



Bread as Politics – Food Insecurity in Egypt

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Introduction

Like many other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Egypt is currently facing significant challenges with regard to food insecurity.¹ Egypt has a heavy import dependence, for example when it comes to wheat, which means that the country has been severely affected by the rise in global food prices. External shocks in recent years, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have exacerbated an already fragile economic situation.² In the absence of effective safety nets for vulnerable households, more Egyptians are now at risk of falling into poverty and face a food insecure future. Food subsidies can be described as "part of the social contract"³ between the Egyptian state and the people, and they are important in the government's efforts to maintain political stability.

There are multiple ways to define food security and insecurity. Food insecurity goes beyond the concept of hunger and can be expressed in multiple ways in different contexts. At the World Food Summit in 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations described food security as the condition "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".⁴

When analyzing food security, four pillars of the concept should be considered: (1) availability, or the total level of how much food is produced, imported or stored; (2) access, or the extent to which food is distributed equally; (3) utilization, or how nutritious food is and whether it is stored and prepared safely; and (4) stability, or whether food availability, access and utilization are stable over time, depending on climate, politics and economics.⁵ If these pillars cannot be addressed in a positive way, it is a sign of food insecurity. This UI Brief examines the political and economic structures that have led to food insecurity in Egypt and what can be done to combat food insecurity in the long term.

Background: Egypt

From Mubarak's Fall to Sisi's Leadership

More than a decade has passed since President Hosni Mubarak's almost 30-year dictatorship ended in the midst of the Arab Uprisings. Inspired by protests in neighbouring countries and with growing discontent around issues such as corruption, unemployment and the lack of democratic institutions, Egyptians carried out a revolution in 2011 that forced Mubarak from office.⁶ Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's first democratically elected president in 2012 but less than a year into his presidency, he faced mounting criticism. Following a military coup in 2013, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi became president. He has managed to remain in power ever since.

¹ World Bank Group (2023), vii; UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 4.

² UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 4; The World Bank (2023, October edition), 1.

³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2023), 51.

⁴ FAO (2008), 1.

⁵ FAO (2008), 1; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2023), 20.

⁶ Springborg et al. (2021), 416; Bowen, BBC (2021).



Although the country experienced its first free presidential election after the Arab Uprisings, which was a significant event in itself, most critics argue that Egypt has not yet succeeded in terms of democratization.⁷ The ousting of one dictator does not necessarily set a stable path for liberal democratic institutions and values to be implemented or respected. Apart from the temporary democratic progress that followed the 2011 revolution, authoritarianism has been a recurrent feature of leadership in Egypt.⁸ Various human rights organizations argue that Egypt is currently experiencing what is known as democratic backsliding. Transparency International and Freedom House, for example, argue that Egypt's leadership has become more authoritarian during Sisi's presidency.⁹ Moreover, Egypt is ranked 166 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' most recent World Press Freedom Index – a decline compared to a decade ago when Sisi first took power.¹⁰

Although relations between the executive and the military have undergone transformations under different leaders in Egypt, the military continues to play a strong role in shaping politics.¹¹ The military influences many areas of Egyptian life, including but not limited to the media, the

business sector and civil society.¹² Almost all of Egypt's leaders since the formation of the republic have had military backgrounds, including President Sisi who is a former Army Chief.¹³ The power of both the president and the military has grown, especially following 2019 constitutional amendments.¹⁴ In contrast to previous constitutional provisions that allowed a president no more than two terms in office, Sisi was able to run for a third time in December 2023.¹⁵ In 2019, the president's term was also extended from four to six years. Parliament's ability to control the military and the government has also been weakened.¹⁶ The military has been described as "above the law".¹⁷

Economic Crisis and Declining Living Standards

Egypt's government is currently dealing with a deep economic crisis, together with declining political support from the population.¹⁸ The budget deficit and high inflation, especially in the food sector, have caused economic pressure and uncertainty.¹⁹ The Egyptian Pound has been devalued three times and lost about half its value compared to the US dollar since the beginning of 2022.²⁰ At the same time, living standards have declined.²¹ Some political commentators have suggested that the decision to hold the latest presidential election earlier than

⁷ Springborg et al. (2021), 81; Reporters Without Borders (2023).

⁸ Springborg, et al (2021), i, 81.

⁹ Transparency International (2020), 4; Freedom House (2023), 18.

¹⁰ Reporters Without Borders (2023).

¹¹ Transparency International (2020), 2; Springborg et al. (2021), 129.

¹² Springborg et al. (2021), 107.

¹³ Knell, BBC (2023).

¹⁴ Springborg et al. (2021), 92.

¹⁵ Knell, BBC (2023).

¹⁶ Springborg et al. (2021), 109, 115; Transparency International (2020), 4.

¹⁷ Springborg et al. (2021), 109.

