Concerns have arisen that increased migration to Europe may be an indirect consequence of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Global food prices have risen to record levels as a result of the invasion. Hunger, it has been assumed, may drive people to migrate. However, the drivers of migration are complex. Many factors other than food prices may influence decisions to migrate.

**Brief Points**

- The feared increase in migration did not take place during the first eight months of 2022.
- There does not appear to be a general relationship between global food prices and migration to Europe.
- The global flow of remittances is unlikely to be significantly affected by the indirect effects of the invasion.

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Dramatic Predictions

In the first half of 2022, several influential individuals predicted that hunger due to the worsening food security crisis would cause a dramatic wave of migration into Europe. European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas, who is in charge of EU migration policy, stated in May that severe food shortages would lead to people travelling to Europe by boat in a ‘chaotic fashion’. Similar concerns have been raised by the President of Poland and the Cypriot Minster of Interior. An influential blog post published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and co-written by the IMF’s Managing Director, First Deputy Managing Director, and Director of its Strategy, Policy, and Review Department, predicted ‘[m]ore people will embark on perilous journeys to seek opportunity elsewhere’ if global supply chains fail to deliver enough food. The head of the World Food Programme (WFP) has argued that failure to provide adequate supplies of food would lead people from northern Africa and the Middle East to travel to Europe, and claimed, ‘For every 1 per cent increase in hunger, there’s a 2 per cent increase in migration.’ This ratio appears to be derived from a 2017 WFP report that looked at migration by refugees.1

These predictions were intended to create alarm and mobilize support for increased food aid for people in developing countries enduring high prices and shortages. More information on the 2022 food security crisis can be found in the 2022 PRIO Policy Briefs ‘Food Insecurity and Social Instability in Light of the Ukraine-Russia War’ and ‘The Role of the Invasion of Ukraine in the 2022 Food Supply Crisis’. Providing food assistance is a humanitarian necessity. Nevertheless, the drivers of migration are complex. The remainder of this policy brief examines the plausibility of these dramatic predictions that food insecurity will increase international migration to Europe and other parts of the world.

The record of food prices and migration over five years

Predictions that food insecurity will lead to a significant increase in irregular migration to Europe are not borne out by the available data. Figure 1 shows two trends: changes in food prices, as reported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in its Food Price Index, which tracks international prices of a basket of food commodities, and trends in migration to Europe by land and sea routes, as recorded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

As the figure shows, an increase in migration in August 2022 coincided with a decrease in food prices. In fact, since 2016, migration flows have not corresponded with global food prices. Migration to Europe waxed and waned over the seasons; overall, it declined between 2016 and 2017, and again in 2020, presumably as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Food prices, in contrast, have risen steadily since mid-2020, with prices in May 2022 about fifty per cent higher than in the years 2016–2020. In 2021 and early 2022, migration levels did begin to rise, but they merely returned to their pre-pandemic levels. Data on asylum seekers to the European Union show similar trends.

Future trends in migration to Europe could differ from those shown in Figure 1. The next section summarises knowledge from research on the drivers of international migration. This information provides some indication about the extent to which future food insecurity may drive significantly more migration to Europe. The last section of this policy brief discusses likely impacts on migration of the invasion of Ukraine.

Drivers of International Migration

Migrating internationally is a consequential choice, involving complex decisions that are often driven by a multitude of factors. In determining whether to stay or leave, people consider a wide range of individual, community, and country circumstances, such as physical security, socioeconomic situation, personal well-being, migrant networks, and the likelihood of being able to move. Economic insecurity caused by high food and energy prices interacts with other factors that influence migration.

Previous research offers some indication of the potential impact of the food and energy crisis on migration. A variety of socioeconomic factors can inspire migration. Unemployment, job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and better economic opportunities elsewhere can motivate people to leave. Migration can be one of several possible pathways to a better socioeconomic life. Yet, socioeconomic insecurity alone does not necessarily spur people to migrate, as the decision to migration is complex, hinging on circumstances and capabilities.

