Fighting food shortages
Hungry for change

A Christian Aid report
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We believe in life before death

Front cover photo: Penny Tweedie

Introduction

It's been called the silent tsunami[1] – the global food crisis that is adding inexorably to starvation's daily death toll. With 862 million people in the world already malnourished,[2] rocketing food prices are pushing another 100 million people into dire poverty.[3]

Weakened by want, they too will be at risk of the diseases that prey on the hungry, and account for the 25,000 deaths[4] each day that take place at present from hunger-related causes.

This is a crisis of man's making, not nature. Last year, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), there was enough food grown to meet the nutritional needs of every person on the planet.[5]

A 'perfect storm' has now arisen, however, in which underlying long-term problems affecting agricultural production have been exacerbated by other factors, sending global food prices soaring and causing acute shortages of staple foods in at least 37 countries.[6]

The FAO has warned that US$30 billion a year is needed to avert further shortages.[7] As well as humanitarian concerns, there are security implications too. With food riots in more than 30 countries,[8] the FAO fears the very real prospect of conflict over food resources.

As ever, it is the world's poor who are being hit the hardest. As much as 70 per cent, and sometimes more, of their already meagre incomes must now go on feeding themselves and their families.[9] The plight of the very poorest, such as slum-dwellers, the displaced and those with HIV, is of particular concern.

One major long-term cause of the shortages is that, in return for trade and aid, poor countries have been forced by wealthy governments, and international financial institutions, to accept a raft of trade liberalisation measures that have had a ruinous effect on their ability to feed themselves.

As the international community struggles for a solution to the present crisis, Christian Aid believes that fundamental changes are needed to the manner in which the international community seeks to influence agricultural and trade policies in the developing world.

Policies that govern international trade and the lending of money to developing countries, and underpin pledges of support and assistance, must be radically reviewed. Nothing less than a pro-poor revolution in agricultural thinking is needed now to prevent such emergencies recurring with remorseless regularity.

US$30 billion a year is needed to avert future shortages and potential conflict over supplies.

Causes of the crisis

The reason that a rise in global food prices matters so much to the world's poor is that many poor countries do not grow enough food. Instead they have to buy their supplies from abroad, and recently prices have more than doubled.

Even in countries that do grow sufficient food for their own needs, consumers are also facing higher prices once other factors such as rising transport costs come into play. In the first three months of 2008 all major food commodities hit their highest price in real terms for nearly 30 years.[10]

To understand the reason that the world's poor have been left helpless in the face of rising food prices, it is important to examine the disastrous policy decisions forced on their governments in recent years.

Imbued with a doctrinaire belief in 'free trade' as the engine of growth, rich donor nations and international financial institutions have made a number of key interventions.

Trade liberalisation

This has generally been imposed as part of a package of 'reforms' demanded in return for aids and loans. Poorer countries have been forced to remove protective tariffs from agricultural produce, leaving their markets open to heavily subsidised food exports from richer nations. This system undercuts local farmers and agricultural businesses, and many have gone out of business. Donors have also forced governments to reduce subsidies on agricultural 'inputs', such as seeds and fertiliser, and lift price controls. Government agricultural boards that would once have bought stock during times of surplus to hold food in readiness for times of shortage, thus stabilising prices, have been closed down. In Malawi, for instance, any national grain surplus would once have been bought from farmers and then used as a reserve during poor harvests. More recently, however, the surplus has been sold for cash (with the assumption that it would always be possible to import grain during a crisis).[11]

State banks that would once have agreed loans for agricultural production have also been closed.

The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that the European Commission has endeavoured to push on African, Pacific and Caribbean countries will only exacerbate matters. In countries that have signed, these agreements will open up free trade still further, depriving governments of the necessary policy tools to protect and harness local productivity.

Under-investment in food production

Twenty years ago, some 20 per cent of foreign aid spent by rich countries went to help agriculture in the developing world. By 2006 that figure had fallen to less than 3 per cent.[12] Health and education projects took precedence. Spending by African governments, meanwhile, is massively tilted towards urban areas. Five years ago African heads of government committed to allocating at least 10 per cent of their budget to agriculture and rural development by 2008. This year the African Union said data from 24 countries showed that just six had reached that target. Average rural investment among the 24 was 6.6 per cent.[13] With food prices low for the past 30 years, there was an assumption that at times of shortage, food could always be purchased elsewhere. While this remains true – there is still enough food in the world to feed everyone – it does not take into account the volatility of world food prices, especially in times of shortage or as a result of hoarding and speculation. Poor countries dependent on imports of staple foods now find themselves without sufficient foreign exchange to pay for these imports, and are again forced to beg for special loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Cash crops

With the opening up of markets, donors and corporations have promoted cash crops (such as flowers, tobacco or biofuels) for export. The most productive land is then used to grow these crops, squeezing out domestic food producers. Although the intention has been to raise the incomes of marginal producers, such crops have reduced agricultural diversity, and left countries reliant on importing staples from abroad. Investing equally in staple crop production would have reduced the risks of food shortages and enhanced opportunities for development.

Small-scale subsistence farmers – including the more vulnerable, especially women and members of marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities – have been worst hit by the effects of such policies. In the most extreme cases they have been driven off their land and denied access to water and other resources. Instead of protecting these vulnerable people, and pursuing pro-poor policies to tackle exclusion, inequality and hunger, governments have focused increasingly on 'export-led growth'.

As a result of this long-term under-investment in food production, domestic farming sectors have been weakened, and countries left over-reliant on expensive food imports.

Following the damage done to the agricultural sector, many

‘The world’s misery index is rising.’

Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Programme

farmers are in no position to respond to growing shortages when the supply of subsidised food stuffs from richer countries stops.

In poorer countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which already struggled to produce enough food, agricultural production has stagnated or fallen. Some sub-Saharan countries have moved from being net food exporters to importers as a result of trade liberalisation.

Roughly 65 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan countries relies on subsistence farming,[14] with the typical farmer a woman with no fertiliser, no high-yield seeds, no irrigation and no medication for her livestock.[15] Such farmers face real difficulties, but with the right support they can increase production and sales.

Even middle-income countries such as Guatemala and Egypt have gone from being food exporters to net importers over the past 10-15 years.

The pattern has been followed elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, food imports doubled between 1985 and 1998 following the liberalisation of agriculture, while agricultural production fell, leading to massive job losses in rural areas.[16]

In Jamaica, imports of vegetable oils between 1995 and 2000 were more than double the imports between 1990 and 1994, and domestic production fell by 68 per cent.[17]

When trade was liberalised in Haiti in the 1990s after pressure from the World Bank and the IMF, rice production slumped, precipitating a huge influx of heavily subsidised rice from the United States.[18]

In Ghana, where tomato cultivation was widespread, World Bank and IMF policy conditions led to the import of heavily subsidised processed tomato preserves from the EU increasing by 628 per cent between 1993 and 2003. Two local canning factories were forced to close and, according to the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation, tomato growers throughout the country ‘continue to face extreme hardship’.

Why now?

There are several key factors precipitating the current crisis.

Price of oil

The price of oil has more than doubled over the past year, pushing up transport costs as well as the costs of fertiliser, seeds, pump irrigation, food processing and other agricultural necessities. Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP), said recently: ‘The world’s misery index is rising.’ She had just returned from a trip to Kenya’s Rift Valley where, with agriculture already seriously disrupted by violence around the elections in December 2007, the cost of fertiliser had climbed 135 per cent in a matter of months.[19] That increase, along with rising prices for seed, and continued instability, led farmers to plant only one third of the crops they planted last year. Elsewhere in the world, higher prices have simply meant less farming. ‘Farmers have no access to credit, so when prices go up, they can’t afford to plant,’ said Ms Sheeran.

Climate change

In recent years droughts and other extreme weather events have hit some of the world’s main grain-exporting countries hard, as noted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its Fourth Assessment Report late in 2007.[20] In particular, poor harvests in Europe and Australia in 2006 and 2007 have led to low levels of global stocks, especially of wheat and maize. In all five of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean currently listed as in crisis and requiring external assistance – Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic – flooding is one of the problems to have hit farmers.[21] And in Central America and the Caribbean, Bangladesh and Burma, hurricanes and cyclones have destroyed entire harvests in a single day. Across sub-Saharan Africa, more erratic rainfall has led to drought and frequent crop failure. Scientists say that the evidence that the climate is changing is ‘unequivocal’, with greenhouse gas emissions caused by humans more than 90 per cent likely to be the main cause.[22]

Biofuels

US demand for ethanol as fuel, which has seen production soar from 1,300 million gallons in 1997 to an estimated 6,500 million gallons in 2007,[23] has led to the diverting of maize from food to biofuel throughout the Americas. Today ethanol is blended into more than 50 per cent of the petrol sold in the US.[24] On the eve of the FAO summit in June, US Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer defended the use of ethanol, saying biofuel production had only contributed ‘2-3 per cent’ to food price rises.[25] In May, however, John Lipsky, first deputy managing director of the IMF, said: ‘…biofuel policies in some advanced economies are spilling over to the price of key food items, particularly corn and soya bean. IMF estimates suggest that increased demand for biofuels accounts for 70 per cent of the increase in corn prices,

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> John Lipsky, first deputy managing director of the IMF

and 40 per cent of the increase in soya bean prices.'[26]

America's growing demand for biofuel is having a particularly devastating impact on Latin America and the Caribbean. These two areas have relied heavily in recent years on imports of maize from the US because of trade liberalisation. The diversion of traditional crops to biofuel production also gives rise to aggressive expansion of crops such as sugar and African oil palm. In some countries this has led to subsistence food producers being violently evicted from their land.[27] Some biofuels (for example jatropha) may have a role to play as part of a sustainable, mixed-crop approach, helping to meet local energy needs and protecting soil quality. However, commercial biofuel plantations can push small-scale farmers off their land and monopolise water supplies, squeezing out domestic food production.

