



The social cost of the food crisis; Children face increased vulnerability as food prices soar

Rising oil prices, poor harvests, trade barriers, and subsidies, have pushed food prices to new heights, forcing tougher choices on the region's poorest families.

Paying more for even the cheapest food means little or nothing is left for education or healthcare. The threat of hunger and malnourishment threatens the youngest lives, while families are forced to resort to coping mechanisms that are tearing families and societies apart.

Decades of conflict have already shattered societies across this volatile region. Millions of urban poor now compete with millions more refugees who have sought safety in the bustling streets of cities in the world's largest refugee hosting region.

From Afghanistan to Kosovo, children are at further risk of malnourishment, abandonment, child labour, trafficking, and institutionalisation as a result of the increased pressures put on poor families.

"It is essential that we keep the children at the heart of our response as we coordinate to respond globally to this food crisis," said David Robinson, Regional Vice President for World Vision in the Middle East and Eastern Europe (MEER).

Ultimately, it is the youngest and most vulnerable of this region that will carry the debt of the food crisis for years to come.

The children of MEER are already living in crisis

World Vision is already witnessing some of the impacts of rising food prices as the poorest and most vulnerable struggle to meet their daily needs.

- Food insecurity – Over half of all Afghan children under 5 are estimated to be chronically malnourished.
- Political unrest and increased threat of conflict - 11 out of the 17 countries in which WV works in MEER are post or ongoing conflict countries. 30% of the 1,200 people who died in the recent conflict in Lebanon were children.
- Millions of Iraqi and Palestinian refugee children contribute to making the Middle East the world's largest refugee-hosting region.
- Living on the streets - 2,000 children live on the streets of Georgia's cities, and thousands more youth between 10 to 16 years of age are at risk of joining them.
- Trafficked for labour and sexual exploitation - In Afghanistan 50,000 children are working on the streets of the capital, Kabul. An estimated 200,000 individuals are trafficked annually from Eastern Europe, with a significant proportion being children.
- Children living in institutions and infant abandonment - Up to 90% of the children living in Georgia's institutions actually have parents.

The global food crisis is driving the poor into deeper poverty and is increasing the vulnerability of children across the region. This is the face of poverty in MEER.

Across the region

Afghanistan

The global food crisis is compounding already enormous factors contributing to hunger and poverty in Afghanistan. In 2006, prior to the onset of the global food crisis, a survey found 54% of children under 5 to be chronically malnourished in the country. This is only set to rise as the impacts of the crisis grow.

World Vision has found that many households are resorting to asset depletion. Some desperate families are resorting to selling their children in order to survive. Girls are the most vulnerable, sometimes being sold into marriage at a very early age (often essentially bonded labour, and some as young as 7), and are usually the first to be removed from school when the costs become too great.

Both girls and boys are at risk of being put to work in order to support the family, and boys have historically been sold to warlords in hard times.

Pakistan

Up to 85% of Pakistanis live on less than US \$ 2 per-day. Rising wheat and flour prices, have an enormous impact on the poor, who have no spare cash to cover the extra burden.

Public anger over rising food prices has featured widely on the domestic political agenda in Pakistan, and threatens to further destabilize the country which is still suffering the effects of a protracted political crisis.

The number of people who are food insecure in Pakistan has risen by 28% to 77 million, according to a recent report by the World Food Programme. The report suggests that Pakistan is facing a "big crisis" due to the growing gap between the increase in prices and increase in wages; resulting in the diminished purchasing power of the poor by almost 50%.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

Today in Gaza and the West Bank children are facing malnutrition as a result of being cut off from the world.

More than 70% of 9 month old children in Gaza, and half of 9-month-old children in the West Bank are anemic (Save the Children, UK).

Up to 800,000 people in Gaza rely on food aid, and 150,000 are in jeopardy of not being fed anymore due to higher costs and the lack of available food.

Already, more than half of Palestinians in the West Bank and more than two thirds in the Gaza Strip are living below the poverty line of US\$ 2 a day, and many even live on less than one dollar.

In the context of the food crisis

There is a heightened risk of a serious humanitarian crisis for the thousands of poor families feeling the pain and consequences of rising food costs.

Rice has trebled in price in the last month and very limited medical supplies as a result of the blockade compound the health crisis. With virtually no fuel to run hospital generators, operations and other medical care are severely restricted.

A recent World Vision food distribution in the Gaza Strip cost 25% more than anticipated as a result of soaring food prices - symptomatic of the global impact on food aid, in which World Vision has been forced to cut up to 1.5 million food aid beneficiaries across the world due to rising prices.

Jordan

An unusually harsh winter, a declining economy, spiraling fuel costs, and the burden of hosting the world's highest percentage of refugees, is placing many of the poor in Jordan at risk of becoming more food insecure.

Iraqi refugees in the country are relying heavily on the sales of their assets, causing living conditions to deteriorate significantly. Vulnerabilities are growing, with signs pointing to increased undernutrition, and incidences of child labour and survival sex.

With host communities increasingly feeling the impact of rising food prices also, the already simmering tensions with refugees threaten to come to the surface, further endangering young refugees.

Kosovo

The country's newly-declared independence is a source of much instability for the poor of Kosovo. The combination of a stagnant economy, imports of subsidised food, and rising global prices, is further compounding the threats faced by Kosovars.

If nothing is done to mitigate against the affects of rising food prices, this global crisis threatens to be a major contributor to further destabilisation in countries like Kosovo.

The way forward

The impact of the global food crisis is already being felt around the world. Children in countries like Afghanistan are facing severe food insecurity and the threat of undernutrition. But across the region, rising food prices are having a less visible impact.; the crisis is forcing vulnerable children and their families deeper into poverty and compounding already daunting threats.

For the most vulnerable, support is needed to help families put food on the table and still meet the necessary costs that afford children their basic rights, like education and health. Vulnerable communities in countries like Jordan and Georgia will need support to keep children and youth from the harshest affects of rising food prices – like street children, child labour, forced child marriage, and child abandonment.

Unless these issues are tackled in a coordinated, comprehensive, and truly global fashion, it is the children who will bear the brunt of the global food crisis.

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