During and after World War II, many countries struggled with hunger including many previously well-off countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. In 1943, forty-four of the states allied against Germany and the other Axis powers formed the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to address this problem. In 1960, when the problem of hunger remained long after the war had ended, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower called for the UN General Assembly (GA) to develop “a workable scheme … for providing food aid through the UN system.” Responding to his request, the GA and FAO established the World Food Programme (WFP). Today, the FAO focuses on agricultural productivity and policies, while the WFP addresses hunger in developing countries and in places affected by wars, famines, and other complex emergencies. As UN organizations concerned with social and economic matters, both organizations report to the General Assembly.

At the World Food Summit of 1996 hosted by the FAO at its Rome headquarters, representatives from 185 countries agreed the Rome Declaration on World Food Security. The Rome Declaration defined food security as the condition “when all people at all times have
access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. The summit also adopted a World Food Summit Plan of Action that established a blueprint for halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, a goal subsequently adopted in 2000 by the GA as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The final Millennium Development Goals Report (2015) suggests the international community came close to meeting this goal.

Despite this success, FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva reports that “hunger remains an everyday challenge for almost 795 million people worldwide, including 780 million in developing regions.” As the international community shifts towards the new post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, the FAO and the WFP are pushing to ensure the long-term economic and political sustainability of food security. The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Summit is expected to adopt “End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved Nutrition and Promote Sustainable Agriculture” as Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals. What can the GA-2 do to help UN member states, the FAO, and the WFP respond to this ongoing challenge?

**History and Current Events**

Food security rises and falls in response to changes in the supply of and demand for food, which can change rapidly and for very different reasons. In 2011, the FAO's food price index (which tracks the prices of meat, dairy, cereals, sugar, and oils and fats) was 2.6 times higher than it was in 2000. The FAO and WFP were concerned then that rising prices were the biggest threat to achieving the MDG for hunger. In August 2015, the food price index showed a dramatic reduction with food prices at just 1.7 times their 2000 level. The FAO concluded that “conflict, political instability or natural disasters have resulted in protracted crises, adding to vulnerability and food insecurity” and the narrow miss of the MDG targets.

Food supply has been the most variable component of food security because it depends on the weather and the cost of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, and

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gasoline to run farm machinery and deliver crops to market. It can also be disrupted by conflict, political instability and natural disasters. Demand, by contrast, has been more constant, increasing only with population growth. When demand increases and/or supply falls, food prices rise and food security becomes a greater challenge. When both happen at the same time, food prices soar and food security becomes a potential humanitarian crisis.

**Causes of Food Insecurity and High Food Prices: Supply**

Historically, the most dramatic increase in food prices occurred in the 1970s, when high oil prices raised the price of farm inputs such as fertilizer and gasoline. By contrast, today’s higher prices are the result of factors on both the supply and the demand side of the equation. As in the 1970s, the sharp increase in food prices in 2011 was due to rising oil prices and environmental factors such as the weather. However, it was also dramatically affected by three new sources: increasing demand for crops to feed livestock, new interest in alternative energy sources such as biofuels, and investor speculation and government hoarding. Together, these factors increased demand at the same time supply was falling creating extremely high food prices, a rise in hunger, and social and political instability.

Energy costs are a major cause of the rise and fall of food supply and food prices. In 2000, prices for crude oil averaged $38 per barrel and the food price index was 91. In 2008, the average price for oil was $100 and the food price index doubled to 201. In 2011, oil prices surged again to an average of $95 and the food price index hit its high of 230. In July 2015, the average price of oil dropped to $51 per barrel and the food price index was down to 156.10

The (US) Congressional Research Service explains that:

> Energy costs affect all levels of the food production sector. Producers spend more for fertilizer (for which natural gas is a major input), crop drying, and transportation — raising production costs. At the processing, wholesale, and retail levels, the cost of transportation and operating packing houses, manufacturing plants and retail stores has increased.11

Weather and other environmental factors are a second supply-side cause of high food prices. In 2007 and 2011, many food-exporting countries and regions, such as Australia and Eastern Europe, experienced droughts, while others, such as Canada, Western Europe, and the Ukraine, had poor weather. In 2012, the United States experienced the most widespread

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drought in half a century, affecting more than half of the continental US. At least 33 states, primarily in the West and Midwest, experienced drought conditions that are severe or worse, combined with falling water levels and outbreaks of wildfires. The US government estimated the drought increased prices of beef by 4-5%, and that milk, chicken, and pork will increase a bit less due to the devastation of 88% of the US corn crop.12