As a means of combating climate change, recent science suggests that ethanol from maize does not actually produce very significant carbon savings. Rich countries need to reduce their use of all carbon-emitting fuels, including biofuels. The overriding priority for the climate is to make deep and swift cuts in emissions.

Market trends

Price volatility

From rice to soya beans, prices today are very volatile. The factors accounting for this include the weak dollar, fluctuating exchange rates and commodity market speculation linked to future food prices.

Speculation

Commodity prices have been drifting upwards for the past six-and-a-half years, a process that has recently accelerated. Hedge funds moving in on this form of commodity trading recognised the 'extraordinary profitability' of agricultural produce if food shortages became prevalent.[28] Michael Masters, a hedge fund expert, told a US senate committee in May 2008: 'You have asked the question "Are institutional investors contributing to food and energy price inflation?" And my unequivocal answer is yes… What we are experiencing is a demand shock coming from a new participant in the commodities futures market: institutional investors.' Masters said these included corporate and government pension funds, sovereign wealth funds and university endowments. Assets allocated to commodity index trading strategies, he said, 'have risen from $13 billion at the end of 2003 to $260 billion as of March this year'.[29] The prices of the 25 commodities he included in his survey, including nine agricultural products such as wheat, corn and soya beans, as well as cattle and pigs, had risen by an average of 183 per cent over the five years in question. So popular has this form of trading become that several banks, including Barclays and Deutsche Bank, have launched agricultural commodity index funds. Part of the reason for this is excessive liquidity – too much money is chasing a limited supply of commodity-based assets. The result has been an increase in market values, which has fed directly into price inflation.

Protectionism

Some major food-producing countries have begun to limit exports during the present crisis to protect their own stocks, cutting supply and raising prices still further.

Growing demand for meat

There has been increased demand for meat among the emerging middle classes in some developing countries, largely fuelled by increased prosperity and a change of eating habits. Livestock requires feed. Raising cattle also utilises large areas that could otherwise be used for crop production.

Population and urbanisation

Population growth is partly to blame for the inability of poor countries to feed themselves. Africa is the worst hit by the present shortages, with 21 countries at present in crisis and requiring external assistance.[30] The continent's population almost doubled between 1975 and 2000 to 794 million, and is expected to show a similar increase by 2030.[31]

In Asia, where ten countries are in crisis and need help,[32] the population increased by 1.2 billion between 1975 and 2000, and is expected to do so again by 2030.[33]

And in Latin America and the Caribbean, where five countries are in crisis and need outside intervention[34], the population grew by 187 million to 519 million between 1975-2000, and is expected to rise by a further 204 million[35] by 2030.

But it isn't necessarily the countries which have experienced rapid population growth that are hungry now. China, which accounts for a significant proportion of Asia's population growth, is relatively food-secure. With the appropriate supportive framework, rapid population growth can generate

'Increasing female education by one year reduces early fertility by 0.26 births.'

Analysis from Nigeria

increased production.

Research has indicated that population growth is a 'primary consequence of poverty rather than its cause'.[36] This pattern is supported by evidence across the developing world but there are of course specific cases where population growth has contributed to worsening poverty.[37]

Reducing poverty is therefore critical, with some policies likely to be of particular benefit, notably 'a concerted effort to promote female education… female formal sector employment, investments in reproductive and child health as well as family planning services'.[38] Analysis from Nigeria suggests that 'increasing female education by one year reduces early fertility by 0.26 births'.[39]

Another factor affecting the ability of poor countries to feed themselves has been the steady drift of people from rural areas to towns and cities. Many of those moving to built-up areas would otherwise have survived through subsistence farming.

This year, for the first time in human history, more than half the world's population, some 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas, where they are very unlikely to be able to grow their own food. In the coming years their numbers will swell. In Asia and Africa the urban population is expected to double between 2000 and 2030.[40] In many places, urban growth steadily encroaches on the land available for farming.

Both population growth and changing demographics therefore need to be taken into account when considering solutions to the current shortages.

Mapping the future

Late in June, without fanfare, the UK government signed up to a remarkable document: the *Synthesis Report* of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD).

The report, initiated by the World Bank in partnership with a number of UN agencies, and compiled by government representatives, civil society, private sector and scientific institutions from around the world, is the agricultural equivalent of an assessment from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

It is a unique document in the history of agriculture: while assessing formal science and technology, it also draws on local and traditional knowledge, and 'recognises the different needs of different regions and communities'.

The result is a radical jettisoning of much of the 'one size fits all' trade liberalisation philosophy for the developing world against which Christian Aid and other development agencies have long campaigned.

Among the findings is the following admission. It is a significant U-turn in the approach of wealthy nations – and the World Bank – to the developing world.

'The IAASTD responds to the widespread realisation that despite significant scientific and technological achievements in our ability to increase agricultural productivity, we have been less attentive to some of the unintended social and environmental consequences of our achievements…

'There is growing concern that opening national agricultural markets to international competition before basic institutions and infrastructure are in place can undermine the agricultural sector, with long-term negative effects for poverty, food security and the environment.'

The tragedy is that this admission has come too late for many poor farmers. In many cases the damage has already been done. However, the report goes on to detail the various ways in which past wrongs can be put right.

It talks of the need to 'retool' agricultural knowledge, science and technology (AKST) in order to reduce poverty and provide improved livelihoods for the rural poor, especially landless and peasant communities.

It calls for 'development and sustainability goals' to be directed primarily at resource-poor farmers, women and ethnic minorities.

It adds that where the potential for improved productivity is low, and 'where climate change may have its most adverse consequences', development opportunities must be created.

The report presents several key options for enhancing rural livelihoods, including increasing the access by small-scale farmers to land and economic resources, and urban and export markets. Such farmers should also be given access to microcredit and other financial services.

With the proportion of women in agricultural production as high as 70 per cent in some countries, the report notes they continue 'to face deteriorating health and work conditions, limited access to education and control over natural resources, insecure employment and low income'.

It calls for major reforms, including improving women's access to education, information, science and technology, as well as credit schemes, support for women's income-generating activities and the reinforcement of women's organisations and networks.

If implemented, the report's recommendations would do

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much to reduce the vulnerability of the world's poor to changes in global markets and to improve their conditions generally.

Christian Aid urges the UK delegation to the G8 to honour the government's commitment to the report's conclusions and to push for its provisions to form the template for a fundamentally new approach to agriculture in the developing world.

In championing the rights of small-scale farmers, Christian Aid is not romanticising the life of the rural poor. Rather, we are recognising a body of evidence that small-scale farms are often more productive than large-scale operations.[41] With so much of the world's population dependent on small-scale farming for survival, particularly in poorer countries, we should support and encourage, not penalise, those following this way of life.

Recommendations

The food security crisis is a life-threatening emergency for men, women and children in poor countries. There is an urgent need to provide food supplies in the areas worst affected, through the World Food Programme and other agencies. We must also put mechanisms in place to make sure those food supplies reach the most vulnerable people.

Major donors are pledging increased funds, but the challenge is massive.

Christian Aid is concerned that while the international community struggles to avert acute food shortages – in some countries famine – the factors underlying the current crisis are being ignored, in spite of the conclusions of the IAASTD.

Some 862 million people worldwide lacked sufficient food before the current crisis. Even if global food prices have reached their peak, for the time being at least, the fundamental problems will remain unresolved until the policies imposed on poor countries are addressed.

The failure to embrace a wide range of reforms, including investment in small-scale staple food production, market development, infrastructure, science and technology – not least to counter global warming – will lead to further, perhaps worse, emergencies.

The increased vulnerability of the poor to changes in global markets demands long-term solutions. We must address the social, economic and policy trends that led to the present situation. Christian Aid is calling on governments, donors and other policy-makers to increase massively their support for long-term agricultural development.

