

Africa South of the Sahara 2008-2011: Hunger as a Factor in Political Instability

by

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Abstract

Between 2007 and 2008 spiking food prices sparked simultaneous riots in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and, to a greater extent, Africa, where more than a dozen countries experienced food related violence. In 2010-2011, inequalities in resource distribution, including access to food, led to riots in many African countries. This paper focuses on structural challenges to food security, presents competing views and weights differences in reaction to economic crisis in Africa south of the Sahara.

Introduction

The 2008-2011 period was characterized by five major events that, combined, have great geopolitical consequences on the course of contemporary history: the global financial crisis beginning in 2008; the nuclear meltdown following Japan's Great Earthquake in March 2011; the Arab Spring beginning early 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the ongoing European Union's euro-zone debt crisis, and the wave of food riots around the world.

The 2008 financial crisis indicated the fragility of the international financial system. The 2011 Japan's nuclear meltdown illustrated how risky the choices to meet energy needs are. Japan's predicament involving the complex interaction of an earthquake and a tsunami confirmed China's ascension to the second place in the world economy. The Arab Spring, in addition to its challenges to or the collapse of domestic dictatorships, demonstrated the loss of control of Western powers, particularly the European ones, over their immediate periphery.

Long banned Islamic political parties won elections in Tunisia and Egypt or emerged as major political forces in MENA. This trend represents a challenge and requests diplomatic adjustments between the West and MENA countries. Furthermore, with the political death of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, the Mediterranean Community project dear to former France's President, Nicolas Sarkozy, has lost its momentum. The current Eurozone debt crisis underlines the fragility of European powers. It raises questions about their traditional role in world affairs as the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) continue to gain political clout.

On the surface, these five phenomena have nothing in common. However, they all indicate weaknesses in the 21st century global political arrangements. The combination of such events and the inability of the international community to find and implement remedies that are efficient, timely and sustainable indicate that the way our societies are run require fundamental changes. All over the world, the voice of the poor and disadvantaged is getting louder. Africa is not immune from the challenges and opportunities presented by the situation we have witnessed the past four years. In 1931, the French poet Paul Valery wrote: *le temps du monde fini commence* (the era of a limited world has begun). For those feeling stifled by the limited world, nothing illustrates and legitimizes the transition from obedience to resistance better than hunger. The 2008-2011 food riots in Africa south of the Sahara exemplified the global political awakening of ordinary people. What does hunger mean? And why is it potentially dangerous for political stability?

Physiological and Psychological Effects of Hunger

The following example will illustrate how hunger has the potential to create political instability. In the first half of the 20th century, when Joseph Stalin took power in the former Soviet Union, one of the first things he did was to control the production of and access to food through agricultural reform (Sorokin, 1975). The faculty at the University of St. Petersburg carefully watched themselves and regularly met to discuss the effect starvation had on them. Commenting on the book by Pitirim Sorokin (one of the professors at St. Petersburg), *Hunger as a Factor in Human Affairs*, Frederick Kaufman (2009, p. 58) summarized the physiological and psychological symptoms of the starving as follows:

...feelings of hurt, weakness, headache, dizziness, and upset stomach, followed by nausea and terrible aches in the joints...A dull and hopeless apathy would set in, and then the infamous "famine psychosis" would reign: depression, paralysis, and an overwhelming sensation of existential emptiness. *Pathological expression of anger and rage* (emphasis added) would soon follow, along with hunger delirium and hallucinatory paroxysms...

When people wait until the last stages of starvation, there is nothing they can do. From 1919 to 1922, as many as 5 million people died of famine across Russia. Revolt is more likely when people are organized and have leaders who can articulate their grievances. In 1789, the French Revolution did not start until the angry poor descended on streets and demanded bread or bullets. Likewise, imagine what could happen, when thousands of hungry people, mostly young, in crowded African cities, and capable of organizing themselves can do in protesting their governments' policies!

There is no need to over-stretch one's imagination. That is what happened in 2008-2011 worldwide, but with particular severity in Africa south of the Sahara.

