

Think

new things

Make

new connections

Conference Summary:

A Hungry World on the move: the impact of the food crisis on migration and how we must respond

13-14 October 2022

DITCHILEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context and why this was important

This hybrid conference took place nine months into Russia's war with Ukraine and at least a year into an unfolding famine in East Africa. As well as refugees, the war has created blockades and disruption to trade in wheat, grain and fertilisers from Ukraine and Russia, impacting on many East African countries. With much of the world's attention on war in Europe, the growing food crisis in East Africa has not got the public attention needed to drive an effective humanitarian response to avert a large-scale famine.

Why is it so difficult to capture the world's attention when famine is looming? Why is media interest dormant until a famine is unfolding, and people are dying? These questions framed a one-day workshop held jointly with Oxfam GB the previous week (4th October 2022) as part of Oxfam's commemoration of its 80th anniversary. **Food insecurity: predict, prepare and share to avoid sleepwalking into future crises**, asked why famine prevention is so difficult when measures that must be taken to save lives are known.

The workshop highlighted the way in which media reporting has changed, so that social media engagement and multi-media story telling is now a major part of global public communication. Have the major (now ageing) humanitarian charities kept pace with this evolution in modern media communication? The discussion raised questions about whether the institutional architecture of humanitarian and disaster relief remains fit for purpose. The concept of charity itself as a core response to disaster seems wholly inadequate in the modern world. And the distinction made between money for humanitarian relief vs funding for development was described as limiting.

The world responded to tackle the Covid 19 virus with huge investment in vaccine programmes and action was taken to support Ukrainian refugees in Europe. But it seems the world cannot act collectively to prevent famine in East Africa. Nor can it prepare for a likely increase in refugees and for changing patterns of migration in response to crises wrought by climate change, more conflict and economic disruption.

The World Food Programme estimates that the numbers of people facing acute food insecurity, on the edge of famine, have risen from 135 million before the pandemic to 345 million in 2022. For this conference, **A Hungry World on the move: the impact of the food crisis on migration and how we must respond (13-14 October)**, food insecurity was a way in to a discussion of the deeper trends and longer-term impacts of global migration.

People

With around 40 participants, some online and others in person, this hybrid conference gathered a wide range of different perspectives on migration including academic and demographic expertise from the UK, US, Australia, France and Germany; those working with migrants for various NGOs and UN agencies; serving politicians from the UK and Italy; a city official from Poland; thinktank specialists, businesses, consultants, agencies supporting migrant recruitment, and journalists.

Analysis

With thanks to Meghan Benton – Conference Rapporteur

This conference began with a discussion of the connection between food insecurity and migration. Historically, famine can be seen to have triggered movements of people where mobility has been an

adaptive medium-term response to food insecurity and drought, and where food insecurity has multiplied other displacement factors such as economic collapse, corrupt governance, failing healthcare and conflict. Climate change is a new and 'mega backdrop' to all these factors, intensifying their impacts and combining to produce complex timelines of short-term symptoms and longer-term dangers. The impact of climate change on both food insecurity and migration will dominate and necessarily inform the full scope of policy action in the coming years. Dealing with climate impacts could though change perspectives away from a prevailing north/south dichotomy. All countries have a stake in managing food and water security, migration and climate impacts, and combining all three in policy.

This north/south divide has shaped a public and political debate in which the interests of the global north have tended to determine perspectives on migration. To date, food insecurity and famine has not attracted enough media attention (to drive global action). In contrast, illegal immigration is prominent: border crises, migrant camps and boat crossings dominate the headlines. Failure to control illegal migration is destabilising and over-determining the political and public debate excluding other ways of considering the future of migration, i.e. in response to labour market need in relation to energy transitions or to future food production. Discussion of migration could be better tailored to relate to different interests whether policy makers, private sector and public audiences. But debate also needs to be more honest about where universal human rights and burden-sharing arguments lead and their limits. Are there moments during which public opinion shifts, for example did the huge response from citizens across Europe to the plight of Ukrainian refugees and the hosting of refugees in homes mark a change in public attitude? Similarly, a strategic response to migration in terms of wider geopolitical or security policies would also recast policies towards migration and draw in new policy perspectives and sources of funds. Does the current moment of labour shortages in developed economies provide an opportunity to rethink approaches to migration with the private sector, leading to new kinds of labour pathways? Examples of successful local bottom-up responses at city level highlighted new approaches in which communities (rather than governments or UN agencies) took the lead and determined for themselves both the scale of support they could offer refugees and how it was done.