The essential measures

Action by the UK government

The UK government has endorsed the IAASTD report. Now it must outline how it is going to put the recommendations of the report into practice. We note that the report calls for investment in agriculture and infrastructure. The UK government should devote more of its funding, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, to supporting work on rural livelihoods.

The UK government should declare how it intends to tackle the current food crisis, including any new resources allocated to resolving the problem. It must also present long-term solutions to prevent it happening again. In responding to the crisis, the government must go beyond recycling announcements of investment in scientific research. Substantial new money must be found to tackle both what is happening now and to prepare for the future.

Furthermore, the UK government must look for ways to kick-start increased and sustained farming production. As the International Food Policy Research Institute notes, small-scale farms account for more than 90 per cent of Africa's agricultural production and are dominated by the poor.[42]

This will require investment in food production and infrastructure (for example irrigation, storage, transport to get crops to markets), access to credit, insurance and savings schemes for small farmers, and support for domestic food markets (such as marketing and agricultural boards).

It also means supporting very poor people (including people living with HIV, orphans and carers, especially older women, slum dwellers and disabled people) to enable them to buy enough food. This could be done by supporting income-generation schemes, social safety nets such as pensions or food-distribution programmes and, if necessary, price controls such as subsidies or tariffs.

Action by G8 country governments

It is vital to ensure that poor women and men can feed themselves and their families. Subsistence farmers, especially women, who do the vast bulk of unpaid agricultural work around the world, need targeted support, as recommended in the IAASTD report.[43]

New thinking is needed to develop national and regional staple food markets and reserves. Countries must be encouraged to work together to plan their collective food needs and to cooperate over investment in regional infrastructure.

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Such regional agreements should also include provisions to continue trading when global demand is high and supply is tight.

Natural resources such as seeds, agricultural land and water must be protected in the face of competition from cash crops and climate change.

Rich countries must commit to deep and fast cuts in greenhouse gases as part of the new international agreement being debated through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Countries experiencing new and detrimental weather patterns should receive help to adapt in the form of payments and support, additional to Overseas Development Aid. Scientists predict that eventually they will be able to link specific weather events to global warming. In the meantime intermediate payments must follow the 'polluter pays' principle, in recognition of the responsibility the industrialised world has for precipitating climate change.

Action by the international donor community

Christian Aid advocates the principle of greater policy autonomy for poor countries. In particular, we believe that poor countries should be able to make their own pragmatic choices about how to feed their citizens, rather than being swept along by donors' free trade orthodoxy.

As stated in Christian Aid's 2007 report *Farmers Left Behind*: 'The World Bank should stop its opportunistic use of funding crises in African countries to push through dogmatic policies to privatise agricultural services, and withdraw from any market intervention.'

African, Caribbean and Pacific countries should not be encouraged or offered incentives to sign up to EPAs as currently proposed by the European Commission. These agreements increase access to these countries' markets and are likely to damage many of their agricultural sectors.

Talks aimed at significant further trade liberalisation – the Doha 'Development Round' – offer no prospect of a solution to the crisis. Even World Bank economists have estimated that the terms of the deal under discussion would damage the poorest economies still further.[44]

More liberalisation without safeguards for poor countries will further undermine domestic agricultural production, reduce global supply of many foodstuffs, and increase price volatility, exposing vulnerable poor farmers and consumers to new fluctuations of global prices. It is a formula that has been tried, and has failed.

If the world is to heed the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's warning to the Rome food summit in June that food production will have to rise by 50 per cent by 2030 to meet demand,[45] nothing short of a pro-poor agricultural revolution will suffice.

Endnotes

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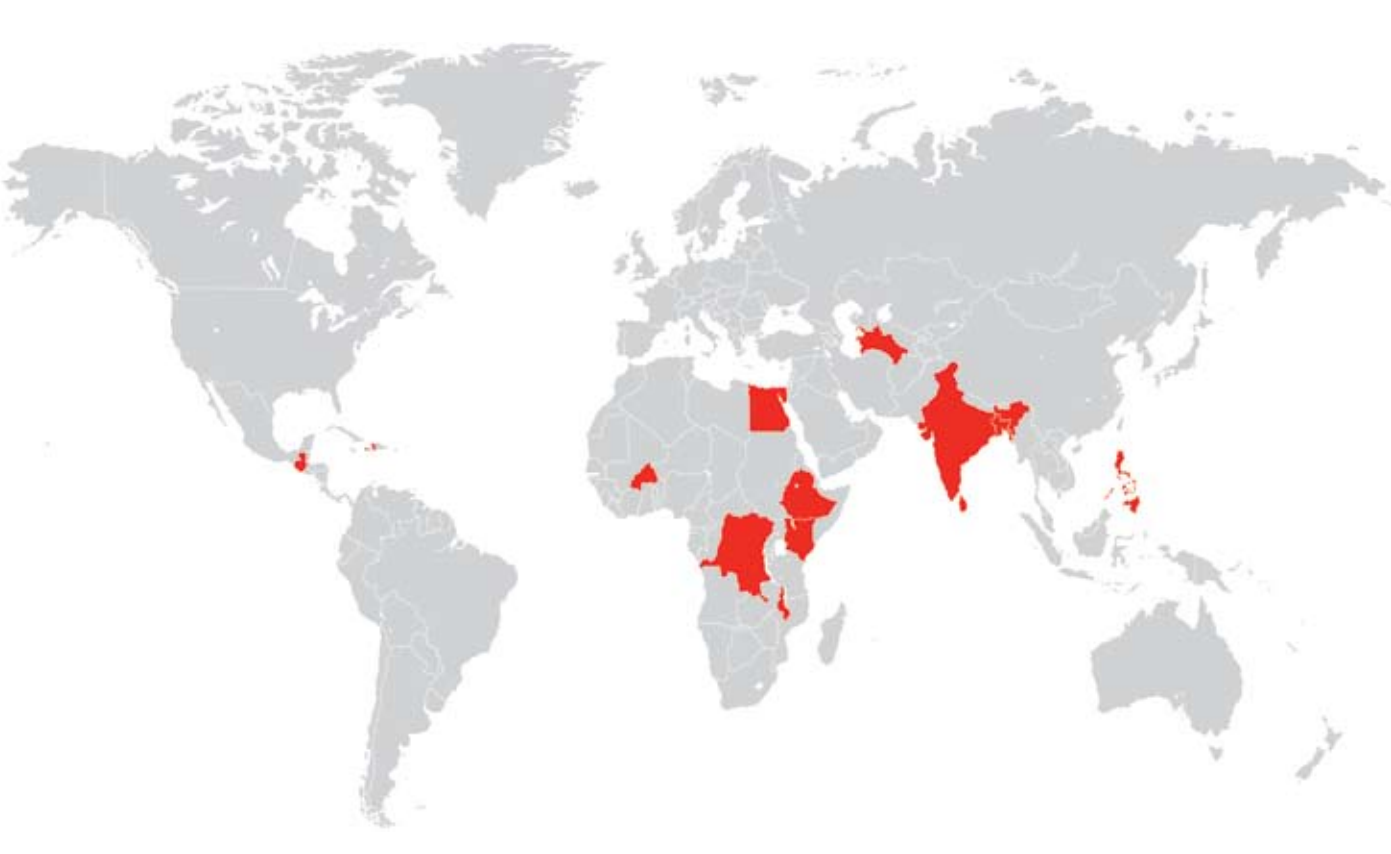
Fundamental changes are needed to the manner in which the international community seeks to influence agricultural and trade polices in the developing world.



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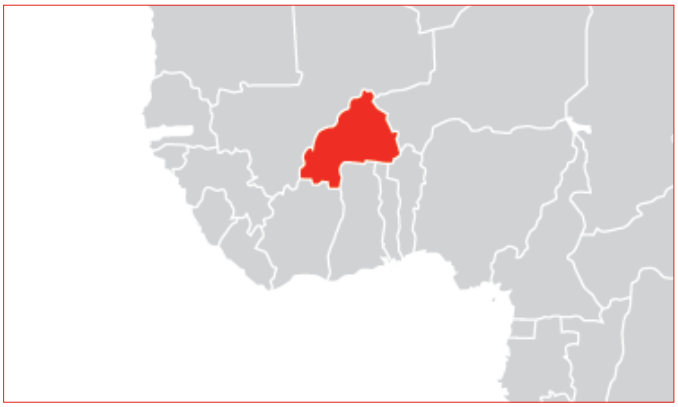


Climate change has led to longer dry seasons, stronger winds blowing away precious topsoil, and much heavier rains

Sharp increases in the price of food and other goods led to riots in February in three of Burkina Faso's largest towns.

Government offices, cars and petrol stations were burned, and troops were needed to restore order.[1]

Two weeks earlier, the government had announced that it was releasing emergency food stocks on to the market in an attempt to moderate prices (which it said had risen between 10 and 65 per cent over an unspecified period) and reducing taxes on some basic goods by around 30 per cent. There were also reports some customs officers were preventing the export of cereals.[2]

These attempts to keep prices down, however, were not enough to allay public anger. Burkina Faso is the world's second poorest and least developed country after Sierra Leone, according to the United Nations Development Programme,[3] and any food price increases are hard to bear.

