TONY BLAIR INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE

Countering Putin's Blame Game: Why the West Must Reset on Global Engagement

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Overview

As the world faces a looming food crisis, the Kremlin's personnel have been on a charm offensive. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov set off on a tour of African countries last week, the latest in a series of attempts to rally support for Russia's narrative on food security.

Russia recognised the role that food would play in shaping the international response to Putin's invasion well before many Western powers. This has left the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom playing catch-up as they rush to counter claims that it is Western sanctions, not Russia's blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, which are causing global food and energy prices to soar – and threatening to push tens of millions to the brink of starvation. This task is not being made any easier by years of Western disengagement, which have made many countries in the developing world more receptive to Russian claims that Western powers happily turn a blind eye to their needs.

Russia's narrative on food security is spreading fast but playing into its blame game will not solve anything. As we set out in our previous paper on the international fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine, the world is facing a crisis that could last for years. While soaring prices are already causing severe problems, by 2023 we could be facing unprecedented global shortages as farmers struggle to access the fertiliser needed for this planting season.

The only way to counter Putin's narrative is to prove we are taking this seriously. This means concrete solutions that go beyond rhetoric and bluster to set out measures that will limit the damage both to this year's harvest and the next.

First, this will mean recognising the agency of the developing countries most affected by soaring prices. For many leaders struggling to feed their populations, picking a side in the conflict is the last thing on their mind. Their priority is to secure support and relief from all possible avenues. This means any ostensible buy-in to Russia's narrative should be taken with a pinch of salt.

But it also means the West needs to be prepared to act when it is in the wrong. We identify three areas in which the US and EU need to urgently explore ways to mitigate the inadvertent knock-on effects of the economic measures they have taken against Russia. Otherwise, they risk lending credence to Russia's claims. The areas are: cautious private-sector companies over-complying with sanctions; the difficulty of paying for essential Russian foodstuffs through the SWIFT financial messaging system; and the impact of rising energy prices on poorer countries as the EU scrambles to find non-Russian sources of energy. While the US and EU are moving in the right direction, they have not gone nearly far enough.

This is not a battle that can be won through communications alone. Putin's narrative – that sanctions have been applied with little thought to their impact on developing countries – is resonating with

countries systematically overlooked by the West. In many cases, what we are seeing is the natural result of US and EU disengagement over the years. The only way to push back is with a show of genuine good faith – making it clear the West is committed to long-term change that will protect the world from future shocks but not shying away from acknowledging there are areas in which we can do better.

Recommendations

Drawing on insight from the Tony Blair Institute's advisory teams, who work with governments around the world, we call for a four-part strategy:

1. **Ramp up short-term support:** Ensure provision of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable, but also boost investment in initiatives that promote small-holder liquidity and long-term self-sufficiency immediately – particularly in the area of fertiliser production.
2. **Be clear about the damage Putin is doing:** Do not shy away from highlighting the wilful damage that Russia is inflicting on Ukraine's farms, storage facilities and logistical capabilities, all of which will make life difficult for developing countries, not just during the rest of 2022, but for many years to come.
3. **Address issues when we are in the wrong:** Actively reach out to developing countries to identify any areas in which sanctions may be complicating their ability to access or afford food, fertiliser and equipment.
4. **Commit to long-term structural change:** Urgently address the reputation of many Western countries who are regarded as disengaged partners that take more than they give. Make sure this is a moment that accelerates, not derails, our support for greater capacity-building and self-sufficiency in developing countries.

Our priority – first and foremost – must be tackling the food crisis, not playing Putin at his own tit-for-tat game. But there is a bigger picture too. This is not a crisis in isolation. Instead, it is a more significant wake-up call on how we build alliances for a more resilient world, one that cannot be held to ransom by undue aggression.

A Food-Pricing Crisis That Could Spiral Into a Food-Availability Crisis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated existing challenges in the global food system, which was already under pressure from the pandemic, climate events and rising energy prices. While the United Nations has just confirmed the departure of the first cargo ship to leave a Ukrainian Black Sea port since February, Russia's blockade has been applying additional strain, with an estimated 25 million tonnes of wheat and corn – equivalent to the annual consumption of the world's least developed economies – remaining trapped in these ports. As countries scramble to pre-empt disruption by two of the world's biggest wheat producers, the United Nation's FAO Food Price Index (FFPI) has soared to an all-time high. At least 23 countries have imposed protectionist measures, subjecting more than 17 per cent of globally traded calories to restrictions – and pushing prices even higher in the process.

