

# The true impact of the food crisis on people's lives has been masked

The food price spike of 2008 has led to higher consumption of junk food and more precarious employment

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**W**hen food prices spiked in 2008, the international price of basic items peaked at unprecedented levels, bringing a wave of food riots in low-income countries.

Subsequent price volatility and peaks put huge pressure on millions of people, many of whom already spent half or more of their incomes and labour effort on getting enough rice, maize or bread. It was as though their real incomes had been cut in half.

The sense of crisis died down when price spikes flattened out in 2012 and the threat of food riots receded. But although global prices remained high, while locally, they dropped slightly, plateaued or continued to climb, they stopped making headlines.

## **Life after the global food crisis**

So what happened next? In the aftermath of the crisis, there have been rapid and significant changes in people's eating, working and social lives, according to the research we did for a report published last week. *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* was a real-time investigation, led by the Institute of Development Studies and Oxfam, into how people on low and uncertain incomes adjusted to their place in the global economy once they could no longer rely on cheap food.

Researchers returned repeatedly to 23 communities in sub-Saharan Africa, south and south-east Asia and in Latin America. We found that the relationship between labour and food changed, making it harder for people to feed their families, care for their children and elderly, to socialise and help each other, and to plan for their futures - to reproduce their societies, in short.

For those people for whom securing food already absorbed most of their resources and energies, the months and years after the crisis brought intense pressure to alter their relationship to food: to earn more to cover the basics, and to extract more value from whatever they consumed.

People worked harder to secure the bare necessities, and more of that effort took them into - and left them at the mercies of - food and labour markets.

## **What were the hidden costs of the food crisis?**

The aftermath of the food crisis showed that if peoples' basic needs are not protected, failures in the markets on which they increasingly rely will lead to two things.

The first is not surprising: people move into precarious kinds of labour, where they will do pretty much whatever it takes to earn more cash. This means a move to more insecure, demeaning or dangerous jobs - such as the Bangladeshi men who moved back into the forest to fish, braving tigers and pirates to do so.

The impact on working life is particularly great for women, who are working harder - especially in informal employment - while at the same time maintaining the household and caring for children. Their time and energy are being squeezed as never before.

The second is less obvious: people eat more convenient or processed foods, so long as they are cheap, cheerful and available. People described the shift from *teff* and *enjera*, the customary fermented bread of Ethiopia, to wheat flour and bread in these terms.

As people worked harder and longer, and migrated to towns, other regions or countries to find work, more turned to heavily-marketed convenience fast food, particularly unhealthy processed items with high fat/sugar/salt content - a more “westernised” diet.

### **Promoting the right to good food**

What we have learned about life as it is lived since the end of the cheap food era is that public policy needs to focus on more than basic incomes. It needs to protect “the social” - the dimensions of human wellbeing that are always beyond and unserved by the market: the unpaid work of feeding families, the right to safe and dignified labour, the benefits of community systems for protecting against hunger, the historical and nutritional riches of customary cuisines and the traditional agrofood systems on which they depend.

Official statistics are masking the true costs of the food crisis on people’s lives - particularly women, who often go uncounted in national and international data sources. We need better data on unpaid care work, irregular, short-term, dangerous and illegal work - and on changing diets to allow policymakers to make better decisions about social protection policies and programmes.

Neither dangerous and precarious jobs, nor replacing customary cuisine with cheap and easy calories are good for society, nor for public policy goals of social protection, human development, women’s empowerment, let alone food and nutrition security.

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