Political Consequences of Hunger: Africa south of the Sahara 2008-2011

Food Riots and Political Instability

Between January 2006 and June 2008, the price of rice tripled; the price of wheat doubled; and the price soy and corn rose 150% (Ziegler, 2011, p. 160). Spikes in food prices culminated in riots in 2008 in many developing countries and on many continents simultaneously. It was a truly global phenomenon. In April 2008, *The Economist* called it "The Silent Tsunami." Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of the UN World Food Program, warned of "a perfect storm" and spoke of "a new face of hunger" on April 1, 2008, at a UN conference in Ethiopia. "We are seeing more urban hunger than ever before. Often, we are seeing food on the shelves but people being unable to afford it," she said.¹ The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, at a UN Trade and Development conference in Accra, Ghana, said that huge increases in price of staples could erase progress in fight against poverty and lead to the loss of years for the Millennium Development Goals. He commented that uncoordinated measures by individual states may result in a cascade of other crises "... and become a multidimensional problem affecting economic growth, social progress and even political security around the world."²

Thirty seven countries were affected world-wide: among them Yemen, in the Middle East; Haiti, in the Caribbean; Mexico and Peru in Latin America; in Asia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan (over wheat shortage), Indonesia (over soybean shortage), the Philippines, and Uzbekistan. Fifteen of the thirty seven countries affected by food riots in 2008 were in Africa, thirteen of them south of the Sahara: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Somalia, beside Egypt and Morocco in North Africa.

Many explanations were given from nature-made disasters to man-made situations such as the diversion of crops to the production of bio-fuel. However, these explanations fail to address the fundamental issue: the power structure that affects food production (cash crops vs. staples) and policies that affect access to food (social safety net for example). As Fraser and Rimas (2010, p. 10) noted, actually,

In the hysteria, not many people noticed that 2008 was the single most bountiful year in the history of agriculture. Never before had farmers coaxed such plenty from the earth, never had harvests been so lush. The weight of the global breadbasket was 2.24 billion tons, a robust 5 percent increase over the previous year. Yet food prices utterly detached themselves from the fact that we had reaped the best harvest in the entirety of human existence. That's because our assumptions had finally started to wear thin.

Fraser and Rimas (2010, p. xiii) added, "When a food empire fails, mobs tear apart the markets places, angry over the cost of bread... It happens again and again. And it's happening now." Sociologist Jean Ziegler (2011, p. 44) confirms Fraser's and Rimas' analysis. According to Ziegler, commodities prices spiked mostly between 2006 and 2009 while, according to FAO's statistics, good harvests were recorded throughout the world during the same period of time. In another article, Ziegler (2012, p.8) cited the work of economist Heiner Flassbeck. According to Flessback, speculation on commodities increased by 2,300% between 2003 and 2008. And FAO indicated that, on average, food prices increased by 24% in 2008 compared to 2007 and by 57% compared to 2006. Given that three basic crops, corn, wheat and rice (50%) represent 75% of global consumption, increase in the prices of these products affects the whole world. Thus, in 2008, hundreds of thousands of people in the 37 countries around the world that were affected by food-related violence lacked access to food rather than being victims of insufficient food production. Food commodities have a particular fragility on the global market. Most of it locally consumed. Only about 10% (7% for rice) reaches the international market. Natural disasters such as floods and drought affecting production can thus have a significant effect on prices on the global market. And speculation on commodity prices only makes matters worse.

And in 2010-2011, following floods and bad weather in Russia, Australia, Brazil, and Pakistan, food prices spiked again on the global market including Africa south of the Sahara where they were accompanied by riots in Cameroon, Gabon, and Mozambique. The recurrence of these events, despite differing reasons for increases in the cost of food, is an indication that there are enduring structural problems that need to be addressed by policy makers.

