eastern and Central regions.[9] Unless bold actions are taken to accelerate progress, hunger will not be eradicated by 2030 as targeted by the United Nations Agenda 2030.

Consequences of Food Insecurity in Africa

Hunger and food security remain large barriers to development and pose enormous obstacles to human and economic development in Africa.[10] Over half of Africans live below the poverty line,[11] and a lack of money or other resources to purchase food results in hunger. In a cyclical way, hunger also leads to poverty, as hungry people produce below their potential.[12] Chronic food insecurity is often at the core of undernutrition and contributes to stunting in children under five years, with long-term negative impacts on health and development. Globally nearly 151 million children in 2017 were stunted, 50 million under-fives were malnourished, and 16 million suffered from severe wasting. Nearly all these children lived in Africa and Asia. Childhood wasting (low weight for height) is attributed to higher risk of disease and death.[13] Food insecurity has also aggravated social and economic inequalities that brew conflict.[14]

Steps to Enhance Food Security

The leading voices in the food security agenda have been the AU, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD/AUDA), and regional economic communities.[15] In 2014, African Heads of State marked a turning point for sustained food security with a clearly defined commitment to end hunger by 2025. The Declaration was a re-commitment to the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Project (CAADP) principles of 2003.[16] African governments have also devised and implemented new policy strategies in line with their national economic policies to support food security.[17]

The Food and Agricultural Organization's Renewed Partnership to End Hunger in Africa by 2025 currently responds to requests for support from governments to enhance national capacities to plan, coordinate, and finance food security interventions.[18]

A G7 partners meeting in May 2022 with African Ministers and key global development and finance bodies, under the theme "Response to Multiple Crises on the African Continent—Focusing on Food Security," observed that Africa's food security crisis is complex. Participants committed to coordinated action to achieve food security in Africa with options to strengthen, scale up, and accelerate access to new technology and quality inputs. The G7 leaders re-confirmed their goal to help African partner countries lead 500 million people out of hunger and malnutrition by 2030 and emphasized the need to mobilize further resources to "address food insecurity and support the sustainable transformation of food systems in Africa."[19]

Kenya, as a member of the AU, has an obligation to put mechanisms in place to meet its targets. There is government commitment, on paper, to transform its food systems through the implementation of robust policy frameworks and development goals such as the Kenya Constitution 2010, Vision 2030, Big Four Agenda, Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy 2019-2029, and The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy 2012.[20] However, Kenya's share of public agricultural expenditure is only 2.3 percent against a CAADP target of 10 percent. More work is needed to institutionalize CAADP processes, enhance ownership in counties, and incorporate Malabo Declaration commitments into their County Integrated Development Plans.[21] Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and a devastating upsurge in locust swarms, have all exacerbated the situation.

Overview and Trends of the Kenya's Food System

Kenya's agricultural sector cannot close the gap between consumption and production—a gap that has no outlook of closing soon.[22] Meanwhile, its population of over 50 million people continues to grow faster than the lower-middle-income average.[23] Decades of poorly formulated and implemented agricultural policies have had serious consequences on food security. The high cost of governance poses a threat to agricultural output and, when coupled with the high rate of corruption, leaves fewer funds for capital and agricultural expenditure.[24] By comparison, the cost of governance in Kenya is higher than those of developed nations.[25]

There are various constraints on land use in Kenya. Suitable land for cultivation is increasingly threatened by desertification in the North and ravaging soil erosion in the South. Drought has resulted in lost crops and an extremely high rate of livestock deaths. Declining forage and water resources have meant livestock owners continue to migrate in search of pasture and water.

The existence of dysfunctional institutions has characterized the agricultural sector. Institutional structures and agricultural development projects, which showed initial promise have either collapsed or become moribund.[26] Devolution has also exacerbated challenges for food security governance including inadequate resource allocation, poor governance, and political corruption thus affecting the capacity of counties to implement proper food security policies and programs.[27] Furthermore, a lack of development for linking policy with national and regional institutions remains a hindrance.[28]

Kenya suffers from numerous economic challenges, not least extreme poverty, which affects 40 percent of the population. Seven million Kenyans are unemployed; nine in ten of the unemployed are 35 years and below. Over 75 percent of Kenyans depends on agriculture for their livelihood.[29] Agriculture is dominated by smallholder farmers (75 percent) with an average age of 60 years, the majority of whom are women (80 percent) and contribute up to 80 percent of agricultural production.[30] They are caught up in cycles of under-investment and under-production and struggle to gain access to adequate seed, fertilizer, and other inputs. Inequalities are inherent in the food system and make finance availability difficult for smallholder farmers. Women face gender constraints on equitable access to resources, lack collateral, and face obstacles in access to finance, technologies, and income.

