

Transcript Interview Prof. Haroon Akhram-Lodi

The historically unparalleled rises in food prices reflects some other factors that are at work. There is a decline in food availability, and this is because Ukraine and Russia are very significant exporters of a number of important crops such as wheat, but also barley, also sunflower oil and other crops.

And there are many countries which are heavily reliant upon food imports. There are 35 sub-Saharan African countries who are net importers of food, and many of these are very reliant on imports from Russia and or Ukraine. A country like Lebanon relies on imports from Russia and Ukraine for 70% of its wheat imports. Turkey is similarly very heavily reliant upon Russian wheat imports. So there are many countries which are heavily import dependent upon grains and oils from Russia and Ukraine, which they now cannot obtain.

And even if they could, the price has gone up. So there's been a decline in food availability. There's also been an increase in fuel prices because of the war in Ukraine. And the thing about modern industrial agriculture, it's incredibly hydrocarbon intensive. And this is not just in front production, but it's also in transport, in processing and in distribution. And so rising fuel prices feed into increased costs for farmers, making it more difficult for them to meet their own costs with the prices that they're getting. At the same time, fuel is very important in the production of fertilizers, particularly gas.

And the production of fertilizers has also become heavily constrained by the energy crisis that has emerged from the war in Ukraine. Fertilizer prices have jumped in the Extreme, and Russia is a very significant exporter of fertilizers to many countries, and so many farmers are unable to get fertilizers, and when they can get fertilizers, they are paying far more money for them.

Another way in which the war in Ukraine is affecting food prices is that much of the grain, which is exported from Ukraine and from Russia, is not used to feed people, but is used to feed animals. And because that grain has become more expensive, what this means is that meat prices will go up. And with meat prices going up, particularly in places like Western

Europe, north America, Australia and Japan, this will put a squeeze on people's living standards.

The final way in which the war in Ukraine impacts upon the food system is through labor. Ukrainian farm workers are extremely important in European Union and British farm production. In the United Kingdom, for example, two-thirds of migrant labor come from Ukraine. In Poland, it's more than half of all migrant labor comes from Ukraine. None of this labor is forthcoming anymore because of the war.

We have to ask ourselves why have countries become so food import dependent? And this is because since the mid 1990s in particular, the way in which countries achieve food security is by the buying and selling of food on globalized markets.

In order for the buying and selling of food on globalized markets to work, there has to be food to be able to be bought and sold. And if that food is not available there is no resilience in the food system to accommodate this kind of a crisis. So the war in Ukraine, by affecting the ability to buy and sell food, has really thrown into very sharp relief the way in which a globalized world food system lacks resilience in the face of a crisis.

I highlighted particular elements of those structural characteristics. The first was the extent of Corporate concentration in the food system. That, in terms of food retailing, in terms of food trading, in terms of agro input suppliers, there is very heavy market concentration in the global food system. And this means that when one supplier has difficulty achieving their production objectives, this very quickly spreads throughout the food system. So if a fertilizer maker has trouble producing the fertilizer that is required in the food system, there is no slack elsewhere because there's so few companies involved in the system.

Second point is that the food system is one in which there has been a global homogenization of diets as a consequence of this process of globalization. And this is reflected in the role of grain going into animal feed and meat consumption. We've seen increased motification of diets and an increased diversion of grain into feeding animals has become far more meat intensive. But again, when animals require so much of this feed, this builds in a lack of resilience into the food system. Along with the global homogenization of diets, we've also seen a situation in which there's a rise in various forms of malnutrition.

Malnutrition is not just being hungry; malnutrition is being overweight and being obese. And if we add the hungry of the world, the overweight of the world, and those who suffer from micronutrient deficiencies, something out like seven out of every 10 people in the world are malnourished. Even though we have a food system which generates huge amounts of food production. And I think seven out of 10 people being malnourished in one way or another is a stinging indictment of the failures of a more globalized food system. At the same time, the food system, because of its hydrocarbon dependence, which I already noted, is very strongly implicated in climate change.

Something on the order of over 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions emerge from global agriculture. And these are going up. This means then that the globalized food system is undermining the very biophysical foundations by which farming takes place making farming more difficult over time. And the way in which the large corporations involved in the food system deal with this is by applying ever more larger quantities of fertilizers, ever more larger quantities of pesticides and engineering seeds to work better in soils which are increasingly denuded of micronutrients.

So the way that I would put it is this, that the food crisis, which has been engendered by the war in Ukraine is in fact a symptom of a much deeper malaise. A malaise, which is a function of an increasingly globalized food system, strongly dominated by large corporate entities and which contributes to poor health and climate change at the same time.

And we have to address some of these underlying conditions if in fact we're going to deal with the more fundamental problems of the food system. We may be living through a food price crisis, but there is not a crisis of global production. So why is the threat of increased food insecurity looming over so many people? And that threat can only be understood by understanding the more structural challenges that we face in the world food system.

Of course, that is a very, very big question.

What can be done, and all one can really do in the sort of time that we have is, is indicate the broad strokes of what is possible. The way in which you shop won't change the world. There are more fundamental forces at work that have to be addressed, and certainly eaters have to

become much more aware of those more fundamental forces because it will change the way in which they purchase the food that they consume. And this can be done in a way which brings more benefit to certain types of farmers.

But the more fundamental problems of the world food system require a transformation in the terms and conditions by which the world food system operates. Now that transformation is one in which rather than warming the planet, the food system should be designed and arranged and organized in a way that cools the planet. And what this in turn suggests is that rather than having a model of farm production and food consumption, which is based upon extracting nutrients from the ecosystem, we should have a model of farm production and food consumption, which is built around regenerating and restoring micronutrients in the food system because then they can act as a carbon sink.