There was debate about terminology and definitions (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants) and whether the current global protection system is fit for purpose especially in recognising the multiple factors that cause human displacement. What is emerging is a huge grey area of protection needs. Some advocate for the category of 'climate migrant' or refugee but there was also concern that this would dilute the legal protection of refugee status and risk further political backlash. Others pointed to the innovation that there has been in large-scale temporary protection in Europe and South America and community sponsorship-like schemes in the US and UK. There was no clear view as to whether the response to Ukrainian refugees marked a change and a potential blueprint for future reform. But the response, especially from neighbouring countries to regional migration, was seen by some as a gateway, opening up new avenues for community action, employer sponsorship and the direct integration of refugees into delivering their own systems support.

There was some discussion of the ways territorial asylum is being tested by initiatives like the UK-Rwanda deal and Title 42, but it was noted that that asylum is not a means of addressing food insecurity, given that only a minority can take advantage of asylum routes and that food insecurity can also lead to forced immobility. The greater need is to stretch the global protection system in ways that focus on broader displacement needs and expand opportunities for those locked in place or displaced within their regions.

Migration in the context of demographic change was raised and served to highlight the inadequacy of short-term crisis thinking. Where is the recognition of the impact of ageing and shrinking western populations? What is the consequence of not allowing people options of mobility? It was pointed

out that population growth has been less than the growth in global food output: distribution is therefore the major challenge. A focus on immediate crises must go hand in hand with the development of better systems to withstand future shocks. Uses of technology and data are already a part of systems of early warning of food insecurity and will have a greater role in the development of resilient supply chains and food production. Technology innovations in border controls and people tracking are liable to be deployed for more sinister purposes by governments.

Alongside demographic change and uses of technology are the largescale changes in the labour markets of developed economies and in the future of work. Significant labour shortages in developed economies are manifest at the same time as the geography of work is undergoing a shift. It is now possible to find work abroad without the need to relocate, i.e. opportunities to migrate without moving. This new reality presents a new lens for migration policies to connect thinking about remote livelihoods and skills training with new kinds of refugee labour pathways and, for example, mobility agreements within regions and within a south-south context. The mindset shift required is to move away from a paternalistic response - how do we help people? - to a response that is more about empowerment - how can people regain agency and autonomy? Instead of the current humanitarian approach in which 'people are treated as a compilation of their vulnerabilities' how can a system better invest in people's agency in support of their own solutions and livelihoods?

Despite the range of expertise, much of the discussion in this conference focused on European or western preoccupations. There was not much discussion of by far the largest migration trends and impact of the mega refugee camps found in places such as Jordan, Kenya, Bangladesh, Sudan and Turkey which hold many millions of people.

FULL REPORT

What is going to be the impact of the growing food crisis on migration? How can we prepare in order to mitigate suffering and disorderly migration?

Inevitably the conference began with a discussion of definitions and the recognition that the generic term 'migrant' does not cover the multiple motivations for migration, including the impact of food insecurity. There is no terminology to cover migration for survival in the face of, for example, food shortages caused by slower onset climate impacts such as underlying drought. However, new definitions were considered to risk diluting the legal protections and status afforded to 'refugees'. Instead of new categories between 'migrants' and 'refugees' a concept of 'displacement' was put forward. This would help to recognise people who are forced to move for reasons beyond their control. Forced displacement as a result of climate impacts is a growing phenomenon and the world is witnessing new levels of human displacement.

Food insecurity is a driver of migration but there are two caveats: firstly, food insecurity can also lead to forced immobilisation and secondly, global food production was said to have outpaced global population increase. These observations, if true, throw into sharp relief the challenges of local production of food to meet the needs of people where they are, food distribution, and the capability of institutions and global governance to enable the world to respond effectively in times of crisis.

