



Explaining the African food riots of 2007–2008: An empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT

A sharp escalation in worldwide commodity prices precipitated the global food crisis of 2007–2008, affecting the majority of the world's poor, causing protests in developing countries and presenting policymakers with the challenge of simultaneously addressing hunger, poverty, and political instability. These food price shocks fomented violent civil responses in some countries, but not others, offering a unique opportunity to assess the factors that contributed to these disturbances. We explore this question empirically with specific reference to Africa, where “food riots” occurred in at least 14 countries. By examining the socio-economic and political conditions facing African countries, we attempt to answer why only some countries in Africa witnessed food riots in late 2007 and early 2008, while others did not. Our empirical analysis demonstrates that higher levels of poverty (as proxied by the Human Poverty Index), restricted access to and availability of food, urbanization, a coastal location, more oppressive regimes and stronger civil societies are associated with a higher likelihood of riots occurring. We also examine three country cases (Egypt, Mozambique, Niger) which represent different circumstances and responses to the food crisis, and identify specific factors that were associated with food protests in each case. Our study highlights the importance of pro-poor policies and investments and improved governance in addressing the problems facing the poor and in helping secure political stability. As the frequency and variability of natural disasters increase in response to climate change, such policies can serve to protect the poor from the debilitating consequences of the resulting shocks.

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Bad harvests and rising prices caused the purchasing power of a large social group to collapse. The first to suffer were the peasantry... because they had precisely nothing to sell... On the other hand, the purchasing power of day laborers, who constituted the mass of agricultural consumers, collapsed because wages did not rise as fast as the cost of grain... Imagine the effect of stopping up the outlets of the rural market on industrial markets entirely dependent on them.

C. Ernest Labrousse, describing France in 1788–1789.¹

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2008, the international prices of a wide range of food, oil and other primary commodities increased in dramatic fashion, in some cases more than doubling within a few months (Demeke et al., 2009). An estimated 74 low income and

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¹ Labrousse, C.E., 1969, 1848–1830–1789: How revolutions were born. In: Crouzet, F., Chaloner, W.H., Stern, W.M. (Eds.), *Essays in European Economic History, 1789–1914*. London, 1969 (originally published 1948), pp. 3–5. Cited in Tilly (1983).

71 middle income countries were significantly affected by oil and food price increases. The resulting crisis and its lingering effects in many countries had a profound impact on the incidence and depth of global food insecurity (Headey and Fan, 2008). Some estimates suggest a 3–5% increase in global poverty rates, equivalent to as many as 100 million people (World Bank, 2008). The impacts of rising food prices on poverty and food insecurity are complex (Ivanic and Martin, 2008; World Bank, 2009a); while rising prices benefit food producers, many farm households are in fact net food consumers and are adversely affected by rising prices. Rising prices also had impacts on macroeconomic stability, economic growth and the political situation in many countries, often fueling violent street protests in late 2007 and early 2008. In Africa, food riots swept across the continent, from Egypt and Tunisia in the North, to Burkina Faso and Senegal in the West, and Madagascar and Mozambique in the South (Fig. 1). The crisis reaffirmed the inherent volatility of international commodity markets, reinforced the extent to which oil and food markets have become highly interdependent, and highlighted the relative inability of national governments and the international community to adequately deal with dramatic surges in food prices.

The multiplicity of causes of the 2007–2008 food price increases, and the relative contribution of each cause to food price outcomes, have been widely discussed by researchers and policy analysts (for example, Headey and Fan, 2008, 2010; Trostle,



Fig. 1. African food riots 2007–2008.

2008; von Braun et al., 2008; Abbott and Borot de Battisti, 2011; Lee et al., 2011a). Yet the analysis of why only some of the countries affected by food price shocks experienced civil unrest and rioting deserves more focused attention. Why did civil strife, food riots and violence occur in some countries and not in others? What socio-economic and political conditions contributed to mass civil protests? Why did many poor countries manage to avoid these riots? Questions such as these are of significant relevance to policymakers. This paper examines these issues empirically with specific reference to Africa. The global food price shocks experienced in 2007–2008 offer a unique opportunity to assess the economic, demographic, political and institutional factors that contributed to political instability and civil strife on the world's poorest continent. By examining the socio-economic and political conditions facing African countries, we attempt to answer why only some

countries in Africa witnessed food riots in late 2007 and early 2008, while others did not. Our empirical analysis of the factors behind food riots contributes to both an understanding of their causes and consequences, as well as ways to avoid the conditions causing future such events.

The questions above are not just of historical interest; the risks of food price volatility remain a current concern. In 2010, numerous climate-related disasters again demonstrated the vulnerability of African nations to food insecurity. A longstanding drought in Niger was followed by unprecedented heavy rains, killing livestock and creating what was described by the United Nations as the worst food crisis in the country's history (Thomson, 2010a, 2010b; Hirsch, 2010). Late in the year, unseasonably heavy rains triggered the overflow of the Oueme and Mono Rivers, flooding two-thirds of the West African nation of Benin (BBC, 2010a). A

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