So what this means is we need to shift our food production methodologies away from more industrial agricultural methods to something which, goes by the name of agroecological production methodologies and practices. Agroecological production methods and methodologies do not try and adapt landscapes to the needs of farming. Agroecological production methods and practices work with landscapes, in order to adapt farming practice to suit the ecology within which the farming takes place. And that's very different than contemporary industrial agriculture. Agroecology is not the same as organic agriculture. And this is important because a lot of organic agriculture, particularly in the United States, is being captured by corporate interests.

Agroecological farming practices use limited numbers of external inputs in order to sustain and maintain soil health. Soil health is the purpose of production. At the same time, agroecological farming methods are methods which are designed to produce a wider variety of crops of greater nutritional content in ways which are more labor intensive than current industrial farming methodologies. So agroecological farming systems are really designed around small and medium scale farms, not the large-scale farms which dominate industrial agriculture. Those farms do not rely upon monocultures the way industrial agricultural farms do, but rather on polycultures.

So a diversity of crops both for own use and for market sales are being produced. There're many successful examples of agroecological farming practices being applied around the

world. If we look to the Indian state of *Andhra Pradesh*, a system of agroecological farming called the system of rice intensification, has produced the highest yields of rice production of any form of farm methodology known to us at all. And this has been done in, a farming methodology, which is completely the opposite of industrial rice production methods in which plants are spaced. They're not watered as intensively.

Soil maintenance is paid far more close attention to and production is very, very labor intensive. We also have seen system of rice intensification experiments scaled up in West Africa, bringing livelihood improvements to many people in the region.

The point about agroecological farming practices as a way of transforming the food system is that although in some places, they don't work in many places they have, in many places they are as productive and as profitable, for farmers as industrial farming methodologies. In some locations, they are more productive and more profitable than industrial agricultural production methodologies. And yet at the same time, almost no agricultural research funding is allocated towards agroecological farming methods. More than 95% of all research funding goes to industrial agriculture. So if more money was spent on doing research into agroecological farming methods, I think it's perfectly feasible that smaller and medium scale farms, which are far more climate friendly, can produce more than enough calories to feed the world adequately. So that's the kind of farming system that's required, but that kind of farming system will only come about when civil society engages in organized politics with the state.

We need movements for food system transformation, and those movements should be led by small and medium scale farmers as exemplified by La Via Campesina, the global peasant movement, which has more than 200 million affiliated members, uh, in its organizations and which makes it the largest social movement in the world. That producer organization can ally itself with civil society groups who are urban. For example, here in Canada, the National Farmers' Union, which is the Canadian affiliate of La Via Campesina does allow associate members who are not farmers to become members of the organization. They're not given voting rights because they're not farmers, but they can still shape how the organization operates.

So I am a member of the National Farmer's Union, even though I live in the center of a city and I do not farm. This is a way of creating alliances between urban eaters and rural farmers of a small and medium variety so that we can work together to try and pressure our governments into transforming the food system. This is a very difficult thing to do though, because the dominant strain of agricultural policy by governments in Western Europe and North America, Australia is to foster increases in agricultural exports to try and become agricultural exporting superpowers. And so the grain of government policy is completely against a more sustainable agricultural system.

So we need to pressurize our governments to think about changing the way in which agricultural policy operates and for whose benefit it operates. Allied together, rather than focusing upon national governments should really focus upon trying to foster change in the jurisdictional level that is closest to them where there is fiscal capacity. Now, what I mean by this is the closest level of government which has significant spending ability. So if it's a municipality, if a municipality has significant spending ability, then you need to pressure municipality into altering the food and agricultural policy for the municipality if it's a district government that has significant spending capacity and to get the district government to alter its spending to enhance a more sustainable agroecological farming practices and more sustainable food consumption practices as well.

The point I'm trying to make here is the way in which civil society, whether farmers or eaters influence policies, is by pressurizing local politics rather than politics and distant capitals who can be far more unresponsive to what people want.

What we saw during the food price crisis of 2007 to 2011 was that governments prioritize their own people first. What we saw during the Covid 19 pandemic was that governments prioritize their own people first, and they do not engage in cooperative behavior on a global scale. That's the reason why there continues to be a lack of adequate vaccination in, for example, sub-Saharan Africa.

Unfortunately, the food insecurities that are immediately engendered by the war in Ukraine are not going to necessarily result in any significant policy interventions designed to ameliorate the conditions facing food insecure populations, particularly in the Horn of Africa, which is extremely food insecure, as well as in parts of Eastern and southern Africa.

Now, governments are going to give all sorts of reasons as to why they cannot address this problem. The fundamental reason, however, is unfortunately the fact that the world doesn't care about Africa, and they don't care if Africans die from a lack of food. If the world and world governments cared, they would start diverting food from being used as feed to those populations that are food insecure.

But that would require intervening in food markets in a way that Western European, North American and Australian governments are simply not prepared to do. They're not prepared to do it. They're not even prepared to increase funding to the World Food Program, which is the UN's humanitarian arm designed to deal with food emergencies. But the truth of the matter is that the increase in the food price has reduced the world food program's ability to meet the crisis because the World Food Program has to pay more for the food which it's trying to supply for humanitarian reasons.

I don't expect very much to be done at all, quite honestly, I just don't think the political will in Western Europe or North America is sufficient to adequately address the problem whether or not civil society then takes it into their own hands as we saw an attempt, however flawed in the early 1980s civil society in the form of the Live Aid concert and things of that type, however flawed that may have been with governments doing nothing. People try to do something whether we'll see that, I don't know. But what happened in the early 1980s, again, you know, there was still many, many people who died because famine relief is not something that you can wait to do. It's something that's needed here, now and immediately if you want to stop things from getting worse.

I'm unfortunately very cynical and pessimistic about this, and the fundamental reason as I said, is that the world does not care.