¹⁸ Knell, BBC (2023).

¹⁹ The World Bank (2023, April edition), 1-2; UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 12.

²⁰ Knell, BBC (2023).

²¹ Reuters (2023).



planned (at the end of 2023 instead of the Spring of 2024) was a strategic move by Sisi's government to be done with the election before a possible further currency devaluation, which could spark another wave of discontent.²²

By September 2023, food prices had increased 70% from the same time the previous year.²³ Higher food prices affect the poor the most because they use a larger proportion of their total budget on food.²⁴ Increases in food prices can also have long-lasting effects. Children who grow up malnourished have a higher risk of taking health issues into their adult lives.²⁵ During past economic crises in Egypt, poor people have reduced their food consumption, which is a tangible risk in the short term too.²⁶ In other words, the economic crisis is likely to have serious consequences for food security in Egypt. In response, Sisi's government introduced a temporary price cap on unsubsidized bread and stopped the export of certain foods in 2022.²⁷ In October 2023, the government also announced agreements with the private sector that would reduce prices and pause customs duties on staple foods.²⁸ How these political changes will turn out in practice and how they will affect food security, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable, remains to be seen.

Corruption, Ineffective Institutions and Discontent

Egypt officially ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption in 2005.²⁹ In practice, however, corruption remains a widespread problem.³⁰ This also applies to the food sector where there is a black market for wheat and flour.³¹ Egypt is ranked 130th of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index.³² Reporters Without Borders has criticized Sisi's government for arresting people who have been active in protests against corruption.³³

The state's inability to increase employment levels has been a problem in Egypt for several decades.³⁴ Previous investments in the education sector have not met people's expectations of reducing poverty or creating meaningful job opportunities.³⁵ A higher education has not necessarily led to higher paid jobs and paths out of poverty, and this has provided grounds for discontent. Disappointment at the state's inability to change the situation for the better in areas such as employment and fighting corruption was expressed starkly in the 2011 revolution, but problems and frustrations with institutions remain.³⁶

²² The Economist (2023).

²³ SvD Näringsliv (2023).

²⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2023), 25.

²⁵ World Bank Group (2023), viii.

²⁶ UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 4.

²⁷ Abay et al. (2023), 3.

²⁸ Reuters (2023).

²⁹ Transparency International (2020), 2.

³⁰ Regeringskansliet (2019), 4;

Nationalencyklopedin (2023).

³¹ Abdalla et al. (2022), 9.

³² Transparency International (2022).

³³ Reporters without Borders (2023).

³⁴ Springborg et al. (2021), 230; Styrman, Utrikespolitiska institutet (2023); Nationalencyklopedin (2023).

³⁵ Springborg et al. (2021), 21.

³⁶ Bowen, BBC (2021).



Food (In)Security in Egypt

Political Importance of Food

According to the Hunger Map produced by the World Food Programme (WFP), 19.5 million people (of a population of 98.4 million) suffer from insufficient food consumption in Egypt.³⁷ In comparison with other countries around the world, WFP labels Egypt's food insecurity level "moderately high". Among children under the age of five, 9.5% suffer from acute malnutrition and 22.3% from chronic malnutrition. Actions to improve food security must therefore be prioritized by the government. Nonetheless, Sisi recently stated: "If the price of the nation's progress and prosperity is to go hungry and thirsty, then let us not eat or drink".³⁸

Wheat is a common crop in traditional Egyptian food culture and continues to be fundamental to the population's calorie intake.³⁹ Bread subsidies are an important feature of food politics as many households depend on them on a daily basis. According to the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Food subsidies, especially on bread, have long been the backbone of Egypt's social protection system".⁴⁰ At the same time, however, food subsidies are an increasing burden for the country's economy.⁴¹

Changes in food subsidies have caused political unrest several times in the past and could do so again in the future. In 1977 bread riots, hundreds of thousands protested the government's decision to cut subsidies on bread and other foods.⁴² More than 70 people died in clashes with the police.⁴³ The protests led the government at the time to make concessions and halt plans to reduce food subsidies.⁴⁴ The 1977 bread riots made the state more aware of the power of protest and subsequently less willing to change its politics on food subsidies. After a global food crisis in 2007, new protests erupted in Egypt and a debate was reinitiated about the efficiency of the bread subsidy system.⁴⁵ This also generated a discussion that the state should invest more in the agricultural sector to achieve better wheat self-sufficiency. The importance of food politics in Egypt was illustrated once again during the Arab Uprisings when the slogan "bread, freedom and social justice" was used by protesters on the streets.⁴⁶

Approximately 70 million people qualify for the "Tamween" ration card system, which has provided food subsidies in Egypt since the 1940s.⁴⁷ In addition, 83 million people are eligible to buy subsidized traditional baladi bread. More than 90% of the real costs of producing baladi bread are covered by the state. Baladi bread has been sold at the exact same price (EGP 0.05, or €0.001 at December 2023 prices) for decades despite inflation and

³⁷ World Food Programme (2023).