More than a third of the country's under-five-year-olds are stunted and underweight and almost a quarter are emaciated, a 2006 study found.[4] The World Food Programme currently supports 490,000 of the country's 14 million people.[5]

Burkina Faso is struggling with the effects of climate change, which has led to longer dry seasons, stronger winds blowing away precious topsoil, and much heavier rains. Last summer, floods across the country displaced 28,000 people and destroyed 2,344 grain stores.[6]

Competition for water and pasture has also led to ongoing conflict between farmers and nomads – 15 people died in less than a month in May and June.[7]

In addition, Burkina Faso has one of the world's highest birth rates – an average of seven children per woman.[8]

The country's food security situation is considerably better than in some other African countries, but experts fear that it may deteriorate. The Food Crisis Prevention Network warned in June that people in 21 of Burkina Faso's 45 provinces are at risk of not getting the food and seeds that they need for the rainy season, which lasts from May until late October. This, in turn, could increase prices.[9]

Christian Aid's partner organisations in Burkina Faso are training farmers to adapt to the country's unpredictable weather, for instance by using techniques that improve soil quality and conserve water. This in turn helps to protect their harvests.

In 2004/05 a devastating drought in Burkina Faso highlighted the importance of food diversification for the millions of farmers struggling to make a living off the land. Christian Aid partner Réseau Marp decided to start a small-scale livestock breeding project, which would give farmers an alternative source of income if their crops failed. The breeding project includes sheep, cattle, goats and poultry.

Democratic Republic of Congo

'The local effects of the war, combined with massive lack of investment over the last 20 years, mean that there is very little food production here.'
Alistair Dutton, Christian Aid's humanitarian manager for Africa

Food prices have risen so steeply in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the past few months that many people have cut the number of meals they eat.

'They are hungry and also confused,' says Antoine Kasongo, Kinshasa resident and country programme manager for Christian Aid.

'It is something new to people here and everybody is wondering what is happening. People are very affected by these problems.'

Kinshasa market prices have roughly doubled since December last year. A 50-kilo sack of rice used to cost US$35, but now it is $60; 100 kilos of maize used to cost US$32 but now that has risen to $60; cassava has gone from US$27 to around $44 per 60 kilos; and charcoal, used for cooking, has gone from US$8 per sack to almost $20.

DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world in spite of vast potential natural wealth.

A war that has raged since 1996 is estimated to have cost the lives of about four million people.[1] Even after a period of transition and the election of a new president, and national and provincial MPs, the violence continues, particularly in eastern areas. Up to 70 per cent of the population face food insecurity.[2]

In northern Kivu, one of the areas worst affected by violence, more than 300,000 people were displaced by fighting late last year, bringing the total of internally displaced people in the province to 850,000.

Their situation is desperate. In April, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced that it was going to halve their food rations, partly as a result of higher prices and partly because the number of people seeking safety in the camps is growing. It is hoped that food deliveries expected in the next few months will ease the situation.[3]

The eastern provinces were once the major food-producing regions of the country, but repeated looting by armed groups has seriously undermined production.

In Northern Kivu, almost one in five people suffer from acute malnutrition.[4] In other parts of the country where security is better, the collapsing infrastructure, weakened by years of conflict and bad management, also hinders production.[5]

Christian Aid partners in DRC include a number involved in trying to rebuild lives and livelihoods in some of the country's most vulnerable and isolated communities.

Alistair Dutton, Christian Aid's humanitarian manager for Africa, says that conflict and a severe lack of investment in agriculture in the DRC are the major causes of the country's crisis. 'The local effects of the war, combined with massive lack of investment over the last 20 years, mean that there is very little food production here,' he says.

He has just visited people who recently returned to DRC's Masisi district near the north-west corner of Lake Kivu. 'They get one fairly large meal in the evening, but they spend the day hungry,' he said. When there is a good bean crop, they will get two meals a day.

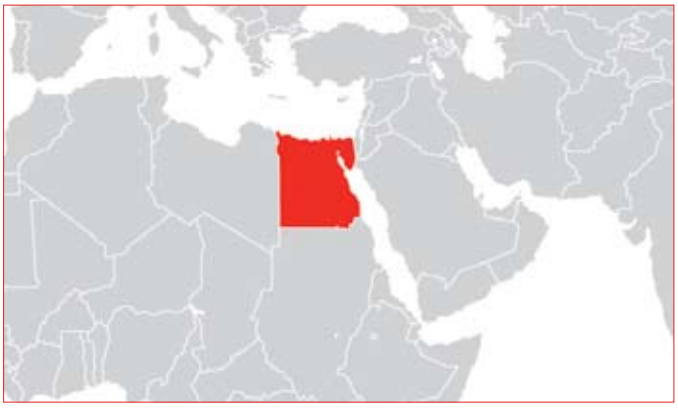
Displaced people living with host families are an especially hungry group because there is almost no distribution of food aid to them, and they have to share what little food is available in the household.

People living in urban areas are also very food-insecure because they buy their food in markets rather than growing it and are therefore exposed to the rise in international fuel and food prices. Fuel prices are important because large amounts of food in Northern Kivu have to be brought in from Kenya and Uganda.

With security, better governance and the right investment, says Dutton, the DRC could grow all the food it needs.

The present crisis could not have come at a worse time for agencies seeking to alleviate the shortages. The WFP is in the middle of a relief operation intended to deliver some 210,000 metric tonnes of food to some 3.3 million food-insecure people by the end of next year.

Egypt



Bread receives a massive government subsidy, some 96 per cent, with sensitivities about bread prices a matter of record.

At least 11 people have died in bread queues in Egypt since February this year – most from exhaustion, but one person was shot dead and three wounded in a brawl for a place in line.[1]

The soaring price of bread also led to a clash in the city of Al-Mahalla Al-Kobra in the Nile delta in early April between political activists, textile workers and police. Dozens of people were injured, a teenage boy reportedly killed, and some 500 arrests made.[2]

Bread is the main source of calories for the 30 million Egyptians – roughly 40 per cent – who live on less than $US2 per day.

The country has little agricultural land on which to grow its own wheat, and is now a major importer, buying around half of its food needs abroad.[3]

Bread receives a massive government subsidy, some 96 per cent, with sensitivities about bread prices a matter of record. When the government last tried to remove the subsidy, there were riots in which police killed more than 70 people.

With so much wheat imported, the country is vulnerable to fluctuations in the price it fetches on the open market, which doubled between March 2007 and March 2008, according to the FAO.

Production at home has also been hit by higher oil prices, raising the cost of fertiliser and the cost of transporting goods to market.

As a result, the price of unsubsidised bread has doubled if not trebled over the course of 2008, leading to huge, uneasy queues at bakeries selling the subsidised version.

Known as baladi bread, a small, single-portion loaf costs around five piastres – about 2.5 pence – while unsubsidised bread can now sell for 10-12 times as much. Inevitably, some people abuse the system by buying cheap bread and then selling it on the open market.[4]

Baladi bread is also being rationed – at most Cairo bakeries, people can only buy 20 pieces a day.[5] To make matters worse, the prices of other foods such as rice, cooking oil, cheese, milk and yogurt have risen by at least 17 per cent.[6]

The Egyptian government has responded by increasing the amount it spends on bread and other subsidised foods such as rice, cooking oil and sugar.

In May 2008, it doubled to two kilos per month the amount of rice the country's 55 million ration-card holders can claim. Ration-card holders also get two kg of sugar, 1.5 kg of oil, and 50 grams of tea per person per month, in exchange for 15 Egyptian pounds (about £1.50).[7]

The bread crisis and the need for rationing are symptomatic of deeper problems in Egypt. Liberal economic reforms have made life even worse for the country's poorest people and exacerbated inequality between the middle classes and the majority.

Christian Aid partners in Egypt include an organisation helping small-scale farmers unite in cooperatives to sell their produce directly to market. Partners have also helped fishermen to campaign for their rights and raised awareness about sustainable fishing practices.

Ethiopia

Some 126,000 children are in immediate danger of death, and a further six million in danger of malnutrition.

So many children are now in danger of starving to death in Ethiopia that comparisons are being made with the major drought of 2003, and even with the famine of 1984-5.

The United Nations' children's agency, Unicef, warned in June this year that some 126,000 children were so severely malnourished they were in immediate danger of death, and that a further six million are in danger of malnutrition.[1]

In the same month the Ethiopian government and humanitarian organisations stated that 4.6 million people needed emergency food aid.[2]

They are in addition to the five million-plus people who live with constant food insecurity and who are already covered by the government's safety-net programme, which gives people work in exchange for food or cash.[3]

The poor or failed rains in most areas of the country is the main cause of the crisis.

