



REVIEW

WAR IN UKRAINE: YET ANOTHER CRISIS FOR AFRICA

The impact of the war in Ukraine is bearing down on Africa, adding to the financial, health, food and debt crises already afflicting the continent. The true scope of new crisis cannot yet be assessed, but there is no doubt that it is making the situations of many African countries even more complex than they already were.

TEXT BY / MAURIZIO MURRU / PUBLIC HEALTH SPECIALIST

The war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia are impacting the entire world. In Africa, their consequences are joining those of other crises and mutually exacerbating one another, from the ripple impact of the 2008 global financial crisis to that of the Covid-19 pandemic, from the repercussions of severe food crises to those of the widespread debt crises that make it so difficult for many governments to take action.

CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the refugee crisis was the first of many to manifest itself. In addition to millions of internally displaced people, some 6.7 million Ukrainians have sought immediate refuge in neighboring countries, many with the intention of moving on later to other countries¹. The numerous Africans who were part of this flight faced discrimination both before and after crossing borders; at least 10,000 African students who left Ukraine have been unable to continue their studies in other European countries due to bureaucratic obstacles².

THE ENERGY CRISIS

After Russia invaded Ukraine the cost of oil soared to \$120 per barrel, later dropping back down to the current \$93³. It is still high due to both war-related anxiety and the reluctance of the OPEC countries to increase oil production, which is still about two million barrels below the pre-pandemic level⁴. While African oil-producing countries could benefit from the high cost, every other country will be harmed. In recent years Russia has supplied about 40% of the gas consumed in the European Union⁵; the need of the latter to diversify supply sources could benefit some of the African countries rich in this resource, including Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Mozambique, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola.

THE FOOD CRISIS

The food crisis is a complex issue often featured in articles containing biased and seemingly contradictory data^{6,7}. The price of food on international markets is set in dollars, a currency that recently strengthened considerably; for many countries, this meant an increase in the cost of imports, including those of food. The cost of transportation has also increased significantly; for example, the cost of sea transport alone increased by 60%⁸ between February and May 2022 (UNCTAD). It has also been claimed that the much-

feared “world food crisis” is nonexistent since our planet produces enough food for everyone on it⁹, and is being aired for purely speculative or propaganda reasons.

As Amartya Sen explained some 40 years ago, many famines occur at times when there is an abundance of food¹⁰; however, the fact that there is enough food for all does not mean that it is *available* to all. This has always been the case. Many African countries are now faced with ever worsening food crises, and the blockade of Ukraine’s ports has only exacerbated situations that are already dire due to climate change, drought and conflict, especially in the Horn of Africa. Overall, African countries import around 40% of their grain needs from Russia and Ukraine¹¹, but are now being impacted differently given the different ways each depends on its imports: Eritrea and Somalia are close to fully dependent on them; Madagascar and Egypt depend on them for over 70% of their needs; Namibia, Tanzania, Congo, Rwanda, Djibouti and others for more than 50%, and so on¹². Furthermore, half of the grain stuck in Ukrainian ports was intended for World Food Program operations in Africa.¹³

REBUILD AFRICAN AGRICULTURE?

Given that Africa contains 60% of our planet’s remaining arable land, the African Development Bank has allocated \$1.5 billion to find a solution, through investment and funding, to the food crisis plaguing the continent, with an increase in agricultural production and improved distribution¹⁴. The war in Ukraine has given a boost to such initiatives, ideas and objectives, including one that advocates for increased production of traditional grains such as fonio, sorghum, teff and millet, which are nutritionally rich and well-suited to the climate of many African countries¹⁵. But these are ideas for the future; in the immediate term, millions of people – estimates range from 20 to 50 million – are at risk of hunger in the Horn of Africa alone, an area now entering its fifth consecutive year of severe drought¹⁶. The crisis in Ukraine has indirectly aggravated the situation, with many donor countries now allocating funds there rather than crises in poorer countries in Africa and elsewhere^{17,18,19}. It is worth recalling that rising food prices were the spark that ignited the Arab Spring in 2011.

WAR AND DIPLOMACY

The war in Ukraine has only hastened the “scramble for Africa” that was already underway to secure both access to its vast nat-

ural resources and diplomatic backing from its 54 nations. In late July, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov began a tour that took him to Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Republic of Congo, during which he reiterated that one of the objectives of Russia's "special military operation" is to counter the West's global hegemonic plan. He also claimed that the blockade of Ukrainian and Russian grain exports was due not to the war, but rather to the sanctions imposed on Russia²⁰. Almost at the same time, French President Macron visited Cameroon, Benin and Guinea Bissau²¹ and, in a long-distance diplomatic battle, called Russia the "last colonial empire"²², while President Biden announced that a long-awaited summit with African leaders would take place in Washington DC in December 2022. Lavrov then announced in Cairo that the second Russia-Africa summit would take place next year, while U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken flew to Johannesburg, South Africa, to start his second African tour, including visits to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. In the following weeks a U.S. congressional delegation visited both Mozambique²³ and Macron²⁴. China and Japan are also going to great lengths in this regard, with conferences, debt forgiveness and various other promises^{25, 26, 27}.

NEW COLD WAR DIVISIONS IN AFRICA?