Lessons from the 2008-2011 Period

Whenever there is conflict or political unrest in Africa, the tendency is to frame it as an ethno-political issue. The wave of food riots on the continent in the past four years is not amenable to issues of ethnicity and religion. Millions of young people populate slums and shanty towns, bored, desperate and angry. Their anger cuts across religious and ethnic groups. Most of them believe that engagement in the political process will change nothing. Thus, any economic difficulty becomes a crisis. Drought easily leads to famine. Fluctuation of commodities prices on the global market engenders challenges in the local economy. And the accumulation of unfulfilled hopes sparks rage amidst an atmosphere of continuing emergency.

By comparison, thanks to China, the rate of extreme poverty in Asia decreased from 55% of the population in 1990 to 17 % in 2005. That is more than 557 million people lifted from extreme poverty in a period of 15 years. In the same period of time, Africa south of the Sahara added 92 million people to the number of those living in extreme poverty (Basset & Winter-Nelson, 2010). It is in that region that the percentage of undernourished people is the highest: 30% in 2010 (Ziegler, 2011, p. 45). Ziegler (2011) also discussed the distinction between structural hunger (*faim structurelle*) and cyclical hunger (*faim conjoncturelle*). Structural hunger is a silent killer. It is produced and reproduced by the social system. Cyclical hunger is more visible. It comes as a result of man-made catastrophe such as wars or nature-made disasters such as drought or flood. When families spend 70% to 80% of their income on food, they can be categorized as living in a situation of structural hunger. Sudden spikes in commodities prices, as in 2008, add to existing insecurity and make the implicit explicit. Furthermore, Larry Diamond (2011, p. 303-304) pointed out that “The years 2006 through 2010 saw the longest period of deterioration in freedoms, according to international rankings, since the great burst of democratic expansion after the cold war ended, and almost surely the longest period since the third world wave began.” In other words, the spikes in food prices coincided with a period of decrease in democratic legitimacy world-wide: an explosive combination.

Recurrent food crises call for strengthening social safety net which, in turn, calls for improved administrative effectiveness. It is the lack of effective administrative performance that leads to political failure. What accounts for persistent deficit in food security in Africa south of the Sahara is most of all a policy deficit.

Policy Deficit

When the 1970 Nobel Prize winner, Norman Borlaug, launched the Green Revolution, Africa south of the Sahara was left out of that revolution. To make matters worse, in the 1980s, the World Bank and other international development agencies decided on the “Structural Adjustment Program” (SAP). SAP required that governments adopt fiscal discipline and reduce debt. Africa was not left out this time. As most African laborers were small farm holders, the World Bank saw that they were in no position to compete and were not to compete on the world food markets. Instead of investing in seeds and expensive fertilizers, African governments were instructed to focus on industrialization and earn money to import food. As a result, agriculture was neglected. Industrialization also failed. While this policy was imposed on African countries, the US and the EU were themselves subsidizing their own farmers, thus making African farming even less competitive. Imported crops, in addition, displaced locally grown food.

Policy Responses to Food Riots and Political Instability

There were two categories of policy responses: domestic efforts and international intervention. Hence, two examples will be considered. Newly elected President Barak Obama immediately understood the security implications of poverty, hunger, and the wave of food riots in 2008. His approach focused on transformational development. He declared, in his inaugural address: “To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow, to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds.” As commented Roger Thurow (2010, p. 108), “Those 30 words have since grown into ‘Feed the Future,’ a program involving most departments of the administration –from the Department of State and the Department of Agriculture to the Treasury Department and the National Security Council.”

The Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, called for by the G-20, was launched in April 2010. Initial commitments came from Canada, Spain, South Korea, the US, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for a total \$880 million. US Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner, when announcing the creation of the fund, mentioned security concerns: “A world where more than one billion people suffer from hunger is not a strong and stable world. A world where more than two billion people in rural areas struggle to secure a livelihood is not a balanced world...Promoting economic growth abroad increases prosperity and security at home” (Thurow, 2010, p. 108). In addition, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation teamed to form the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa.