Although currently less impactful than in 2011, droughts are still affecting on food production. According to the United States’ National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), which monitors global drought conditions:

By the end of July 2015, the earth experienced little drought relief ... In Europe, drought conditions intensified over the majority of the continent including all around the Mediterranean. Switzerland began transporting water to cattle in the south via helicopter due to the lack of rain in the past month or more. In Asia, drought continues to be focused in the Southeast as well as around the Caspian Sea. Indonesia is warning about the potential for failed crop harvests largely due to El Nino. In Africa, drought intensified and expanded in the equatorial region and in the North. Due to the drought, South African maize production is down an estimated 32% ... In South America, drought remains entrenched in Brazil and the Southern Andes and while not expanding much in area, has intensified in many locations. Sao Paulo, Brazil is currently relying on emergency reserves of water and began rationing to extend the water supply. In Australia, drought indicators point to a slight easing of conditions in the North while .... The ongoing dry conditions have led to a large liquidation of the beef herd.13

Weather is a key component in famine, or the extreme scarcity of food. In 2011, famine due to a combination of factors including drought and war resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Somalis, and affected many more in neighboring states of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Uganda, where an estimated 7.9 million people needed emergency humanitarian assistance.14 In 2012, drought in Africa’s Sahel region threatened millions in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal with famine.

Causes of High Food Prices: Demand Factors
On top of these supply-side changes, the world has seen three new sources of demand for food. First, rising average incomes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America over the past 20 years


have increased the demand for meat and processed foods. Meat production requires feed grains, and processed food production requires oil, which is often derived from grains.\textsuperscript{15} Thus consumers of raw grains compete with farmers who feed grains to their livestock and producers who use grain oils to prepare packaged foods. In some cases, these buyers are competing for the same food crop (such as soy for tofu, livestock feed, and oil for frying). In other cases, the competition is less direct (field space for unprocessed rice vs. for field space for corn that could be fed to animals vs. sunflower seeds that could be turned into food grade oil). As demand for goods changes, farmers generally try to produce the higher-priced good. This reduces stocks of less-expensive goods such as raw rice, wheat, and soy, upon which many people rely for most of their calories.

The second new source of demand is biofuels. Just as farmers try to produce the most expensive crop, energy users try to use the least expensive fuel. Thus, as oil prices have risen, demand for biofuels has grown. This trend has been accentuated by states such as the US and regional economic groups such as the European Union, which mandated increasing use of biofuels to reduce oil import reliance and curtail environmental damage. The result was rising food prices, as consumers of food competed for field space with consumers of energy.\textsuperscript{16} According to the IMF, “almost half the increase in consumption of major food crops in 2007 was related to biofuels, mostly because of corn-based ethanol production in the US.”\textsuperscript{17} In 2000, less than 5% of the US corn crop went to ethanol production. By 2014, over 40% of the US corn crop was used for ethanol.\textsuperscript{18} In 2012, the UN, development groups, and even large food corporations like Nestlé called for the US and EU to reduce usage of biofuels, specifically denouncing future targets set to increase use of biofuels as a strategy to limit imports of foreign oil.\textsuperscript{19}

The third new source of food demand is speculation by investors and hoarding by governments. When investors bet that the future price of a commodity will be higher than it is

\textsuperscript{15} Capehart and Richardson, “Food Price Inflation: Causes and Impacts,” p. 2.


\textsuperscript{17} International Monetary Fund (IMF), “Impact of High Food and Fuel Prices on Developing Countries—Frequently Asked Questions,” April 11, 2008, \url{http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/faq/ffpfaqs.htm}.


today and purchase that commodity today to sell tomorrow, governments whose populations depend on that commodity often begin to limit the export of whatever stocks of that commodity they have. According to many observers, like head of UN FAO José Graziano da Silva, speculation has played a large role in volatile price fluctuations and recent price hikes. In the last quarter of 2010 alone, the amount invested in agricultural commodities tripled compared with the previous quarter. According to da Silva, “speculation is indeed an important cause of heavily fluctuating and very high prices. It only benefits banks and hedge funds, but not producers, processors and buyers – and certainly not consumers.”

Other observers, such as the International Food Policy Research Institute, argue that futures prices have risen in response to government hoarding, not vice versa. Yet even these researchers point out that government hoarding is a kind of speculation. In 2008, some of the largest rice producers -- including India, Vietnam, China and Brazil -- curtailed exports to keep domestic prices low.