³⁸ Knell, BBC (2023).

³⁹ Abay et al. (2023), 7.

⁴⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 76.

⁴¹ Bryant et al. (2023), 45.

⁴² Abdalla et al. (2022), 2.

⁴³ Abdalla et al. (2022), 2; Springborg et al. (2021), 16.

⁴⁴ Springborg et al (2021), 16.

⁴⁵ Abdalla et al. (2022), 7.

⁴⁶ Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (2022).

⁴⁷ Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (2022).



other changes to the economy.⁴⁸ Baladi bread has undergone shrinkflation, however, a phenomenon where the price stays the same while the product becomes physically smaller. As domestic wheat production cannot keep up with the population's needs, and global wheat prices increase, subsidies on baladi bread are becoming more problematic for the national economy.⁴⁹

The "Takaful and Karama" programme (TKP), which was initiated in 2015, supports nutritional diets for vulnerable households in Egypt through cash transfers.⁵⁰ The majority of TKP recipients are women.⁵¹ According to an independent evaluation, TKP transfers increase food consumption and reduce poverty. The prevalence of wasting – an indicator of malnutrition where body weight is too low in relation to height – in small children is also reduced in TKP-recipient households. In response to higher food prices and the economic crisis in Egypt, the government has announced that it will add more households to the TKP programme.⁵²

Egypt's bread subsidies can be problematized from a nutritional perspective. While there is no doubt that subsidies help poor households to avoid hunger in the short term, subsidized bread does not contain enough nutrients for a healthy diet, especially for children's needs.⁵³ Some

people in Egypt suffer from malnutrition and obesity simultaneously, and would benefit if more nutritious foods were subsidized.⁵⁴ Food subsidies could also be better targeted at groups that suffer the most from malnutrition. Today, child undernutrition is frequent, and obesity is more common among women than men.⁵⁵ An overall evaluation of Egypt's food subsidies is needed to make them more effective at combating food insecurity in the long term.⁵⁶

Beyond the more traditional food subsidy programmes, the National School Feeding Program (NSFP) is designed to combat malnutrition and improve school enrollment among children.⁵⁷ Children have been proved to perform better in schools thanks to the NSFP. Another project that aims to combat food insecurity is the Egyptian Food Bank's food delivery campaign, in which it collaborates with private sector firms to donate food boxes to poorer households.⁵⁸

The Agricultural Sector and Climate Change

Climate change is causing harm to both individual farmers and the agricultural sector as a whole in Egypt and around the world.⁵⁹ It is having negative effects on the economy and creating new challenges for ensuring food security.⁶⁰ For example, rising

⁴⁸ Abdalla et al. (2022), 2.

⁴⁹ Lei Win (2022).

⁵⁰ World Food Programme (2022), 22.

⁵¹ United Nations Development Programme (No date), 137-140.

⁵² Abay et al. (2023), 3.

⁵³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 76.

⁵⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 76; Abay et al. (2023), 9.

⁵⁵ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 76.

⁵⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 83.

⁵⁷ UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 17-18.

⁵⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), 86.

⁵⁹ Abdalla et al. (2022), 2.

⁶⁰ Springborg et al. (2021), 343; Bryant et al. (2023), 45-46.



temperatures demand increased water use in agriculture. Because crop yields can be negatively impacted by global warming and extreme weather events, climate change also contributes to higher food prices.⁶¹ Egyptian farmers are already experiencing negative impacts on crop yields linked to warmer temperatures.⁶² Greater crop diversity could be needed in the future and Egypt has initiated new research on which crops are more resilient in a warmer climate.⁶³ SIANI has warned that the Nile Delta region, which has historically been crucial to the agriculture sector and now produces approximately 60% of Egypt's food, is vulnerable to climate change.⁶⁴ Saltwater intrusion in the Nile Delta could increase with rising sea levels, which would cause damage to crop yields in the coming decades.⁶⁵

Egypt has tried to improve its level of food self-sufficiency, for example in wheat production, but this has proved to be a challenge.⁶⁶ The government has offered farmers better wheat prices to boost domestic production but water scarcity remains an obstacle.⁶⁷ By trading more with each other, MENA countries could specialize in producing the foods they are particularly good at, and thus make their food security levels more stable.⁶⁸ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the FAO state in a joint report that more trade could benefit food security in the

region, especially in this new age of climate change: "as the significant adverse effects of climate change on agriculture and food supply are expected to worsen, trade can also contribute to the stability of food security".⁶⁹ In practice, however, conflict and political instability both within and between the MENA countries are likely to continue to impact intraregional trade.