Russia's hand in destabilising the global food system is clear. However, for effective solutions, there will need to be clarity on the exact nature of the problem. The world is primarily facing a food-*pricing* crisis, not a food-*availability* crisis. For now, grain production remains high (albeit with significant stocks trapped in Ukraine), with the International Grains Council estimating the 2021/2022 amount will surpass last year's figure. As many countries and humanitarian organisations are making clear, though, this does not translate into affordable prices. Putin's invasion has sent markets into disarray: in the Sahel and West Africa alone, for example, more than 40 million people are facing acute food insecurity in 2022, up from 10.8 million three years ago, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The situation is already serious but without immediate action, it will get worse in coming years. Russia's invasion is threatening to decrease Ukraine's annual wheat output by an estimated 42 per cent next year, with the damage to farms, soils and storage facilities set to impede production for years to come. Even more worrying is the impact of the invasion on a volatile fertiliser market. Prices had already risen by 80 per cent in 2021. As production costs rise and Russia imposes export bans, prices have soared a further 30 per cent. The collective risk by next year's harvests is that yields will reduce to the point at which many parts of the world face genuine shortages, not just unaffordable prices.

This means the immediate priority, in addition to ramping up pressure on Russia to end its aggression, has to be addressing the liquidity crisis currently being experienced by small-holder farmers around the world. If Ukraine's ability to provide beyond its borders, and countries' abilities to provide for themselves, are both compromised, the world looks set for years of disruption.

Russia's Aggressive and Alternative Line on Food Security

It comes as no surprise that the Kremlin has a different narrative on the looming global food crisis. Since the start of the war, Russia has promoted the idea that Western sanctions are solely to blame for the stress on the world food system, with Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova claiming in May that "prices are rising due to sanctions imposed by the collective West... Failure to understand this is a sign of either stupidity or deliberate misleading of the public".

The Kremlin has also been quick to try and shift the blame for the Black Sea blockade, which it openly admits is causing serious disruption as millions of tonnes of wheat and other products remain trapped. Russia has pinned the blame squarely on Ukraine, accusing the country of refusing to remove the mines planted in Black Sea ports, which are prohibiting ships from carrying Ukrainian food to countries around the world. For its part, Russia claims that it stands ready to export food and fertiliser as usual – if Western sanctions are lifted.

Russia recognised far more quickly than the West how decisive the question of food security would be in shaping the international response to its invasion. There are already worrying signs that its skewed narrative is finding an audience worldwide. At a video summit in late May, President Macky Sall of Senegal, also the African Union chair, warned EU leaders that Russia's narrative was already "out there". And in a clear sign of just how "out there" the narrative is in Africa, Sall went to visit Putin in person just a couple of weeks later, repeating a key Russian talking point that "anti-Russia sanctions have made this situation worse" while urging the EU and US to ease sanctions to facilitate grain exports to Africa.

Similarly, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who has previously blamed NATO for the outbreak of war in Ukraine, had a call with Putin in late June to explore ways to boost supplies of Russian fertiliser and "expand mutually beneficial cooperation". Meanwhile, Gwede Mantashe, the South African energy minister told his Parliament the country is now considering imports of cheap Russian crude oil to tackle skyrocketing basic-commodities prices. But Russia's diplomatic efforts have not been limited to the African countries bearing the brunt of rising prices. In late June, Putin called Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro to reassure him that Russia was committed to stabilising food and energy prices and that it would fulfil its obligations to supply fertiliser to the country.

As the international community turns its attention to soaring prices, Russia's strategy is already clear: it is presenting itself as a willing partner, one that can offer potential solutions to the looming food crisis, all the while effectively holding the world to ransom. As Natia Seskuria, associate fellow at security think tank RUSI, puts it: "Due to unprecedented Western unity on sanctions against Russia, Moscow is now trying to blackmail the world in order to gain relief from sanctions".

Tackling Russia's Narrative Means Acknowledging It Has Elements of Truth

There has been understandable anger at the blatant hypocrisy of Russia's stance, which pins the blame on targeted Western sanctions while refusing to acknowledge the most effective way to relieve the crisis: by putting an end to its invasion of Ukraine. But the West cannot simply play Russia at its own blame game – a smarter response will entail being open to the concerns from developing countries on areas in which we could do better.

There is very little evidence to suggest Western sanctions are directly affecting food availability, especially as global grain stocks remain relatively high. But the following three issues deserve closer attention.

First are the overly cautious private-sector actors. While the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West have been considered, making exceptions for exports of wheat, fertiliser and other essential foodstuffs, those companies needed to facilitate the movement of Russian food and fertiliser to developing countries are often now acting with too much caution. There are reports of banks, shipping, agricultural and other logistics companies avoiding dealing with Russian exports out of fear of punitive financial measures and secondary sanctions.