Evidence from studies of droughts in Africa illustrates the complicated relationship between food insecurity and migration. For example, in some areas, communities may cooperate to mitigate the effects of drought and help ensure that livestock survive. In other areas, drought may lead to violent competition for dwindling water resources, in particular between farmers who grow crops and herders who manage livestock. Reactions to drought and potential food insecurity at the local level clearly mediate people’s decisions about whether or not to leave home.

One study of people in Africa found that food insecurity increased the probability that people would express a wish to migrate internationally but that the probability that they would actually migrate decreased as the severity of food insecurity increased.2 This is not as paradoxical as it may at first seem. Migration involves costs, as food and energy become more expensive, resources available for a costly international journey may decrease. Furthermore, migration may not be an obvious solution to food shortages. At the individual level, migration may actually

![Figure 1: Migration to Europe and global food prices over five years (August 2016–August 2022). Source: Authors’ compilation of data published by the FAO and IOM](image-url)
create greater food insecurity as someone who is travelling across borders may struggle to obtain food. At the community level, the departure of young male members, those most likely to migrate, decreases the future stock of labor and thus the community’s potential to grow crops once the drought abates.

Similarly, research has found that increased economic development among less wealthy societies leads to more emigration, whereas wealthier societies are associated with less emigration. To translate an aspiration to leave into actual migration, particularly across borders, people need economic means. The poorest seldom have the ability to leave. Yet as incomes rise, people are better able to raise the money necessary to travel. Economic shocks or a deterioration in disposable income due to high prices for food or energy can, in fact, reduce the ability of the poorest people to migrate.

Moreover, insights from research on environmental shocks and natural disasters show that such fast-onset, extraordinary events lead most often to short-distance, temporary migration. In Sub-Saharan Africa, migration associated with drought usually occurs within one country, or to neighbouring countries. People may, perhaps initially, plan to return after the disaster has abated. If they hope to return, short-distance migration may make the most sense, as long, international travel is typically more costly, time-consuming, and challenging. In addition to economic costs making international migration difficult or less attractive for some people, moving to a distant country usually means a greater change in the way of living than does internal migration or migration to a neighbouring country.

Violence and conflict can drive migration (as is apparent from the Ukraine war). However, the intensity of violence, the duration of conflict, and perceptions of threat can influence the number of people who leave. Perhaps more important than the actual level of violence are individuals’ perceptions of their own physical insecurity. For people already living in conflict environments, additional economic shocks caused by rising food and energy prices can heighten hardships.

Physical and economic circumstances interact with a variety of other migration drivers. Migration aspirations are more likely to arise among individuals who are young, unmarried, male, highly educated, urban dwellers and are unhappy or dissatisfied. Social networks among current and former migrants can help translate aspirations into actual migration.

**Likely Effects of the Invasion of Ukraine on Global Migration Patterns**

The dramatic predictions that rising global food prices resulting from the invasion of Ukraine would produce a wave of irregular migration to Europe have not yet come to pass. Although we lack data on other impacts of the war in Ukraine, we can make several observations about its possible effect on migration. In general, there are few probably direct effects, but the invasion may have some indirect effects.

High energy costs portend an economic recession that may affect European labour markets for migrants. High costs have driven a boom in fossil fuel industries in some parts of the Global South, which may reduce migration to Europe. Industries that extract gas, oil, and coal need more workers, and the countries with cash-rich economies will employ more people to work in other commercial sectors. An indirect effect of the Ukraine war may be the alteration of migration patterns, due to fewer opportunities in Europe and more work in countries with traditional oil economies, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, or in new centres for oil and gas extraction, such as Senegal and Tanzania.

Of those people who do decide to migrate, those affected by tightened household budgets are more likely to move first within the country in which they live. Such ‘in country’ migration may involve moving to an urban area in the hope of finding paid work. Or it may entail leaving for a rural area, either in the hope of being better able to obtain food or because the farming sector requires labour to produce more food, which is selling at higher prices.