Effects of High Food Prices on Hunger
Hunger refers to malnutrition (malnourishment) as well as undernourishment (lack of calories). Although hunger “does not usually kill people through outright starvation, it weakens them and leaves them susceptible to infectious diseases that would not ordinarily be fatal.”

In 2015, according to the WFP, the number of undernourished people in the world was 795 million, meaning one in nine people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life. Of those, 98% live in developing countries The rate of hunger has dropped significantly since 1996 but varies widely by region. According to the UN final report on the MDGs,

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The Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern Asia, Latin America and South-Eastern Asia have reached the hunger target, due mainly to rapid economic growth in the past two decades. China alone accounts for almost two thirds of the total reduction in the number of undernourished people in the developing regions since 1990. Northern Africa is close to eradicating severe food insecurity, having attained an overall level below 5 per cent.

In contrast, the pace of reduction in the Caribbean, Oceania, Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa has been too slow to achieve the target. Southern Asia faces the greatest hunger burden, with about 281 million undernourished people. Progress in Oceania has been slow because of heavy dependence on food imports by the small islands that constitute the majority of countries in that region. Food security in this region is also hampered by natural and human-caused disasters, which often result in volatile prices and sudden and unpredictable changes in the availability of important staple foods.

In sub-Saharan Africa, projections for the 2014–2016 period indicate a rate of undernourishment of almost 23 per cent. While the hunger rate has fallen, the number of undernourished people has increased by 44 million since 1990, reflecting the region's high population growth rate. The situation varies widely across the subregions. Northern, Southern and Western Africa have already met or are close to meeting the target. But in Central Africa progress has been hampered by rapid population growth and environmental fragility as well as economic and political upheaval. The number of undernourished people in the subregion has doubled since 1990.

In Western Asia, a starkly different pattern emerges. Despite a relatively low number of undernourished people and fast progress in reducing food insecurity in several countries, projections indicate that the prevalence of undernourishment will rise by 32 per cent between 1990–1992 and 2014–2016 due to war, civil unrest and a rapidly growing number of refugees.

Politics and Food Prices

Rising food costs increase the stress on working and middle class people across the world, which creates the potential for social and political unrest. Since 2007, protests and riots over food prices have broken out in 30 countries.26 According to the IMF,

In Burkina Faso, there have been demonstrations in two cities. In Cameroon, political unrest spilled over into protests over food and fuel prices. Niger has also suffered food-

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price-related riots, while in Indonesia there have been protests over soybean shortages.\textsuperscript{27}

In April 2008, thousands of Haitians stormed the palace gates and demanded food. Within days, the prime minister was voted out of office.\textsuperscript{28}

Rising food prices also contributed to the protests that set off the Arab Spring uprisings and changes of government. In Egypt, one of the first countries in which a government fell, the price of bread, a mainstay of the Egyptian diet, rose 37\% from 2007 to 2008. General food price inflation was 18.9\% per year when President Mubarak was ousted in Spring 2011.\textsuperscript{29}

Some countries, such as Sudan, have profited from rising food prices. According to the New York Times, in 2008, “even as it received a billion pounds of free food from international donors, Sudan [grew and sold] vast quantities of its own crops to other countries, capitalizing on high global food prices at a time when millions of people in its war-riddled region of Darfur barely had enough to eat.”\textsuperscript{30} According to the WFP director in Sudan, “Sudan could be self-sufficient” in food, but because of the ongoing conflict, production is low, and the government refuses to allow food into the Darfur region. In addition,

part of the reason relief agencies bring their own food into Sudan stems from the American policy of giving crops, not money, as foreign aid. Many European countries, by contrast, just give the World Food Program cash, which can be used to buy food locally. [In 2008], the program bought 117,000 tons of Sudanese sorghum. United Nations officials said they would like to buy more, but they had had run-ins with Sudanese suppliers who could make more money with exports.\textsuperscript{31}

The US policy mentioned here is called monetization, which is the method by which surplus, government-subsidized grain is shipped from the US to charities in the developing world, which sell the grain in the local market and invest the proceeds for their own programs. The US, which is responsible for almost half of all food donations to the developing world, is

\textsuperscript{27} IMF, “Impact of High Food and Fuel Prices on Developing Countries—Frequently Asked Questions.”


\textsuperscript{29} Rami Zurayk, “Use your Loaf: Why Food Prices were Crucial in the Arab Spring,” Guardian, 16 July 2011, \url{http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/jul/17/bread-food-arab-spring}.