The US is currently organising discreet negotiations with the private sector to encourage more sanction-exempt exports, particularly among the insurance companies that would usually cover Russian shipments of grain, other foodstuffs and fertiliser. This is a very welcome step, but greater coordination is still needed to avoid countries having to bear the brunt of rising prices while efforts are made to identify who best to target in these talks.

Second, there's a risk of similar knock-on disruption because of the exclusion of many Russian banks from SWIFT. While neither the US or the EU has sanctioned Russian fertiliser or wheat, the African Union (AU) has voiced concerns about the sanctions on Russia's financial system making it more difficult for countries to purchase these products. The EU has already carved out payment-method exemptions for countries making gas and oil payments to Russia but despite repeated calls from the AU, no such mechanism exists allowing for payments of foodstuffs and fertiliser.

Finally, many developing countries are also grappling with the fallout of rising energy prices. Again, this is not the direct result of Western sanctions but the indirect consequence of more advanced economies scrambling to find non-Russian sources of energy. The consequences are still acute especially as rising transport costs add another layer of pressure to already record-high food prices. For example, the UN's World Food Programme is reporting unprecedented operating costs that are a staggering 44 per cent above its usual monthly average.

So while Russian claims that Western sanctions are the primary cause of soaring prices are obviously untrue, we cannot afford to ignore instances in which knock-on effects from sanctions are spilling over to industries and countries that should be unaffected. If the West is to effectively push back against Russian claims that our sanctions have been applied with little or no thought to their impact on low-income countries, then we need to be prepared to acknowledge and address these issues.

Developing Countries Hear Putin Out – But That Does Not Mean They Are Convinced

Countering Putin's narrative will mean figuring out just how seriously other countries are buying it. President Sall's Sochi visit understandably sounded alarm bells for observers worried about Putin's weaponisation of food. But before jumping to conclusions on the traction that Putin's narrative is gaining, it's worth digging deeper into the motivation for this engagement with Russia.

Too much discussion of the looming food crisis underplays the agency of developing countries, which are set to bear the brunt of it, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. There's a tendency among many Western observers to see the Russia-Ukraine War as a binary conflict in which it is only natural to staunchly pick a side. But from the perspective of many developing countries, which are geographically distant from the conflict, the idea of picking a side beyond their borders was already unlikely – and it's even more so today, as many of them grapple with the mounting challenges of feeding and sustaining their own populations.

From this perspective, a willingness to engage with Russia – and by extension, its narrative – is far more understandable. Rather than an uncritical buy-in to the Kremlin's talking points, countries in often precarious positions are instead seeking support from all possible corners available to them. For countries on the brink of instability or unrest, it is not the narrative or the rhetorical dressing that matters, it is the substantive support and relief that any partner can provide.

This, in part, is likely to be behind the thought process of President Ramaphosa reaching out to Putin – or the visit of the AU leadership to Sochi. While African leaders may well share concerns about the knock-on impact of sanctions, Sall's visit came almost straight off the back of a separate video-summit with EU leaders during which he struck a more conciliatory tone, calling for EU action to help African countries pay for Russian food supplies, but still praising the efforts of the bloc made to date. The same is true of Ramaphosa who – despite his fierce criticism of NATO – applauded the G7's commitment to boosting investment in fertiliser production in Africa when he hosted a visit from European Council President Charles Michel in July. In both these cases, we see mostly pragmatism, not ideology, at play: so, rather than treating this as a moral question of picking sides, the likely primary aim of leaders is to maximise their leverage and goodwill among all potential sources of help. Of course, this often means playing up to the stories each side tells about themselves.

None of this is to say that, behind closed doors, developing countries are buying in to our narrative without criticism either. The conflict has laid bare the consequences of Western disengagement that was taking place long before Putin's invasion, with an estimated two-thirds of the world's population thought to live in countries that are either neutral or actively support Russia's side in the conflict. In many places, this is partially the result of the long-standing policy of non-alignment that dates back to the Cold War, but it has not been helped by the real sense of double standards, with countries regarding the West as either turning a blind eye to conflicts in other regions or pursuing a policy of "intervention, then neglect".

This is not something that can be wished away. We need to face up to the fact that leaders and people in large parts of the world do not believe that Western powers have their best interests at heart – and that we could well be capable of applying sanctions with little thought as to how they might impact third-party countries. There are countries, particularly those that have dealt with the fallout of Western disengagement in other conflicts, such as Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen, in which Russian claims of Western neglect do resonate.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind one last dimension of the food-security blame game: the chance for leaders to deflect from their domestic shortcomings. For some, the Russia-Ukraine War – no matter its perpetrator – is a useful scapegoat for pressures that predate Putin's invasion. In Ghana, for example, opposition politicians have heavily criticised the government for pinning supply-chain issues on the war, instead blaming instability on pre-existing poor governance. Even in the UK, the cost-of-living crisis – often pinned on the war too – is being felt so intensely today because it intersects with pre-existing economic mismanagement and pandemic recovery.

