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The impact of the 2007-2008 food security crisis: the uncounted social and economic cost of resilience

At the peak of the recent [food security crisis](#), in 2008, when food prices had increased in 'real terms' by more than 50% (around 75% in [current or nominal prices](#)) according to FAO, food and agriculture made their return on the international agenda, while several high level meetings were organised and initiatives launched to address the crisis. FAO estimated then that the number of food insecure in the world had increased, because of the crisis, by almost 200 million to cross a total estimated number of one billion. At the same time World Bank estimated that the number of poor in world had increased by several hundred million.



Now that things are back to almost 'normal' and that the 'real' FAO food price index is around 15% above pre-crisis levels (40% in current prices), the general impression given by international indicators is that everything is back on track: FAO's estimates of the number of food insecure are following a regularly decreasing trend in which the increase due to the crisis can hardly be seen [\[read\]](#). Same can be said for the World Bank's estimate of the number of poor [\[read\]](#).

Does this macro-picture really correspond to reality?

A four year collaboration between the [Institute of Development Studies](#), Brighton, UK and [Oxfam Great Britain](#) *'explored the everyday aspects of people's lives, as they responded to this change in prices'* in 23 sites in ten countries, to realise that the crisis had a deep and lasting impact and that it contributed to accelerate the already on-going process of globalisation and market integration of the world population, thus making their lives more precarious and affecting fundamentally their eating habits, undermining in the process some of the basic mechanisms on which traditional societies had hitherto relied. As people faced *'low and uncertain incomes'*, they made *'dramatic adjustments'* in their lives: these adjustments and changes are the *'uncounted ... costs of resilience to [the] food crisis'*.

The core finding of the study, [Precarious Lives: Food, Work and Care after the Global Food Crisis](#), was that *'sudden and sustained rises in the price of basic daily needs introduced change in patterns of everyday life via two universal mechanisms: (1) an immediate and sustained pressure to earn more cash to meet the rising costs of relatively inelastic needs, and (2) similar magnitudes of pressure to extract more value from whatever was consumed'*. People entered *'a period of particularly rapid and disruptive social and economic change when more domains of human life and effort [were] being drawn into markets, adjusting to new patterns of work, life and diet'*.

To survive this particular period, people has to find work that paid more, even if they had never done this type of work before and if it was *'dangerous or insecure, or even illegal'*, and an increasing share of their labour was exchanged to earn cash, basically to purchase food. But because there was a lag between price increase and increase of wages, and because jobs were largely uncertain and temporary, people cut *'out more expensive items and [replaced] them with filling foods, sacrificing safety, taste and familiarity for volume and price'*. Many people had to move *'towards more processed, packaged and purchased foods of different types'*, because, working more, they did not have sufficient time left for buying and cooking fresh food and feed and take care of their children. Consuming this type of food was also felt to create *'status and identity'*. This change was made easier because processed foods purchased were often industrial foods with high sugar, fat and salt content that are known to be of an *'addictive nature (particularly for young people)'*. Evidently, this change in the way people eat has huge implications on the way their life is organised, implications that have already been observed for decades in richer countries. As a consequence, traditional locally produced foods saw demand for them drop (e.g. sorghum, millet, teff and quinoa) while demand for global food commodities increased (e.g. maize, rice and wheat). Change in food consumption habits also means that less meals are taken together which, with time, can loosen family ties and that there may be some loss of control of parents over children. Another implication is that a greater value is given to well-paid labour, rather than to labour that traditionally was appreciated because of the skills it requires. Consequently, unpaid labour (e.g. subsistence farming, caring for children, the sick and the elderly, or environmental services) is now decreasingly considered and this has important potential implications on social cohesion.

The authors do not believe that *'the food crisis or the period of high and more volatile food prices that followed caused all these changes'*. Rather, they believe that *'these events and changing relative prices acted as accelerants and catalysts, pushing more people faster down pathways that were already available, and which quickly became familiar and well-trodden routes to development and marketised, modern life'*.

While rural areas saw *'rapid and significant economic diversification and growth as they adjusted to higher prices'*, in urban areas, *'city folk appeared to be pursuing much the*

same livelihoods they were doing before the food crisis, but now they had to simply do more of them, with work becoming more intermittent and unpredictable. Among other changes observed, authors note that in all study sites, *'seasonal and temporary migration increased'* and in many places default rates in microfinance schemes went up.

Among their recommendations on how to deal with the changes observed, the authors call for *'a broad and confident approach to social protection that protects labour against exploitation and high risk, and protects subsistence, so that bad food, dangerous and demeaning occupations, and strained care are no longer necessary elements of resilience in the face of global economic development'*.

In our view, at hungerexplained.org, this report will certainly be an eye-opener for many on the very fundamental changes the occurrence of the food crisis has contributed to accelerate, and IDS/Oxfam should be congratulated for having undertaken this four year research. It gives a quite new perspective to the impact of the food crisis the implications of which, in terms of economic and social policy, health and social cohesion will need to be further explored. It shows that, behind the beautiful picture given by world indicators published by international organisations, structural changes are taking place that create more economic vulnerability, health hazards and, as the structure of societies changes, potential social and political time bombs.

One may however regret that the findings the IDS/Oxfam report presents are perhaps not sufficiently supported by quantitative data and that they rest mainly on case studies, sometimes even individual stories whose representativeness is not clear. One can hope that IDS and Oxfam will find the resources needed to pursue this essential work and that their results will influence decision makers at national and international level.

To know more:

- Scott-Villiers, P.; Chisholm, N.; Wanjiku Kelbert, A. and Hossain, N. [Precarious Lives: Food, Work and Care after the Global Food Crisis](#), Brighton: IDS and Oxfam International, 2016.

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [Facts and figures on world hunger](#), 2015
- [The latest report on the State of World Food Insecurity admits that the Millenium Development Goal 1 to reduce hunger by half will not be achieved](#) , 2015
- [Food crises: A consequence of disastrous economic policies](#), 2013.