\textsuperscript{31} Gettleman, “Darfur Withers as Sudan Sells Food.”
currently the only country that distributes aid by monetization. Other countries donate food to be given to those who need it or donate money for organizations to buy and distribute food grown locally.\textsuperscript{32}

The US has a long history of price supports for agricultural commodities, and these subsidies in turn affect world food prices and US food aid policy. The practice of agricultural subsidies is rooted in response to the Great Depression, when many US families owned small farms, and the government used subsidies as a safety net in times of crisis.\textsuperscript{33} The US is not the lone developed country that still subsidizes farming amid changed demographics and economy; the EU has the richest system of agricultural price supports in the world, with subsidies comprising almost half of the EU’s budget.\textsuperscript{34} Many decry the use of agricultural subsidies because they depress world prices, hurting farmers in poor countries who do not receive price supports from their governments, and reduce market opportunities for developing countries.\textsuperscript{35}

The World Food Programme and Food Aid
Sixty percent of all global food aid is distributed by the WFP. In 2012, the WFP distributed 2.9 million metric tons of food aid out of a global total of 5 million metric tons. The amount of global food aid is down 50 percent from 2001, a reflection of the significant decline in hunger and malnourishment globally. However, the amount of food aid the WFP delivers due to “emergency” is increasing, with two-thirds distributed for people affected by natural disasters, crop failures, droughts, and complex humanitarian emergencies associated with war and refugee movements.\textsuperscript{36} Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were the main recipients, with 61% of the 2012 aid distributions. Just 10 recipient countries accounted for 72% of all food aid distributed in 2012.—Ethiopia (19%), North Korea (11), Yemen (8), Somalia (6), Pakistan (6), Sudan (6), Kenya (5), Palestine (4), Niger (4), and South Sudan (3).

\textsuperscript{32}Eben Harrell, “CARE turns down U.S. food aid,” \textit{Time}, 15 August 2007, \url{http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1653360,00.html}

\textsuperscript{33}“Farm Subsidies Become Target Amid Spending Cuts,” \textit{New York Times}, 6 May 2011, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/07/us/politics/07farm.html?_r=1}


High food prices increase both the demand for WFP food aid programs and their cost. Thus the WFP has to work harder than ever to deliver aid to those who need it. According to WFP head, Ertharin Cousin:

> We have the knowledge to defeat malnutrition, but it requires dedication...Yet global progress has been extremely slow...Food prices are abnormally high, savings are exhausted, and livestock herds have not been replenished. This is why...it is critical that the world continue to fund safety nets that protect the most vulnerable, because the alternative - food riots, starvation and a generation of children permanently stunted by malnutrition - is far more costly.\(^{37}\)

Despite the large amount of aid dispersed each year, millions every year are left in need of food supplies. To handle shortfalls in aid, particularly critical in areas in need of emergency assistance, the WFP calls on support not only from member states, but also from private companies and individual donations. In May 2012, WFP called on members of the G8 to join forces with companies and foundations to find new approaches to meet food shortage problems.\(^{38}\) For example, PepsiCo has teamed up with WFP and USAID to create a specialized nutrition product to help relieve malnutrition in Ethiopia, focusing on 40,000 children and 10,000 farmers.\(^{39}\)

Climate Change and Future Food Prices
The current droughts in the US and across the world have provoked questions as to whether these events are a result of climate change. According to most scientists, it is difficult both to measure the effect of warming on droughts and to link any single event to climate change. Moreover, the US has experienced worse droughts before, and the weather pattern, La Nina, is also a factor in the 2012 dry spell.\(^{40}\) However, certain weather and climate extremes, like more frequent severe floods and droughts, are predicted to occur more often as the climate warms. According to a 2012 report from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),


can say with “medium confidence that some regions of the world have witnessed more intense and longer droughts” as the climate has warmed than they did before.41

In its 2007 report, the IPCC documented the effects climate change has already had worldwide, including extinction of plant and animal species, with effects on human food supply. Global rise in temperatures may reduce food security in some regions of the world through decreased crop yields and resulting higher prices of food. The IPCC also warns of decreasing crop yields, as warmer temperatures may also affect food production through the spread of diseases and pests.42

**Previous Committee Work on Rising Food Prices**

Since 2003, the GA has annually adopted a resolution on the right to food in which it reaffirms “that hunger constitutes an outrage and a violation of human dignity and therefore requires the adoption of urgent measures at the national, regional and international levels for its elimination” and “the right of everyone to have access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, so as to be able to fully develop and maintain his or her physical and mental capacities.” The GA requests that all states, private actors, and international organizations promote the effective realization of the right to food for all.43