Historically, people have always moved as a means of adapting to changes in environment. In response to failed harvests for example, pastoralists moved on. From this perspective, national borders can be seen to run counter to ancient, traditional and successful ways of life. In addition, competition over land-use is coming from new directions. Moves towards reforestation in support of carbon offsetting, for example, can conflict with a need for arable land for food production. In other words, there are risks that some mitigation and adaptation measures the world wants to see could have negative effects for the poorest.

Inevitably again, the conference Terms of Reference were challenged, the charge made that migration was presented as unavoidably problematic. Instead, the positive case for migration and

the contribution migrants make to all developed democracies was emphasised. However, there is a yawning gulf between positive assessments and the political and public concern over irregular migration. The political salience of the issue adversely impacts on an open, honest and strategic assessment of future migration trends and what policy responses will be. There was some consensus that an expansion of legal migration would solve some of the problems of illegal migration, but also a recognition that the scale and shape of future migration may render the current approaches obsolete whether these are by national governments, humanitarian and NGO-led or development based. The raw politics speaks to genuine fears of future challenges.

Conference working groups discussed three areas: *humanitarian responses: current approaches and future need*; *the economics of migration and North/South relations* and *the politics of migration*, with the question of how to work on the politics being pivotal to solutions in the first two.

Humanitarian responses: current approaches and future need

The vulnerability of the global food system to shocks has been demonstrated. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent shortages in supply are exacerbating starvation risks and have revealed the brittleness of the system. As well as meeting emergency needs, the challenge for humanitarian responses is to also support longer term development goals. Can food systems be made resilient to shocks and increase food security longer-term? The effectiveness of the current mix of global institutions and NGOs were challenged. What form will a next generation of institutions that prevent famines and dangerous food insecurity take? Where will the moral leadership come from? Strong arguments were made for new legal pathways to support displaced people to receive forms of official recognition and entry to formal labour markets. Humanitarian support along migration routes would help to provide for basic needs as people travel.

From a humanitarian perspective, the mish mash of hesitant humanitarianism combined with poorly managed illegal migration combines to produce the worst outcomes for all. Unabashed, strengthened and newly imagined humanitarian responses including direct financing for refugees must be separated from state weakness over border controls, poor asylum processes and backlogs. For some, the concept of humanitarian relief now needs to be replaced with stronger goals based on a concept of global protection.

The economics of migration and North/South relations and the politics of migration

On the economic side, it was noted that human mobility is restricted whilst movement of goods as part of globalisation is less so (although this is changing). Freedom of movement as well as free access to goods and culture was part of the vision of post-war prosperity. Collective long-term prosperity requires greater mobility and the risks of labour shortages across developed economies were striking. The ability of some people to move is a mark of wider inequalities. The freedom of elites from both north and south to move, stands in contrast to those in both hemispheres who are less able to do so. New labour pathways have the potential to change at least part of the picture on migration. Remittances are a major part of the economics of migration and worth much more than development finance.

What changes are needed for multilateral institutions to support the provision of 'global public goods', i.e. goods beyond the scope of single countries and essential for both rich and poor countries: the natural environment; a stable climate; clean air and water – goods protected by multilateral institutions.

The politics of migration

The politics of migration is unbalanced with highly visible and emotive illegal migration outweighing the less visible and under-debated needs of labour markets. The crisis and failure of states to deal with illegal immigration has overwhelmed the wider political debate about what kinds of migration

countries need. It has also made humanitarian responses more fraught. Despite some variation, there is a broadly non-partisan penalising tone in policy reflected in complex asylum and visa systems and severe backlogs in administration. Such bureaucratic friction has become normalised across many developed democracies. Disincentivising all processes for migration appears an inherent part of policy, whilst overseas recruitment drives for skilled staff for health and social care take place away from the media spotlight. Honest public debate is closed down by accusations of racism on one hand and disingenuous politics on the other.

Attitudes to migration are tied to perceived levels of prosperity. The arrival of 1 million refugees into Germany in 2015 was said to have had relatively little political impact and these refugees have largely been integrated into German society. The more recent acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in a context of rising energy and food prices and political tensions has caused more disquiet and yet there remain very significant shortages in the German labour market.

