

Fighting food insecurity despite floods

Despite the scale of the issue, global food insecurity and famine are treatable issues. **Jean-Michel Grand** discusses solutions, including how to use floods to grow crops

We are living in a world where 2.3 billion people do not have enough food to eat and 768 million suffer from hunger. This leads to malnutrition, which can drastically restrict life chances and even lead to death – around one in 10 people across the world is malnourished.

How we fail to act in some countries now – in parts of the world like East Africa and South Sudan – will have consequences for generations to come.

In order to overcome this crisis, we need to drill down into the misconceptions surrounding the causes of food crises. The common refrain is that there isn't enough food to go around to feed the increasing number of hungry people.

We are told that the main solution is to produce more, which comes at the risk of soil erosion, deforestation, depleting water resources, and increasing CO₂ emissions. The stark reality is that 40 per cent of the food produced in the world is wasted (from the producers' fields in developing countries to the consumers' bins in developed countries).

The truth is that there is enough food produced to feed everybody, but it does not reach everybody. The food system is failing a quarter of the population because of

profound inequalities in access to food.

Millions of families, small-scale farmers, daily workers, single parents, and elderly people are living day to day, not knowing what and if they will eat in the coming days and weeks. This road can lead to hunger and, in extreme cases, to famine.

Conflict is the main cause of extreme hunger, destroying food stores, farming infrastructure, and markets. This can sometimes lead to looting and killing, forcing millions to leave their homes to look for protection and safety.

Natural hazards such as droughts or floods are testing communities' resilience and often result in major losses for families, who rely on agriculture.

These factors very often result in a surge in food prices, as we are seeing today, leaving many families with difficult choices to make, such as not having enough food to feed their family and deciding whether to buy medicines, pay the school fees, or have food.

Malnourished dreams

The result is that 161 million people are in a situation of extreme food insecurity, many of whom are on the brink of famine and starvation. Over 50 million children under five years old are acutely malnourished.

The consequences of malnutrition need to be unpicked if we are to address this issue robustly and sustainably. Children are particularly affected by undernutrition, with over half the deaths of children under five linked to not having enough food to eat. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are absolutely essential in building a healthy and strong immune system for their physical and intellectual development. Mothers also need access to treatment and prevention services around malnutrition to support their children from conception to when they breastfeed.

A well-nourished person is key to stronger family and community ties, as well as participation in the economy through work and having enough money to afford necessities like food.

There is no one panacea. As we have seen, the causes of life-threatening hunger are multiple, and any response will need to be adapted to the local situation and involve first and foremost local communities and national governments. However, globally, some major changes need to happen.

Firstly, no child should die from severe malnutrition when a £50 treatment with a 95 per cent cure rate exists.

Bol Gatkuoth, 40, deweeds his rice paddy in his home besides the floods.

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This takes the form of a special peanut-based paste called ‘ready-to-use therapeutic food.’ It is packed full of the nutrients and energy a child needs to ward off malnutrition. Today, only one of four severely malnourished children receives this treatment. Therefore, scaling up access to treatment is a top priority.

Secondly, the UN Security Council has been failing the world again and again; it needs to be reformed. The Security Council’s primary responsibility is to maintain international peace and security, but today it is preventing any meaningful collective response to stop conflict and violence. Hunger should not be used as a weapon, which is exactly what we are seeing in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The UN Security Council’s structure needs to be improved, so that member states are holding permanent members accountable.

Thirdly, there should be a rethink of our agri-food system with a greater focus on access to nutritious food for all rather than consistently presenting increased production as the solution. Priority should be given to local production and access to food for all. There should be greater investment in agriculture, especially agro-ecology, for small-scale farmers, so that we can create sustainable farming and harvesting practices, which take account of local experience and knowledge and minimise negative effects on the environment, the economy, and society. Financial profitability and the protection of the environment are not mutually exclusive, but need major changes to achieve nutritious, sustainable, and fair agri-food systems.

Communities like South Sudan have been affected by an unprecedented cycle of climate disasters, protracted violence, and extreme poverty, threatening more than eight million people with acute food insecurity. Floodwaters that won’t go away have ruined farm and pasture lands, displaced families, and left those in flooded villages with



Women in South Sudan using flood waters to plant rice

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few options.

Since farmland has been flooded for three years in a row, many people have had to survive by picking water lily bulbs, which have no nutritional value, and fishing in muddy floodwaters.

Now, dozens of women in Paguir are getting their feet wet learning how to plant a new crop: rice. Action Against Hunger trained community members, who in turn are training a larger group to sow the seeds for food security. It’s been a great boost of confidence for the Paguir women. Rice grown in floodwaters has actually helped the people of this area survive. If anything, the initiative has helped bring the community together. Tackling climate-change produced food insecurity requires such adaptive measures, ones that can stick in the longer run.

In terms of the treatment of life-threatening hunger, a few years ago, Action Against Hunger opened the first health services centre in the area for families in Paguir. It continues to treat malnutrition and provide access to safe water and sanitation while expanding climate adaptation efforts.

Initiatives trumpeted by the G7 or governments on protecting world food security should be followed by actions and resources, not just words until the next announcement. The G7 committed in 2015 to lift 500 million people out of food insecurity and malnutrition by 2030. Look at where we are seven years later: the situation is worse than in 2015, with a 150 per cent increase in the last two years.

The world is obviously not on track to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030, which features as the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2); all hunger indicators are in the red. Achieving SDG 2 seems more and more like a mirage unless drastic changes are made to realise sustainable futures, where a good supply of healthy and nutritious food for all is the absolute bedrock. It is up to all of us - individuals, civil society organisations, governments, and corporations—to eliminate life-threatening hunger. **CRJ**

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Nyakieth Kulang, 22, pounds rice to remove the husk.
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