It is especially worrying that the areas of Ethiopia that normally grow more crops than they need are short of food this year. Both they and the areas they normally supply face a very severe situation, over and above the usual shortages that occur in the 'lean season' from June to September.

The food shortage is sending prices soaring way above those of the world market. By late June, the local price of wheat had reached US$605 per metric tonne, while the cost of importing the same amount was just US$355.[4]

An assessment in June by Christian Aid and its Ethiopian partners in two southern regions, Oromia and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) found a 'critical need' for emergency food aid and agricultural supplies. While some food aid is already being provided in the two regions, most households are facing hunger and malnutrition,[5] and the UN is warning that the amount of food entering the country will not meet their needs.[6]

People are trying to cope by migrating to towns in search of work, selling their assets at throwaway prices, renting out their land, child labour and seeking support from relatives, the assessment shows.[7]

Fear and hunger are reported to have spilled over into food riots in some districts of the SNNPR.

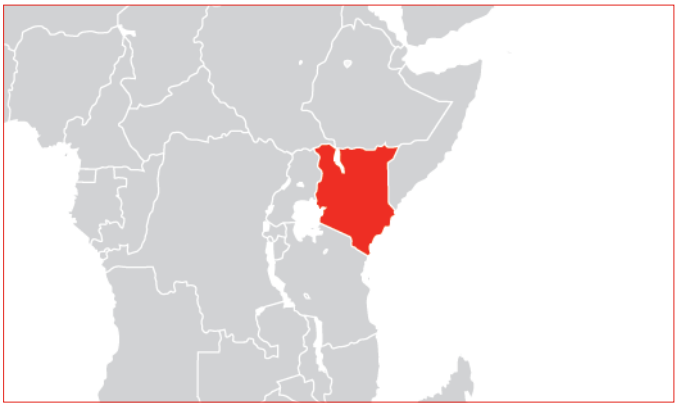
There is now an acute need for seeds and fertiliser so that farmers can plant crops before the planting season ends in July, and replant the young plants that have been eaten by the armyworm infestation that has hit parts of Oromia and the SNNPR.

Christian Aid assessors have found that, as a result of the lack of supplies, only 30 per cent of farmland is being cultivated. Christian Aid and its partners are planning to supply seeds and fertilisers to 41,050 vulnerable households in the two southern regions.

The lack of rain has also damaged production of coffee, which provides a livelihood for some ten million people in Ethiopia.[8]

The government has tried to help people in various ways including stopping the export of barley and subsidising the import of wheat and vegetable oil. However, food prices are expected to keep rising, not least because supplies to markets usually fall during the 'lean season' from June to September.[9]

Kenya



By March, only 10-20 per cent of land in Rift Valley was ready for cultivation. Usually it's 60-90 per cent.

Food price hikes of 50 per cent in six months brought hundreds of protestors out on to the streets in Nairobi in May, demanding government action to cut the cost of basics such as maize flour. Police fired tear gas into the air to disperse them, and declared their protest illegal.[1]

While international price rises are affecting the country severely, the current crisis is partly the result of the explosion of violence that followed last December's elections. It left more than 1,300 people dead,[2] caused 500,000 to flee their homes in terror, and devastated farms in the Rift Valley Province – Kenya's 'grain basket' and important for milk production.[3]

Farmers who fled had to abandon fields and stores, many of which were then burned or looted. By March this year, only 10-20 per cent of the land in the province had been prepared for cultivation – far below the usual 60 to 90 per cent.[4]

Soaring farming costs – the price of fertiliser for example has trebled in Kenya since the start of 2008[5] – have added to farmers' problems. The amount grown this year is expected to fall further, keeping food prices high.[6]

The government has said it will try to make up the shortfall with imported – and therefore expensive – grain. General inflation is also running at a punishing rate of 31.5 per cent, and rising.[7]

It makes life almost impossible for most Kenyans. Nearly 60 per cent of the country's 35 million people live on less than US$2 a day.[8]

People are responding to higher food prices by restricting their diets – cutting back to one meal a day; reducing the intake of protein, which is vital for good health; buying cheaper vegetables; and buying unmilled maize, which is cheaper than the milled version.[9]

Yet Kenyans can ill afford to cut back on what they eat. Malnourishment in recent years has affected a third of the population, according to the United Nations Development Programme.[10]

Drought, exacerbated by climate change, is compounding the food crisis in parts of the country. Rainfall has been below normal in north western Kenya and other pastoralist areas, where thousands of people are trying (and increasingly failing) to survive arid and semi-arid conditions by keeping livestock and selling products derived from them.[11]

Pastoralist farmers, who have not fully recovered from a drought three years ago that decimated livestock, are already moving to neighbouring countries in search of water and pasture,[12] which risks sparking conflict with others competing for the same scarce resources.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is now providing food for 862,000 people affected by drought, but says it will have to cut their rations unless it receives extra funding.[13]

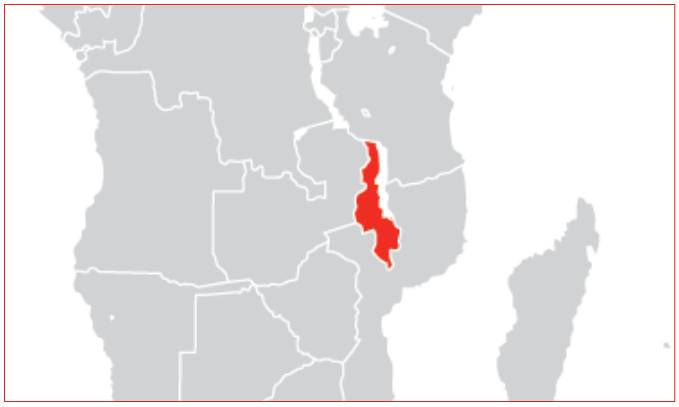
Poor people living in cities who depend on markets for their food are also very vulnerable to the food price rises, as are the 300,000-odd people living in camps. By mid-June, almost 78,000 Kenyans displaced by the violence had still not returned home.[14]

In addition, some 244,000 Sudanese and Somali refugees, who have fled across national borders into crowded camps in northern and eastern Kenya, are being fed by the WFP.[15]

The Kenyan government has responded by lifting taxes on basic foodstuffs such as maize and wheat flour.[16] But food prices are expected to remain high into 2009, as a result of reduced cultivation, low stocks and high fuel prices.[17]

Partners supported by Christian Aid in Kenya include Northern Aid, a Muslim organisation that delivers both short-term relief and longer-term development projects to pastoralists who have lost their way of life as a result of drought. It also attempts to rebuild relationships between communities after outbreaks of conflict over scarce resources such as water or land for grazing.

Malawi



Almost two-thirds of the population live on less than US$2 a day, one third are already malnourished and one in five is infected with HIV/AIDS.

The situation in Malawi is potentially so serious that Christian Aid is at present carrying out a vulnerability assessment. The president claims that although some areas may face food shortages, overall the country will have a surplus of maize of 500,000 metric tonnes.

However, there are fears that the strategic grain reserve may have been badly depleted, with stocks sold to Zimbabwe, but never paid for.

Heavily subsidised fertiliser and seeds helped produce a bumper harvest of maize – the national staple – in 2006/07. Zimbabwe received 400,000 tonnes, with another 88,000 tonnes being supplied to the World Food Programme late last year.[1]

In 2002 when a famine hit Malawi, it emerged that senior officials at the national food reserve agency, which had been newly privatised at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), had sold its stock.

Drought, poor institutional infrastructure and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which limited the numbers who could work the land, led to severe food shortages for the next two years. It all contributed to a further famine in 2005 during which more than four million people needed food aid and the president declared a national disaster.[2]

Now, worrying signs of a new crisis are emerging. Christian Aid's Malawi country manager, Charlotte Timson, says: 'Like 2005, there may be a disaster waiting to happen.'

By the end of February, maize prices in some local markets were so high that they were close to those of 2005/06.[3] This year, maize traders started to buy stocks earlier than usual, which indicates that they expect prices to rise over the course of the year.[4]

Malawi's government blames the current price of maize – which is more than double the government-decreed minimum paid to farmers – on rumours that there will be shortages.[5]

Since December, dry spells and floods have considerably damaged and even destroyed the latest harvest.[6] In addition, the price of fertiliser has doubled over the last 12 months, which could reduce crop yields later in the year. The fertiliser subsidy programme has failed to reach all those meant to receive it.