Effective bottom up, community and city scale response to migration was demonstrated by a city in Poland close to the border with Ukraine. The city delivered a local response to refugees from across the border not just to provide shelter to very large numbers but also to integrate refugees into the city whilst respecting identity and language. Refugee teachers were employed for children in schools. Public services such as libraries were adapted. School books were published and printed in Ukrainian and ways were found to support people to work. Local responses were based on communities determining their capacity for accepting refugees and the approaches to doing so. The city reported these achievements despite the lack of national government or multilateral support from UN agencies.

Climate change, demographics, labour markets and future of work, and north/south partnership

Climate change impacts on land, food and water will shape future migration and test the limits of humanitarian responses and global protection. Climate change forms the backdrop to much policy. At the same time, the limits to current humanitarian practices should be recognised and delivery reformed. Current humanitarianism does not equal global protection – can protection be extended and in what ways?

Labour market shortages and demographics change are combining to present economic and social challenges. The extent of labour shortages in developed economies is striking with, for example, the need for around 400,000 new workers a year in Germany.

However, assumptions that demographic mismatch can be addressed by meeting shortages in the global north with surpluses in the global south were described as mistaken. Current debates about migration are overwhelmingly presented with interests of the global north uppermost. The impacts of within-region migration (by far the largest form of migration) receive much less public attention. Assumptions that migration flows can be turned up or down to suit developed economies and that migrant labour will always be available when needed are too easy to make. Neither technological advances nor environmental resource constraints will be enough to counter the impacts of labour shortages caused by demographic change. The impact of too few workers will be felt especially in health and social care.

Africa is a continent rich in resources but with poor populations. Demographic transformations in Africa will also change the geopolitical map. It was suggested that Euro-centric approaches have much to learn from the experience of migration across regions within Africa. Like the example of the city in Poland, regional solidarity could possibly lead greater global solidarity. There must, in future, be much more north/south cooperation over the development of future labour markets. The prospects of new labour pathways, innovative training, skills development and cross border

employment could change the landscape. Meanwhile, China's development banks are lending more than twice as much for infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa than the US, UK, Japan and Germany combined. There is a deeper challenge here for western democratic nations.

Topics and issues to be carried forward at future Ditchley events:

- Global food insecurity; evolving production and distribution of food. Labour market shortages and consequences of demographic change – January 2023 conference on the nature of current economic change: [A profound economic crisis](#).
- Changes particularly in Germany's labour market, the impact of shortages and population change – March 2023 conference on Germany's future: [Zeitenwende: a new Germany?](#)
- Uses of AI and data in technologies applied to migration (border controls / satellite analysis) – February 2023 conference on [AI and creative destruction](#).
- The dominance of climate impacts across politics and policy making is a central strand of Ditchley's current climate programme. Climate Programme Summit, March 2023
- The broader geopolitical issues associated with migration will be part of the December 2023 conference on geopolitics.

This Note presents a summary of the conference discussion. No participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.

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UNHCR Representative to the United Kingdom; member of the Bar of England and Wales. Formerly: range of policy, evaluation, and emergency-related positions, including Special Assistant to the High Commissioner, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva; served in field operations, including in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Myanmar; most recently as Deputy Representative in Syria (2020-22); author of a number of articles and book chapters on the topic of forced displacement.

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Founder and Director, African Youth Initiative Network, Uganda (supporting former child soldiers through education and medical rehabilitation) (2005-); UN Goodwill Ambassador for Peace and Justice, promoting SDG Goal16 (2015-); member, Global Advisory Group to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on Gender, Forced Displacement and Protection (2016-). Formerly: nominated for Nobel Peace Prize 2015.

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Dr Meghan Benton

Director, International Program, Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Washington, DC (work spans labor mobility, immigrant integration, border management and humanitarian protection; has a particular interest in the role of technological and social innovation in immigration and integration policy, and in how labor market disruption affects immigration and integration); co-founder (2016), MPI Europe's Integration Futures Working Group (seeks to develop a forward-looking agenda for integration policy in Europe); more recently, has been working on how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global mobility; convenor, MPI's Task Force on Borders and Mobility During and After COVID-19. Formerly: Senior Researcher, Nesta (UK's innovation body, where she led projects on digital government and the future of local public services); Constitution Unit, University College London; Institute for Public Policy Research. PhD (2010) research focused on citizenship and the rights of noncitizens.

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Mr Tim Cole

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