If the Ukraine war and its effects persist for years, long-term effects may also be produced. Prolonged high costs may also have second-order effects. For example, governments may be unable to keep subsidising food and fuel; the consequence would be further increases in domestic prices. People are used to weathering short-term crises, but pressure on household budgets from years of high food and energy costs may increase motivations to migrate internationally, in order, for example, to be able to send remittances home.

**Effects on regular migration**

The Russian invasion has most directly affected migrants who were in Ukraine at the start of the war, especially the approximately 80 000 foreign students, most of them from the Global South, who were studying at universities in Ukraine at the time of the invasion. They had to leave the country quickly, abandoning their studies. Ukrainian educational institutions will be unavailable to future students until the war is over and universities and schools have been rebuilt.

Claims for asylum in Europe by people fleeing persecution in the Global South are unlikely to be directly affected by the invasion of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine will not directly affect persecution taking place elsewhere. Further, there is no sign that the war will affect either the criteria used by host countries to determine eligibility or the usually arduous path that asylum seekers travel to be able to claim asylum. It is possible that a more assertive Russian foreign policy, particularly in the Sahel region, could intensify armed conflict. If so, a subsequent increase in refugees could result, which would constitute an indirect effect of the invasion of Ukraine.

It is unlikely that the influx of Ukrainian refugees will reduce the number of temporary European work permits available to people from the Global South. A July 2022 labour market assessment pointed out that Ukrainian refugees had only had a significant effect on the labour force of three countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Poland. Two of them – Poland and the Czech Republic – already experience labour shortages. More generally, millions of Ukrainians already worked in EU member states (as both permanent residents and temporary workers). The Ukrainian refugees themselves are predominantly women and children (as men have been mobilised), and the adults have high levels of education. For all these reasons, Ukrainian refugees are unlikely to affect the work prospects of temporary workers from the Global South, who tend to be employed in the agriculture sector in Southern Europe.

**Effects on irregular migration**

High prices for food and energy may have different and countervailing effects, at least in 2022. Higher costs of living may amplify economic incentives to leave. However, higher fuel and food prices may also increase the costs of migration, constraining the ability to leave, even if
the aspiration to do so exists. Tighter household budgets due to higher costs for food or fuel will likely mean fewer financial resources available to fund lengthy cross-border journeys. Given these possible countervailing pressures, it is difficult to predict how higher prices will affect migration rates. As of September 2022, migration to Europe had not increased significantly and food prices had declined to their pre-war levels. It is therefore unlikely that irregular migration to Europe increased significantly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Effects of the War on Remittances

Remittances can result in remittances, which are sent both by long-term migrants and by new arrivals. Labour markets in places to which migrants send remittances may have been indirectly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In particular, the effects of the war – lower growth caused by energy price shocks, recession in Russia’s non-energy sectors, booming energy sectors in other regions – may have affected incomes. The global effects of an economic recession are unlikely to be dramatic, however. Despite fears that global remittances would fall due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they actually increased 0.8% in 2020 (a much smaller increase than in previous years). A May 2022 estimate suggests that global remittances will be 4.2 per cent higher than in the previous year.

These global trends obscure some local differences. Remittances sent to sub-Saharan Africa did decline by 8.1 per cent during 2020 (although they increased again in 2021 and 2022). However, this decline may be a consequence of the invasion not occurred.

We can therefore assume that, at a global level, economic recession and high food and energy prices are unlikely to result in a significant decrease in global remittances. Recessions and high prices increase the need for remittances, and people find ways to send the money. It may be, however, that the rate of growth in remittances will be lower than it might have been had the invasion not occurred.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge ideas and information provided by their colleagues Marta Bivand Erdal, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, Andreas Forø Tollefsen, and Tone Sommerfelt.

Notes

1. Predictions in this paragraph are drawn from: Bloomberg, 24 May; Reuters, 24 May; Reuters, 4 June; International Monetary Fund, 22 May; Financial Times, 26 May; World Food Programme (2022) At the root of exodus: Food security, conflict and international migration.


3. OECD (2022) The potential contribution of Ukrainian refugees to the labour force in European host countries.

Further Reading