Malawi has become increasingly dependent on chemical fertiliser in order to increase the productivity of its degraded soils. As a result, the cost of food production is directly related to that of chemical fertiliser.[7]

The price of fuel has also risen steeply, going up 25 per cent in just one day in June, which increases the cost of transporting food around the country.[8]

Malawi's 13 million people are extremely vulnerable to price increases. Almost two-thirds of them live on less than US$2 a day; one third are already malnourished; and as many as one in five is infected with HIV/AIDS.[9]

Even though the population is overwhelmingly rural, some 30 to 50 per cent of people have to buy their food for at least half the year because their own crops produce so little.[10]

The World Food Programme currently provides school meals for almost half a million children in Malawi, as well as to thousands of old, pregnant and ill people, and to households whose crops have failed.[11]

Climate change may be adding to people's food insecurity – long dry spells in the middle of the growing season are becoming common; floods at the same time of year also destroy crops.[12]

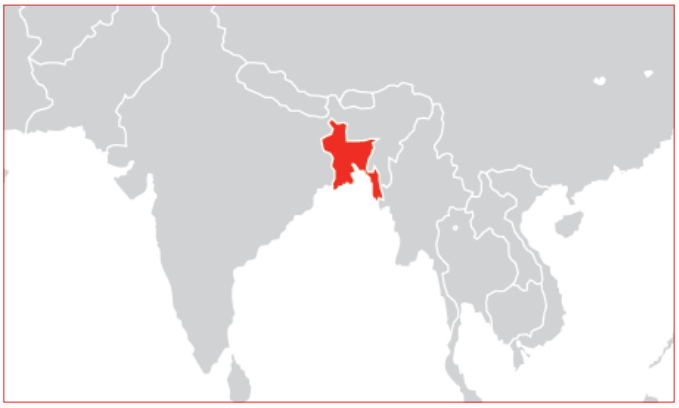
But the biggest problem is the failure of government to tackle the root causes of the farmers' problems. For instance, policy continues to focus on maize, even though the crop is extremely sensitive to water shortages. The government has also failed to invest in small-scale irrigation.

With this year an election year, politics may have a malign influence, with fears that the government may try to hide the existence of hunger while using food hand-outs to win votes.

The government has acknowledged the risk of a major food crisis by considering the purchase of weather derivatives – a financial instrument that means that if the country's rainfall dips below a certain level, then it will get a pay-out. The World Bank has backed the move.[13]

Asia

Bangladesh



'It is unbearable for me to see our children are crying for want of rice. I cannot express my pain...'
Imran Ali, a rickshaw puller

The soaring price of rice in Bangladesh has sparked violent protests and countless acts of private desperation, in which people have withdrawn their children from school, cut back on the number of meals they eat and sold possessions to pay for food.

In the latest escalation, in early June, the government withdrew subsidies for rice in the capital, Dhaka. Now many are reported to be living on just one meal a day.[1]

Since April 2007, the market price of rice has doubled, from around 18 taka (13 pence) per kilo to 38. Pulses, a relatively cheap source of protein, have risen from 38 to 100 taka per kilo over the same period, while a litre of soya oil is up from 84 to 120 taka.[2]

These rises come against a background of extreme poverty: more than 40 per cent of the population lives on less than US$1 per day.[3]

The most visible sign of people's struggle to cope was a violent clash between thousands of striking garment workers and police in April near Dhaka.

Some 24 people were injured, as demonstrators demanded wage increases to cope with price rises.[4]

Interviews conducted by a Christian Aid partner have revealed the extent of the suffering.[5]

Imran Ali, 23, a rickshaw puller, and his wife, Mukta, together earn 4,500 taka per month. It was enough to live on, but basic food and rent together now cost them 4,050 taka a month.

They sold their television in March and withdrew their son from school. Now the family eats only rice, and that is in short supply.

'Now I understand what famine is,' says Ali. 'It is unbearable for me to see our children are crying for want of rice. I cannot express my pain… I am tempted to commit suicide rather than bear such pains.'

Another parent, Bibi Amena, 45, a part-time housemaid, earns 1,000 taka a month. She lives with her married daughter and son-in-law and now spends her entire income on rice.

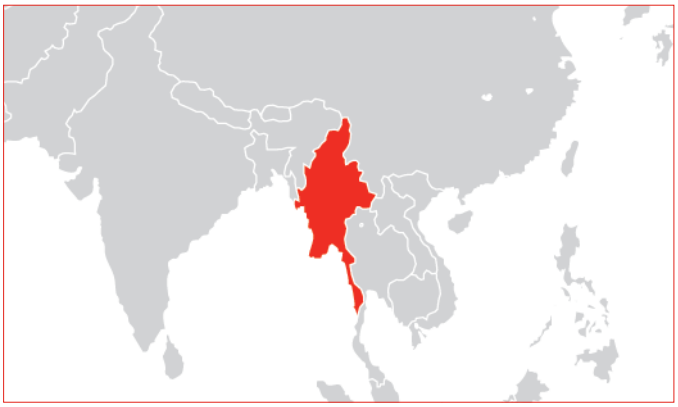
'We never had the ability to eat fish, meat and other such diets,' she says. 'But we could eat three meals a day before. We had enough to eat in order to be fit for physical work. Unfortunately for the last six months we cannot manage even two meals of rice a day.'

The immediate cause of the food price rises is extreme weather – last year Bangladesh suffered severe floods and a cyclone in November, which destroyed a vast quantity of crops, leaving many agricultural workers underemployed.

Families had to buy food – they could no longer rely on what they had grown – which pushed up prices. Some traders are thought to have hoarded supplies, inflating prices still further. Exacerbating the situation now is the early arrival of monsoon floods, which have caused thousands of people to lose their crops.[6]

International factors have also had an impact. Other food exporting countries in the region – India, China and Vietnam – have now restricted exports.[7]

Burma



Unscrupulous rice traders have increased their prices in order to take advantage of demand from aid agencies working in the wake of the cyclone.

The leap in world rice prices has left 140,000 Burmese refugees living in camps on the border with Thailand facing a cut of up to 50 per cent in their already minimal rations.

Christian Aid partner the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) said in May that it was considering cutting rations to just half the international standard considered necessary to keep people alive.

The decision was postponed after TBBC received new donations, notably from the Canadian government, and world rice prices eased slightly.[1]

However, TBBC still has a funding shortfall of US$3.5 million (£1.75 million).

The Cyclone Nargis disaster in May left 134,000 dead or missing, according to the latest United Nations estimates.

Of the 2.4m survivors in the worst-affected area, the Irrawaddy delta, 750,000 are 'in dire need of immediate food assistance', according to the World Food Programme (WFP), which has distributed food aid to some 501,000 people since the cyclone struck.

In the delta area – Burma's main rice-growing region – some people are likely to need food assistance for up to a year, the FAO has warned.[2]

This is because the cyclone and the subsequent tidal surge destroyed or seriously damaged many families' rice stocks, flooded their paddy fields with salt water, killed around half their cattle and buffaloes, and left them without the tools and seeds needed to plant rice.

There is now a race to get at least some rice planted by the end of July at the latest, in time for this year's monsoon.[3]

At the same time, steep price rises since Nargis hit have forced poor people – who spend around two-thirds of their income on sustenance – to buy less food.

Ray Hasan, head of programme policy and strategy at Christian Aid, says the rises are due less to international market prices and more to the actions of unscrupulous rice traders, who have increased their prices in order to take advantage of demand from aid agencies working in the wake of the cyclone.

In Rangoon, the cost of a 50-kilo bag of half-broken rice has doubled, cooking oil has tripled, a bottle of drinking water is up 60 per cent and eggs up 50 per cent.[4]

However, due to the strict control of aid delivery by the Burmese regime and the restriction of access to the worst-hit areas of the delta, it remains difficult to get a full picture of the true impact of the disaster.

Aid agencies, including Christian Aid partner organisations, have provided basic assistance to some of those affected by the cyclone, but hundreds of thousands of people have yet to receive any support. It is therefore extremely difficult to know whether they have been able to get enough food and clean water to meet their immediate needs.

India

In early monsoon floods this year, crops and livestock have been destroyed, 93 people killed and 1,500,000 people moved to relief camps.

Rasani Prasad, an Indian fisherman, spends twice as much to feed his family as he did six months ago.

'We have not been able to eat full meals for many months because we have to spend 80 rupees (£0.96) per day on food, rather than 40 rupees,' he says. 'I cannot now afford to send my three children to school and we are facing many health problems.'

In spite of India's booming economic growth of 9 per cent, the poorest have been hit hard by the food crisis.

Grocery bills have shot up by an average of 40 per cent over the past year. In the capital, New Delhi, prices of pulses have gone up by between 20 and 35 per cent; in Mumbai, wheat costs have gone up by 24 per cent; and in south India, where rice is the staple food, rice prices have shot up by 40 per cent.[1]

India was self-sufficient in edible oils a decade ago, but now it largely imports them and the price has risen by 40 per cent during the past year.[2]

Anand Kumar, Christian Aid's country representative in India, says: 'Over the last few months India has experienced an unprecedented rise in food prices. These hikes have hit the poor hardest as they have less income to spare.'

More than 300 million people in India live in extreme poverty on less than US$1 a day and over 500 million on less than US$2 a day.[3] Nearly half of all Indian children are undernourished, a far higher level than in most of sub-Saharan Africa. At least 80 million people go to bed hungry.[4] The current rise in food prices is making these already shocking statistics even worse.