The war in Ukraine is once again dividing the continent into two

NOTES

- 1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ukraine Situation, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/ukraine-situation> consultato il 23 Agosto 2022.
- 2 Al Jazeera, May 13th 2022, Across Europe, African students fight to study after Ukraine exit, Across Europe, African students fight to study after Ukraine exit | Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera.
- 3 Tradingeconomics.com, <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/crude-oil>, consultato il 27 Agosto 2022.
- 4 British Broadcasting Corporation, August 4th 2022, Oil prices have soared. Why won't OPEC bring them down?, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61188579>
- 5 Selectra, Europa dipendenza da gas russo: abbassare di 3 gradi il riscaldamento aumenterà l'indipendenza del continente europeo?, Europa Dipendenza Gas Russo: qual è la situazione oggi? (selectra.net)
- 6 The Guardian, August 24th 2022, Food price rises around the world are result of broken system, say experts, Food price rises around the world are result of 'broken' system, say experts | Environment | The Guardian.
- 7 The Economist, August 22nd 2022, Against expectations, food prices have tumbled, Against expectations, global food prices have tumbled | The Economist.
- 8 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), June 28th 2022, Maritime trade disrupted, The war in Ukraine and its effects on maritime trade logistics, Maritime Trade Disrupted: The war in Ukraine and its effects on maritime trade logistics (unctad.org).
- 9 Federico Fubini, 23 Agosto 2022, Corriere della Sera, La crisi alimentare mondiale è un allarme infondato, Corriere.it
- 10 Sen A, Hunger and Entitlements, World Institute for Economic Development and Research, United Nations University, 1987, WIDER RESEARCH FOR ACTION-1 Hunger and Entitlements (unu.edu).
- 11 Il Manifesto, 4 Giugno 2022, Mancano grano e fertilizzanti "Africa vittima della guerra" | il manifesto.
- 12 The Economist, July 28th 2022, Will the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine reduce global hunger? | The Economist
- 13 Atlante delle Guerre e dei Conflitti nel mondo: 2 Agosto 2022, Dossier / La questione del grano, Dossier/ La questione grano – atlante guerre
- 14 Devex, July 27th 2022, A food crisis in Africa "can be averted", AfDB Chief Economist says, A food crisis in Africa "can be averted," AfDB chief economist says | Devex.
- 15 Deutsche Welle, June 29th 2022, With vast arabal lands, why does Africa need to import grain? | World | Breaking news and perspectives from around the globe | DW | 29.06.2022

blocs, one aligned with Western positions and the other with Russia and China. Regardless of the positions of individual governments, people in many countries – even those aligned with the West – seem more inclined to fault the United States and Europe for hypocrisy and double standards than to share their positions²⁸.

The very different treatment of Ukrainians and Africans fleeing Ukraine, the diversion of funds from development aid to aid to Ukraine, both military and otherwise, and the West's focus on this war versus its indifference to the many conflicts in Africa, are all well-founded reasons for skepticism by many in African countries. In addition, the memory of the Soviet Union's support for many African wars of liberation from colonialism is still very much alive; not surprisingly, Lavrov recently stated Russia's intention to help Africa "complete the process of decolonization".

In conclusion, the consequences of the war in Ukraine are making themselves felt worldwide, Africa included. It will take time to assess their magnitude both in a positive sense, for the oil- and gas-producing countries, and in a negative one: high inflation, the energy and food crises, cuts in international aid, and years of education lost by thousands of African students. What we can say already with 100% certainty is that this war, like nearly all wars, will create more problems, direct and indirect alike, in both Africa and the rest of the world, than it can ever solve.

- 16 UN News, August 26th 2022, WMO: greater Horn of Africa drought forecast to continue for fifth year, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/1125552>
- 17 The Guardian, August 20th 2022, Horn of Africa drought places 22 million people at risk of starvation, says UN, 'Horn%20of%20Africa%20drought%20places%2022%20million,risk%20of%20starvation%2C%20says%20UN&text=The%20number%20of%20people%20at,food%20programme%20(WFP)%20says.
- 18 OXFAM, March 22nd 2022, As many as 28 million people across East Africa at risk of extreme hunger if rains fail again | Oxfam International.
- 19 Oxfam International, March 18th 2022, Some governments contemplating raids on aid funds earmarked for other crises to pay for new costs of Ukrainian support | Oxfam International.
- 20 ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale), 25 Luglio 2022, Lavrov in tour in Africa, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lavrov-tour-africa-35871>
- 21 France 24, Macron embarks in African visit to "renew relationship" with continent, Macron embarks on African visit to 'renew relationship' with continent (france24.com).
- 22 Institute of Security Studies, July 29th 2022, Lavrov's African safari was not routine, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lavrovs-african-safari-was-not-routine>
- 23 United States Embassy in Mozambique, August 17th 2022, United States Congressional Delegation visits Mozambique, <https://mz.usembassy.gov/u-s-united-states-congressional-delegation-visits-mozambique/#:~:text=August%2017%2C%202022%20%E2%80%93%20From%20August,conservation%2C%20business%2C%20and%20health>
- 24 Le Monde, 25 Aout 2022, Emmanuel Macron et l'Algérie, une longue histoire contrariée, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/08/25/emmanuel-macron-et-l-algerie-une-longue-histoire-contrariee_6138955_3212.html
- 25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 19th 2022, China and Africa: Strengthening Friendship, Solidarity and Cooperation for a New Era of Common Development, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220819_10745617.html
- 26 Nikkei Asia, March 28th 2022, Japan vows to boost post-covid development cooperation with Africa - Nikkei Asia.
- 27 Africanews, August 27th 2022, African and Japanese delegates meet to promote continent's growth, African and Japanese delegates meet to promote continent's growth | Africanews.
- 28 Nikkei Asia, June 15th 2022, Not everyone sees Ukraine as the main issue, Not everyone sees Ukraine as the main issue - Nikkei Asia.