

Uncertainty about a Future that is no Longer What it used to be. On the Way to Food Insecurity?

Opinion

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Abstract: When we have not yet definitively emerged from a pandemic state, such as that caused by COVID-19, we find ourselves once again immersed in another threat, of unpredictable dimensions for global food security, such as the war in Eastern Europe. Bearing in mind the three fundamental principles of food security: sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, which we can position for a better understanding at the vertices of a triangle, it is clear that both impacts (pandemic and armed conflict) will have consequences that are difficult to predict in their magnitude and of enormous significance, and may lead us to an unknown dimension of enormous uncertainty, such as food insecurity.

Keywords: Pandemic; Armed conflict; Food security; Food insecurity; Precautionary principle; Food sovereignty

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In the 1970s, the concept of food security emerged, based on food production and availability. A decade later, the idea of access - physical, social, and economic - was added. Finally, in the 1990s, the concept that still exists today was developed, incorporating the term food safety and considering food security as a human right.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), food security is defined as “physical, social and economic access by all people at all times to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” [1].

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a crisis affecting food systems, threatening people's access to food due to major disruptions in food supply chains as a result of population confinement, as well as a slowdown in the global economy. The crisis also led to lower incomes and higher prices for many foods, making them inaccessible to a significant proportion of the population. Dynamics influencing food security. According to an FAO report, a quarter of the world's population already suffered from moderate or severe levels of food and

nutrition insecurity before the outbreak of the pandemic [2]. The same organization considers that food production could also be affected in the future, especially if the virus is not contained and certain restrictive measures continue [3].

As we have just mentioned, even before the health crisis has ended, a new threat has arisen, the armed conflict in Eastern Europe with the war in Ukraine, which is once again forcing us to change priorities and rethink decisions to ensure food security at a global level. The consequences of the conflict in the agri-food sector could have serious repercussions. With the outbreak of the war, commodities such as wheat and maize have soared to record levels, which, on top of an already complex situation, is leading to higher prices and severe difficulties in the food supply. Those areas of the world with less food sovereignty will have much more difficulty in guaranteeing food security in times of crisis such as the current one [4].

The current difficult situation may also lead to a certain relaxation of the so-called precautionary principle, eliminating or slowing it down as it is considered to interfere with industrial development and, in periods of crisis such as the present, it is considered a brake on the industry in general, and in particular, agri-food. The current



precautionary principle was already enunciated by Hippocrates in the 5th century B.C. “if there is any doubt that there is a problem, in doubt, refrain from using this product”. It is such a necessary and transcendent principle that it requires us in case of threat to the environment or health, and in situations of scientific uncertainty, to take appropriate measures to prevent harm [5]. The question of when and how to use the precautionary principle gives rise to intense debate and divergent and sometimes contradictory views, both in the European Union and on the international scene. Policymakers are constantly faced with the dilemma of finding a balance between the freedom and rights of individuals and industry, and the need to reduce the risk of adverse effects on the environment and human, animal, or plant health. Therefore, finding the right balance so that proportionate, transparent, coherent, and consistent non-discriminatory measures can be taken requires a structured decision-making process based on detailed scientific information and objective data. While this is a matter of debate and controversy in times of global economic stability, in times of uncertainty and crisis such as the current one, the risk of slackening compliance can reach levels that also pose a real risk to food safety [6]. Therefore, in addition to the health and war problem, we must consider a new threat, namely non-compliance with the precautionary principle. This new situation may lead us from the three fundamental principles of food security (sufficient, safe, and nutritious food), graphically represented by the vertices of a triangle, to the three new current threats to food security (health pandemic, armed conflict, and weakening of the precautionary principle), which can also be graphically represented by the vertices of a triangle.

In short, we are facing a time of maximum difficulty for the agri-food sector, and as a result, food security in many areas of the world could be seriously affected. However, in the search for medium- and long-term solutions to possible future adverse situations, a new term must be explored in all its magnitude: the food sovereignty of people, defining their own agricultural and food policy, without dumping on third countries [7]. Are we facing the opportunity of a return to the origins? In the face of a new threat, we must always seize and explore new opportunities.

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