India is the second largest rice producer in the world, the third largest wheat producer and the seventh largest corn producer. As prices rose, the government in April banned the export of wheat, non-basmati rice and pulses, and imposed duty on exports of basmati rice, in what it said was a move to protect the poor.

Other countries believe these bans are driving up international prices and harming other south Asian countries by taking food off the global market. They also believe the bans are discouraging farmers from responding to market forces and investing in future production.

Indian leaders have blamed the rising prices on global factors, but there are also factors specific to India that have exacerbated matters.

Economic growth has mainly been confined to manufacturing and services, while agriculture – which provides employment for around 70 per cent of the 1.1 billion population – has grown just 2.5 per cent over the past five years.

In India productivity gains are stagnating in the grain-belt states of the north. Over-exploitation of the soil means that annual productivity is now lower than population growth. Fragmentation of land holdings, a fall in public investments in rural areas, especially in irrigation facilities, and a lack of proper credit support for farmers engaged in agriculture are also to blame.

Some 60 per cent of India's agricultural areas lacks irrigation so farmers are particularly vulnerable to droughts, which will get worse as climate change accelerates.

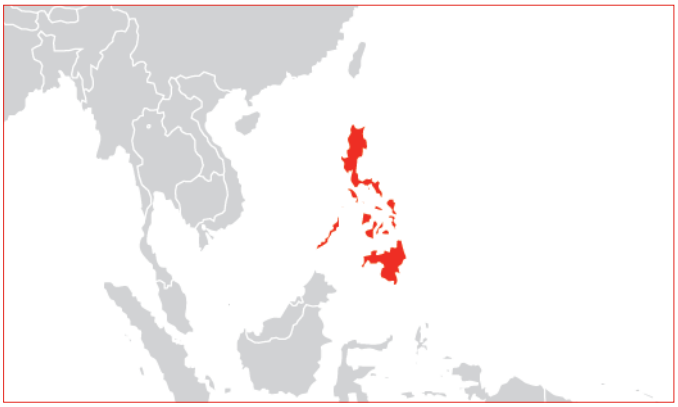
During the past decade millions of hectares of agricultural land were shifted to cash crops such as cotton, sugar cane, coffee or pepper, which commanded temporary high global prices at the time. Farmers who grow crops to sell, rather than growing their own food, are dependent on the market and therefore more vulnerable.

Farmers were also ruined by sharp price declines as trading restrictions were removed and tariffs were lowered. For example, the decision by the government to remove import duty on palm oil ruined domestic coconut farmers in the southern state of Kerala and led to the edible oil market in the state being taken over by foreign companies.

Early monsoon floods this year have destroyed crops and livestock in West Bengal, Assam and Orissa. Some 93 people have been killed and 1,500,000 people have had to move to relief camps.[5]

Christian Aid works through local partners in India to reduce the vulnerability of farmers to the vagaries of global markets by increasing self-sufficiency and community control over food production. The Deccan Development Society (DDS) for example has trained 4,000 female farmers in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in sustainable farming techniques.

Philippines



The world's largest importer of rice, with 38 million people living on less than US$2 a day.

Ministers have adopted desperate measures to prevent anger about high rice prices spilling over into violence as rice prices surged 50 per cent between March and June.[1]

Hoarders were warned they could be imprisoned for life, troops were drafted in to deliver subsidised rice to poor areas, and restaurants were urged to offer customers the option of half their normal portions.[2]

In June President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo declared the country could become self-sufficient in rice within five years, under a government plan to invest in fertiliser, irrigation, education, rice dryers and other infrastructure.[3]

At present, however, it is the world's largest importer of rice,[4] leaving its 89 million people very vulnerable to increases in the global price of rice.

Food security was a problem in the Philippines before the current price increases. The WFP restarted its work in the country in 2006, after an absence of ten years.

For the 43 per cent of the population who live on less than US$2 a day – some 38 million people – the price rises are potentially disastrous.[5]

The situation is critical in the Mindanao region, where fighting between the government and separatist Muslim rebels has created an internally displaced population of at least 120,000.[6]

The WFP is trying to support two million people in the areas affected by conflict. In June it said that more than 60 per cent of the households it had assessed have 'very poor access to food' while 30 per cent were 'taking life-threatening risks to meet daily food needs'.[7]

'Due to rising prices, a further deterioration in food security is expected as the majority of the population in conflict-affected areas purchase the bulk of their food on the market,' it warns.[8]

The government has responded to the latest crisis with help for a minority of the very poorest families. Around a third of the families living below the poverty line in the Manila area will get cards entitling them to buy subsidised rice.[9]

In the provinces, some 300,000 families are to be given cash for healthcare and each child's attendance at school. However, this represents only seven per cent of the total number of poor families in the country.[10]

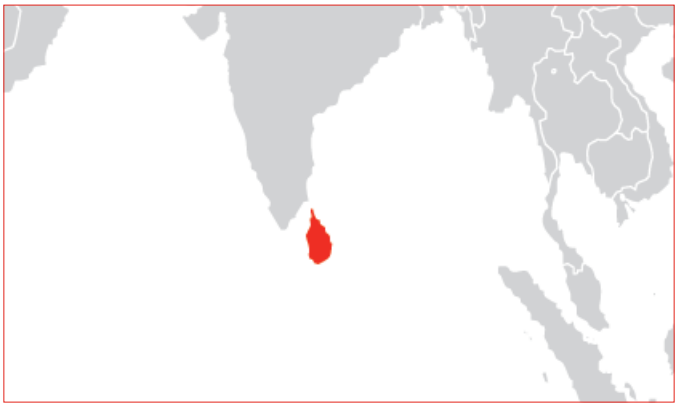
People are trying to cope by abandoning expensive foods such as meat and surviving on rice and noodles. In the central Visayas region, newspapers report that farmers are living on their root crops and selling their livestock in order to buy food.[11]

Other factors in the current crisis include the rapid conversion of irrigated agricultural land to urban use over the past 20 years, and the rapid rise in the country's population, which has ballooned from 60 million in 1990 to around 90 million in 2008.

Government critics say that its polices have contributed to food price rises by focusing on industrial development while neglecting agriculture and abandoning the goal of national self-sufficiency in food.

Some Christian Aid partner organisations in the Philippines work to challenge such policies; others strengthen the rights and incomes of the urban poor and of small farmers, who are vulnerable to being evicted from their homes and land. This, in turn, disrupts their ability to buy and grow food.

Sri Lanka



At least two million poor families will not get the minimum amount of rice they need.

Soaring food prices have left millions of poor people in Sri Lanka facing terrible choices. Many spend about 80 per cent of their already meagre incomes on food and when food prices rise by half, they have to decide what to sacrifice.[1]

In the year to March 2008, the price of rice rose by 40 to 80 per cent (depending on quality); wheat flour by 72.5 per cent; pulses by 85 per cent; and potatoes by 16 per cent.[2]

Sarath Fernando of Christian Aid partner Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (Monlar) says that as a result of the price rises, at least two million poor families will not get the minimum amount of rice that they need, let alone other foods and personal requirements such as healthcare and transport.

'In addition to the high rates of malnutrition and hunger, the growth in suicide rates and growing indebtedness are clear indicators of the poor being pushed beyond the threshold of survival,' he states.

Malnutrition was a problem in Sri Lanka long before the current crisis, according the United Nations Development Programme. Twenty-two per cent of the population were undernourished in 2004, while 29 per cent of children under five were underweight for their age and 18 per cent were stunted.

The situation is significantly worse in the north and east of the country, which is affected by fighting between the Tamil Tigers and government forces. A World Food Programme survey in 2003 found malnutrition rates among five- to seven-year-olds in the north and east were up to twice as high as the national average.[3]

Sri Lanka's current food crisis has important domestic, as well as international, causes. The north and east of Sri Lanka were once the country's 'bread basket'. Since fighting started in 1983, thousands of acres of farmland have been abandoned as people flee dangerous areas, says Christian Aid's Sri Lanka programme manager, Tess Dico-Young.[4]

In addition, restrictions on the movement of agricultural specialists and non-governmental organisations have prevented small farmers getting the technical and financial support they need. Recent changes in weather patterns are also damaging farmers' ability to grow food, says Dico-Young.

A further, fundamental problem is that the economy is not run in the interests of the rural poor.

Monlar is working to build a consensus between Sri Lankan academics and non-governmental organisations, about how politicians should tackle unaffordable food prices. Its latest statement calls for food sovereignty (the right of countries to define their own food and agricultural polices) and environmentally sustainable small-scale farming, challenging economic policies such as aggressive trade liberalisation.

Tajikistan

Freezing winters, blistering summers, crop failures, plant and animal disease – and now a plague of locusts.

An invasion of crop-destroying locusts is only the latest in a catalogue of crises hitting Tajikistan this year.