From a longer-term perspective, prioritizing policies that combat climate change will contribute to improved food security. Examples of widespread problems in Egypt (like many other countries) are high and avoidable levels of food loss and food waste.⁷⁰ Spreading greater awareness among producers, traders and consumers about the potential benefits of preventing food loss and waste throughout the food supply chain will be essential from an environmental perspective, but also with regard to food security.⁷¹ The food system could be better regulated so that food loss and waste are kept to a minimum. To ensure food security for all, resilience must be built into the agricultural sector so that it can operate more efficiently and better withstand the challenges of climate change.⁷²

Global Impacts: COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine War

Egypt's domestic wheat production is insufficient to meet the demands of a rapidly

⁶¹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (2023), 73.

⁶² Abu Hatab, SIANI (2023); Lei Win (2022).

⁶³ Springborg et al. (2021), 343.

⁶⁴ Abu Hatab, SIANI (2023).

⁶⁵ Lei Win (2022).

⁶⁶ Abdalla et al. (2022), 3, 10.

⁶⁷ Lei Win (2022).

⁶⁸ Bagnied and Speece (2019), 115.

⁶⁹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (2023), 57.

⁷⁰ Abay et al. (2023), 9; The American University in Cairo (2021), 4.

⁷¹ UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 5; The American University in Cairo (2021), 3.

⁷² Bryant et al. (2023), 45.



growing population and the state has become heavily dependent on wheat imports.⁷³ As the world's largest wheat importing country, Egypt is vulnerable to price fluctuations in the global market.⁷⁴ International shocks have brought to light flaws in Egypt's food system and shown how ill-prepared the state is for ensuring food security for all in times of global crises. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war (and related sanctions) have created disruptions in trade flows and triggered higher prices on commodities such as wheat, sunflower oil and fertilizers.⁷⁵ Beyond the civilian suffering in Ukraine, production and trade disruptions linked to the war have troubled Egypt and its people. About 85% of Egypt's wheat imports came from Ukraine or Russia before the war.⁷⁶ In July 2022, just months after Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) was established between Russia and Ukraine to enable grain transports to Egypt and other import-dependent countries.⁷⁷ Global food prices decreased as a result, but the effect was only temporary as Russia decided not to extend the BSGI in July 2023.⁷⁸ To compensate for the losses, Egypt is searching for alternative trade partners.⁷⁹

Conclusion

This UI Brief has examined how political and economic structures affect food security in Egypt. The discussion is built around the four

pillars of food security: (1) availability; (2) access; (3) utilization; and (4) stability. Egypt's food system is not strong enough to guarantee food security for the entire population. Regarding availability, domestic wheat production is insufficient to meet the population's needs. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have disrupted the transport of wheat to Egypt and other import-dependent countries. This has triggered inflation and higher food prices. As people's purchasing power has decreased, it has become more difficult to afford nutritious food. Higher food prices affect the poor the most as they spend a higher proportion of their income on food.

For generations, many households in Egypt have relied on subsidized food on a daily basis. At the same time, food subsidies have become an increasing economic challenge for the state economy. Previous experience, not least of bread riots in 1977, has shown that it would be difficult for the government to remove food subsidies without creating political instability. While food subsidies certainly help to tackle the most acute hunger, the food items covered by current subsidy programmes are typically not effective in reducing malnutrition. An evaluation of Egypt's food subsidy programmes would therefore be a positive development. If more nutritious food alternatives were to be subsidized – and if food subsidies were better targeted at the most vulnerable groups – this would make a

⁷³ The American University in Cairo (2021), 2.

⁷⁴ Tanchum (2022), 1.

⁷⁵ Abay et al. (2023), 1-2; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2022), vi; Abu Hatab, SIANI (2023); Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (2023), 57.

⁷⁶ UNICEF/The Economic Research Forum (2023), 4.

⁷⁷ Wintour, The Guardian (2023).

⁷⁸ BBC (2023).

⁷⁹ Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (2022).



difference in ensuring food security for all. Better targeting could also help to reduce poverty and inequality. In other words, both the utilization and stability aspects of food security could be improved in Egypt by strengthening the food subsidy systems that are already in place.

This UI Brief has shown that climate change is a growing challenge to guaranteeing food security for all. However, that is not the only external shock that affects food security in Egypt. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have both put serious stress on Egypt's food system and shed light on its structural weaknesses and internal vulnerabilities. To

contribute to food security and meet the needs of a growing population in the longer term, it will be necessary to invest in the agricultural sector to make it more resistant to climate change. To strengthen the availability of food and limit the country's vulnerability to external shocks, Egypt also needs to widen its sources of food imports. In addition, it will be important to combat all forms of corruption, not least in the food sector, to guarantee that state resources are correctly and efficiently used to boost food security. In summary, Egypt must build resilience into its food sector to be better prepared for future internal and external shocks.



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