Over 3.5 million Kenyans faced food insecurity in February 2022, an increase from 3.1 million in December 2021 after the mid-short rains season assessment.[31] Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL) counties have reached crisis levels of hunger and are increasingly vulnerable to emergency levels of Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).[32] Fifty percent of the population in ASAL counties is estimated to be facing high levels of food insecurity (Fig 2). Nominal food prices have more than doubled in the past

ten years. Environmental experts reported that recent droughts, which have resulted in major livestock loss and declines in viable pastures, are pushing herders toward places they used to only go as a last resort during dry seasons, leading to clashes with farmers.
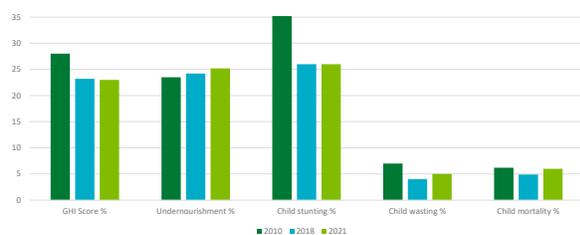

Fig 1: Kenya's Global Hunger Index Scores and Indicator Values 2010, 2018, and 2021. Source: Global Hunger Index Report, 2018 and 2021

Fig 2: Percentage of population in IPC Acute Food Insecurity in ASAL Areas. Source: IPC Technical working group 2021-2022

The failures of Kenya's food system exacerbate risks to stability and peace and can unleash social unrest. The country has witnessed several episodes of instability and lack of peace due to food insecurity. The devastating impacts of climate change and widespread food shortages have contributed to insecurity in parts of the country. Hunger and conflict over resources have triggered ethno-driven instability in Baringo, Laikipia, and several parts of Rift Valley, Eastern, and North Eastern Regions. The Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Africa reports, "Efforts to meet growing demands on agriculture with existing unsustainable farming practices add to fears that food shortage-related conflict could become endemic."[33] In 2022, Kenyans have struggled in the face of sharp food price hikes and a scarcity of staples. During the 2022 national election, attempts by protestors to halt voting unless food prices were reduced occurred in parts of the country.

Kenya's government responded to food price protests in June 2022 by temporarily lowering flour prices. A decade earlier, a movement known as "the Unga Revolution" led by poor Kenyans in Nairobi's slums morphed into a large-scale revolt against high food prices and maize shortages. The specter of mass action and, potentially, violent instability continues to hang over protests over food prices and supply. Common to such protests is the belief that government is "deaf" to calls to reduce the burden of poor Kenyans struggling to feed their families.

Peacebuilding aims to reduce the risk of relapse into violence by addressing the root causes of conflicts. Building food system resilience will contribute toward reducing conflict and creating sustainable peace. Without a resolution to improve food security, it will be difficult to build sustainable peace; without peace, the likelihood of ending hunger, a target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), will be a mirage.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Kenya's failing food system represents a threat to peace and stability. Creating more opportunities for smallholder farmers, youth, and women in agriculture to increase agricultural output should be prioritized, as stated in the CAADP process. An investment that could reap significant positive dividends of upgrading and strengthening their resilience is the incorporation of Food Security and Peace Hubs (FSaPHs) that coordinate responses and address immediate vulnerabilities and stability while building longer-term capacities around agricultural production.[34] This is achievable through the delivery of new technologies, extension and advisory services, market innovations, quality inputs, and credit advisory services. The hubs, while building on local knowledge and capacity, would bring together local, regional, and international actors engaged in humanitarian action, development work, and peacebuilding. If successfully implemented, the hubs can offer solutions for instability in other food insecure states.

Secondly, Kenya's agricultural modernization will struggle to succeed if the country does not build a pipeline of talent for food producers and actors on an urgent basis.[35] Kenya must therefore reshape its training focus to produce capacity for the food system through deliberate actions to build training pathways for young people into modern food systems. Development partners should provide additional funding and technical support to boost government efforts in creating FSaPHs and promoting agricultural education, training, and research.[36] These actions can propel Kenya's efforts to build a food system that is more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable to help drive the sustainable peacebuilding agenda.

Furthermore, Kenya's position as an economic hub in East Africa could aid the food system with the potential of transferable frameworks and pathways that can be implemented in other contexts.[37] These recommendations present a new opportunity for the newly installed Kenya government to implement initiatives to enhance food security and the stability of the country.

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