During the country's coldest winter for three decades, temperatures plunged to -25°C, electricity, gas and water were rationed, and the price of food climbed.[1]

By February the price of bread had doubled in 12 months, leaving people struggling to afford food and fuel.[2]

Almost two-thirds of Tajikistan's 6.6 million people live on less than US$2.15 a day, with the poorest now spending more than 70 per cent of their incomes on food.[3]

People have responded to the food price rises by panic-buying wheat flour, vegetable oil and rice.[4]

Climate change appears to be adding to Tajikistan's food insecurity. Research last year, funded by Christian Aid, found farmers complaining of unusually hot weather, drier soils, snowfall at unusual times, crop failures caused by scorching weather, and an increase in the animal and plant diseases that thrive in higher temperatures.[5]

The crippling cold and fuel rationing of winter was followed by unusually dry weather. Without electricity to power water pumps and tube wells, farmers had only a fraction of the water they needed in late spring. As a result, their wheat crop failed to grow properly, according to the United Nations.[6]

This can only worsen the country's food security. Even a year ago the situation was so bad that the WFP launched a two-year programme to help 591,000 people – almost one in ten of the entire population.[7]

In April more than 220,000 hectares of Tajik farmland was hit again, this time by a plague of locusts from Morocco. Although the insects arrive every year, their numbers were especially high, and the Tajik army was sent in to try to control them.[8]

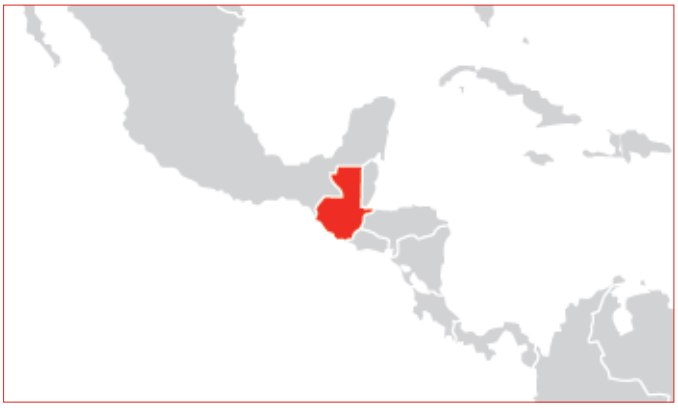
In May the Khatlon region in the south-west of the country suffered from storms, floods, mudflows and landslides, which damaged crops and property, and killed one person.[9]

Now, according to Christian Aid's country representative, Surayo Yuldasheva, the summer is forecast to be especially hot, which means that drought could damage whatever crops are left.

'The situation is not likely to get better, only worse,' says Yuldasheva. 'All this is increasing unrest, especially in the remote areas of the country.'

Latin America and the Caribbean

Guatemala



Government policies favour cultivation of African oil palm and sugar cane over basic food stuff.

Even before the current food crisis, Guatemalan children were among the most malnourished in the world.

According to Unicef, only Afghanistan, Burundi, Ethiopia, Nepal and Yemen had worse rates of chronic child malnutrition, which leads to stunted growth.[1]

Guatemala is defined by the World Bank as a 'middle income country', but it suffers from remarkably unequal income distribution. Almost 57 per cent of Guatemalans are poor and 21 per cent live in extreme poverty.[2]

Since food prices began rising sharply, even those with a regular income can no longer make ends meet. The minimum wage in Guatemala ranges from 1410 to 1455 quetzals (£97-£100) per month, but it now costs 1752 (£121) to pay for a monthly shop that fulfils basic nutritional requirements.[3]

A number of factors have contributed to the rise in prices. One of the most significant is the fall in US wheat exports to Guatemala as US farmers devote more land to cultivating biofuels in order to benefit from subsidies. In Guatemala itself more land is now being used for biofuel crops such as sugar cane and African oil palm.

The situation in the east of the country is particularly stark. When Hurricane Stan struck in October 2005, more than 1,000 people were killed and 80 per cent of the maize harvest was destroyed. Nearly three years on, people are still struggling to recoup their losses. The silt left behind by the widespread flooding also left the land much less productive.

The eastern highlands are the poorest area of the country. Christian Aid supports an organisation there called Bethania, which runs a community health centre with a specialist infant-malnutrition clinic.

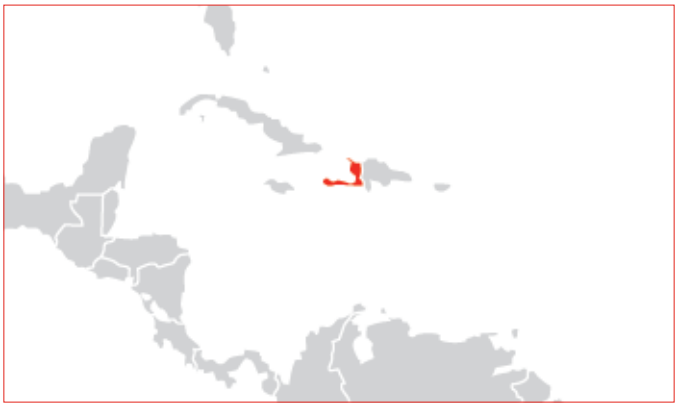
In 1970, Guatemala was the chief grain producer in Central America and was self-sufficient in beans, rice and maize. Following structural adjustment programmes designed by international financial institutions, the government's policies began to favour cultivation of African oil palm and sugar cane over the production of basic food stuffs. Both of these cash crops require a lot of water and land, and fewer agricultural labourers.

Between 1990-2005 the production of beans fell by 25.9 per cent; maize by 22.2 per cent; wheat by 80.4 per cent; and rice by 22.7 per cent. Over the same period the cultivation of sugar cane increased by 98.6 per cent.[4]

Guatemala is now a net importer of food and it is highly vulnerable to international price fluctuations. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta), which lifted the few remaining trade barriers, has accelerated this process still further. Local farmers cannot compete with subsidised food from abroad.

The balance of trade between Guatemala and the US was always favourable to Guatemala until 2006 when Cafta came into force. Guatemala now posts a US$409 million trade deficit with the US, compared with a US$302 million surplus in 2005.[5]

Haiti



In April, five people were killed as food riots broke out in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, ranking below Bangladesh in the United Nations international poverty scale.[1]

Even before the current food crisis, it ranked with Somalia and Afghanistan as one of the three countries of the world with the lowest daily calorific intake per capita.

Some 2.4 million Haitians – a quarter of the population – could not afford the minimum recommended by the World Health Organization.[2]

But until recently the nation was full of optimism. A democratically elected government was in place after years of uncertainty following the ousting of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004.

Then the price of rice and other basic foods began soaring and the country's stability and security was once again thrown into jeopardy.

Sylvie St Fleur, a factory worker in her fifties who has recently lost her job, described the situation: 'If you used to buy a sack of rice for 1,000 gourdes (£13.30), you have to buy it at 1,500 gourdes (£20.05) now. Even if you work for the minimum wage of 70 gourdes (£0.93) a day, you can't buy a gallon of gas for 150 gourdes (£1.97). You see, you can work for two whole days and you can't even buy a gallon of gas.'[3]

In April, five people were killed as riots broke out in the capital, Port-au-Prince. Looters ransacked shops and protesters stormed the presidential palace. The government of President René Préval survived, but only after Préval sacked his Prime Minister and promised food subsidies for a limited period.[4]

Thirty years ago, most of the elements of the Haitian diet were produced locally. Now the situation is completely reversed and Haiti has become a net importer of food.[5]

Two structural adjustment programmes designed by the IMF and the World Bank in 1986 and 1994 greatly accelerated this process by forcing the Caribbean island to reduce import tariffs on basic foodstuffs drastically.[6]

For most Haitians this policy was disastrous. Haiti now imports more food than any other product, using 80 per cent of its export earnings just to pay for food.

As food imports increased, local production decreased because local farmers were being undercut by subsidised imported food, mainly from the United States. Under the US Farm Bill, American farmers received $13.4 billion in subsidies in 2006.[7] Haiti is now the third largest importer of US-produced rice after Mexico and Japan.[8] Once an exporter of rice, Haiti now imports an estimated 82 per cent of total consumption.

Small farmers were forced to abandon their land in search of work in garment assembly factories or petty trading. When US farmers recently began devoting more of their land to growing crops for biofuels – to benefit from generous subsidies – there was less excess food to dump on the Haitian market. However, the agricultural sector in Haiti cannot recover instantly to meet the newly increased demand.

Christian Aid supports an innovative project called Veterimed, which has opened dairies throughout the country. This gives farmers a market for their milk, which is processed into yogurt, cheese and sugary drinks to sell locally.

Christian Aid believes that this kind of agricultural investment is the only way forward for Haiti: to ensure that Haitian families have enough to eat, and to enable Haiti to begin to build a stable economy.

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There is growing concern that opening national agricultural markets to international competition before basic institutions and infrastructure are in place can undermine the agricultural sector, with long-term negative effects for poverty, food security and the environment.

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