Second, in regard to domestic efforts, at the turn of the 21st century, Ethiopia successfully implemented the Borlaug's method. Crops were produced in great abundance but there was no local infrastructure to absorb the harvest, no roads to access the markets and no storage facilities. The following year, in reaction to that disastrous experience, there was less farming. Then, drought struck causing Ethiopia's 2003 famine. After 2003, other African governments were tired of the policies imposed on them by the existing doctrine of the World Bank. Bingu wa Mutharika, newly elected President of Malawi, decided that he would start giving subsidies to his farmers to help them with seeds and fertilizers. Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame, declared that he would do the same. As a result, Rwanda has largely freed itself from dependence on food aid. The World Bank then reversed its doctrine, retreating from its Structural Adjustment dogma. It hailed the role of small farmers as leading the way out of hunger and poverty in its 2008 *World Development Report*. It also recognized the importance of state investment in agriculture and some subsidies (Thurow, 2010, p.106). When Mutharika became chair of the African Union in 2010, he promised to champion greater investment in agriculture: "Africa must feed Africa," he said.

These initiatives from African leaders are laudable. Were their approaches the result of well planned and executed policies or the product of self-serving power strategies? The Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, and Presidents Paul Kagame and Bingu wa Mutharika respectively of Rwanda and Malawi had one thing in common: they newly came to power and needed to establish their political legitimacy. It is possible that their policies with regard to food production were tied to their need to consolidate their power base.

Another change in the region is the reaction of African governments against land grabbing by foreign governments. Because land is relatively cheap in Africa, land-grabbing by foreign entities has become a matter of serious concern. India, China and Saudi Arabia in particular, facing shortage of food production at home due to climate, land and water constraints, have been buying land in Africa and investing in farming to grow and export food for their own people. Private entities are also buying land in Africa for bio-fuel production. Ziegler (2011, p. 312) found a striking example in South Sudan, reporting that:

After twenty-six years of liberation war and more than one million deaths and mutilated, the new state of South was born on July 9, 2011. However, even before its birth, the provisional administration of Juba sold to a Texan agribusiness firm, the Nile Trading and Development Inc., 600,000 hectares of arable land, the equivalent of 1% of the country, at low price: the Texans paid \$25,000, i.e. 3 cents per hectare. The Nile Trading and Development Inc. keeps the option of additional 400,000 hectares (my translation).

Conclusion: Reasons for Hope

Demographer Nicholas Eberstadt (2010, p. 56) asserted that, in the face of aging and declining populations in developed countries, “Over the next 20 years,... the largest share of growth in the world’s working-age population –well over a third of the total—will take place in sub-Saharan Africa... Bangladesh and Pakistan will account for nearly another eighth of the world’s work force growth. In other words, over the next two decades, sub-Saharan Africa, Bangladesh, and Pakistan will generate nearly half of the growth in the world’s working age population.”

The potential in work force efforts are reinforced by Africa’s natural resources. For Thurow (2010, p.103), “More and more eyes are turning to Africa, agriculture’s final frontier” because “More than half of the earth’s unused arable land that can still be exploited without endangering forests and other ecosystems is in Africa. And less than 5 percent of Africa’s arable land is irrigated; abundant water sources, such as the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia, are largely untapped for farming.” As Borlaug liked to say, “You can’t eat potential.” One should conclude with Thurow (2010, p. 110) that “the rich world neglects Africa at its own peril. It will be impossible to multiply global food production -- that is, to reduce hunger in poor countries while meeting growing demand in emerging ones-- in the coming decades if African farmers are not given the means to grow as much food as they possibly can. The continent that has been fed by the world’s food aid must now help feed the world.”

Conditions thus exist for Africa to realize and ensure food security if there is political will to implement policies that aim first at meeting its own populations’ needs. Then, the continent that has been fed by the world’s food aid can, in turn, help feed the world.

Notes

¹ Executive Intelligence Review. Retrieved on April 6, 2012 from http://www.larouchepub.com/pr/2008/080409brits_africa.html

² Posted by PBS on April 1, 2008. Retrieved on April 6, 2012 from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/world/jan-june08/food_4-21.html

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