According to a 2012 report from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the idea behind the “right to food” is that no one should have to live with persistent hunger and malnutrition, which is the norm for millions of people. Hunger affects people’s ability to be productive and escape poverty. The report argues that hunger and malnutrition arise from structural causes, such as the lack of economic and social empowerment, natural resource degradation, climatic pressures, demographic and social issues, and governance. In addition, it identifies challenges to enhancing food security, including the growing demand for food crops to produce energy,

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shifting dietary demands for meat and livestock products, food loss and waste, climate change, and conflict.\textsuperscript{44}

In February 2012, the GA passed Resolution 66/188, “Addressing excessive price volatility in food and related financial and commodity markets,” again referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with regard to the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, and stressed the need to take measures to reduce excessive food price volatility and the importance of timely and transparent information in helping to understand its causes. In this resolution, the GA requested that member states and other stakeholders (such as the FAO and other international organizations) engage in dialogue about price volatility in food and commodity markets in order to better address food price volatility.\textsuperscript{45}

The issues involved in food price volatility and food security have been brought out numerous times on the world stage. In the 2009 World Food Security Summit in Rome, then-Director of the FAO, Jacques Diouf, highlighted the problems of governance of world food security, and decreasing funds available for agricultural development. The share of agriculture in total Official Development Assistance (ODA) fell from 17 percent in 1980 to 3.8 in 2006. Diouf said that is this one of the root causes of the 2007-08 food crisis and called on the G8 (the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan, and Russia) to fulfill their pledge of 20 billion USD for agricultural development.\textsuperscript{46}

The Summit also highlighted the role of foreign direct investment (FDI) and increasing privatization of the food supply. In particular, land and water acquisitions have been made in an effort on the part of food-importing countries to reduce their dependence on the world markets for food, which reduces the land and resources available for these countries to grow their own food.\textsuperscript{47}

Trade regulations and market prices are other areas of debate. Developing countries face the most stringent export requirements, and protections like agricultural subsidies


\textsuperscript{47} FAO, “Secretariat contribution to defining the objectives.”
(discussed above) continue to hamper production for farmers in developing countries. Also discussed was commodity speculation (also discussed above) which the Secretariat noted played a role in the increasing level and volatility of world food prices in the 2007-08 food crisis, as did the increasing use of biofuels by developed countries.\textsuperscript{48}

**Conclusion**

Factors on both the supply and the demand side lead to food insecurity and challenge the sustainability of global efforts to end hunger. This makes it difficult for “the bottom billion” to survive and puts considerable pressure on middle class people and governments worldwide. In addition, sudden increases in food prices and emergencies increase both the demand for WFP food aid programs and their cost. How should the GA-2 respond to this situation? In developing your country’s position on this issue, consider the following questions:

1. Have your country’s citizens and government been affected by food insecurity and/or rising food prices? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

2. Is the WFP currently operating in your country? If so, what kind of aid is it providing? How effective is that aid in providing for the health and survival of citizens and the stability of the government?

3. Is your country a donor to the WFP and other food relief programs? If so, what kind of food aid does it favor, how much does it provide, and to whom does it give aid and with what conditions? How effective has your country’s food aid been?

4. What is your country’s position on the best way to respond to the problems of supply and demand that can cause food insecurity and high food prices? For example, should the UN member states emphasize short term solutions such as increased aid to countries with food crises or long-term solutions that address the supply and demand factors that keep prices high?

5. Which of the supply and demand side factors are most necessary, possible, or desirable to address? Consider oil prices, weather conditions, climate change, rising incomes and demand for meat and processed foods, demand for biofuels, and commodity speculation.

6. If all people have a right to food, as the GA asserted in the UDHR, how can that right be assured?

\textsuperscript{48} FAO, “Secretariat contribution to defining the objectives.”
**Recommended Reading**


This book collects the findings of a group of scientists and economists who have taken stock of climate change impacts on food and agriculture at global and regional levels over the past two decades.


On this site, you can keep up with the latest news on the famine global food prices, and hunger. You can also read about successful projects to alleviate such problems.


This website Tracks food prices over time and provides access to FAO reports.


This article is a good discussion of why developed countries pursue protectionism in the form of agricultural subsidies, and how that contributes to world food insecurity.


On this site, you can read country reports on the Millennium Development Goals. Focus on MDG #1 (eradicating poverty and hunger) & MDG #8 (increasing international cooperation, especially foreign aid).


The World Bank is the main source of development statistics including about what percentage of the population in each country lives on less than $1.25 per day.