Recognising the agency – both good and bad – of third-party countries must be at the heart of a smart response to the Kremlin's propaganda. The fight is more complex than simply pushing back against uncritical buy-ins to Russia's entirely false narrative. Instead, we need a strategy that acknowledges the futility of asking countries in a crisis to pick a side in a conflict they have little to do with while seriously considering the sort of help our "side" is best placed to offer. That means being prepared to listen and act when sanctions have inadvertent consequences. But it also means not letting Putin's needless war derail a global push for self-sufficiency and capacity building that the West is far better placed to support than Russia in the long term.

What Should Our Strategy Be?

Short Term: Ramp Up Existing Support

The immediate priority must be securing help for those who need it the most. The number of severely food-insecure people is estimated to increase to 323 million people by the end of 2022, with 48.9 million across 43 countries currently on the edge of famine – and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) warning of a sharp rise in child deaths across the Horn of Africa.

Short-term humanitarian support will be critical to saving lives. Soaring food and energy prices are not just impacting individuals but humanitarian organisations too, with the UN's World Food Programme reporting all-time-high operating costs and a funding deficit of more than $5 billion this year. Around the world, aid groups are being forced to scale back operations at the very point they are most vital.

There have already been welcome steps in this direction, with the US having committed $2.8 billion in emergency food aid to more than 50 countries since the beginning of the war and, more recently, allocating an additional $760 million for food security as part of the Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act. The EU is also doing its bit to promote short-term relief via its "Solidarity Lanes" initiative, which aims to find alternative routes to transport grain out of Ukrainian ports.

While vital, these ad-hoc initiatives are not a replacement for the systematic support that promotes long-term sustainability and self-sufficiency.

With production still exceeding global demand, the global food crisis can be more accurately viewed as a food-pricing crisis. But drastic price rises in fertiliser, fuel and energy, as well as growing global inflation, have impacted costs throughout the foodstuffs value chain meaning that as farmers look towards next year's harvests, many are facing a serious liquidity crisis.

Without immediate support, Africa risks losing a fifth of its food production in the next two harvesting seasons, as farmers are priced out of fertiliser and other key materials that are needed to keep yields high. This means our immediate support should not only focus on immediate outcomes, concerted international action is also needed now to stop this spiralling into a food-*scarcity* crisis in the coming years.

Leaders have already been clear. In late May, the AU's Chair Macky Sall made it clear what the EU has to offer to African nations: "What we lack, and what you can provide, is the financial and technological investment needed to produce more and better, and create shared prosperity." He called on EU leaders to focus on how Emmanuel Macron's "Food and Agriculture Resilience Mission (FARM)", established in

conjunction with the AU and G7, could be used to maximise large-scale investment in Africa's agricultural self-sufficiency.

Immediate support should be developed that considers the three strategic objectives below.

1. **Providing emergency relief and addressing the immediate humanitarian challenges.** Recognise the impact of rising procurement and distribution costs on countries and humanitarian organisations – and target immediate relief to the most vulnerable.
2. **Pre-empting long-term damage and disruption to the global food supply.** Prioritise financial instruments that can effectively deliver liquidity to individual farmers to cover the next few years' harvests. Invest both in agricultural research and development for fertiliser and higher-yielding, more-resilient crops, and the upskilling of populations in sustainable farming and agricultural practices.
3. **Demonstrating the West's recognition that this crisis is global while proving our commitment to long-term support and structural change.** Recognise that acceptance of Russia's narrative, whether sincere or not, partially reflects a failure of the West's long-term engagement strategy. The reluctance among some countries to join efforts in support of Ukraine is a result, in part, of the perceived double standards and unreliability of the West. Our efforts to mitigate the fallout of Putin's invasion should be a foundational step in demonstrating our intention to listen properly to the needs of smaller and developing countries going forwards.

Short Term: Push Back Against Russia's Misinformation Campaign

While our priority must be to address the human impact of food insecurity, we cannot let Russia's narrative go unchallenged. This will mean concerted efforts to debunk false Russian claims and clearly demonstrate the commitment of Western countries to support other countries, targeted not just at governments but at their populations too.

Russia has long targeted information spaces with propaganda and misinformation in many African countries. This has given it a formidable digital infrastructure to draw on in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. A series of disinformation campaigns have spread in African cyberspace, pushing the Kremlin's narrative on food security across social media – particularly Facebook and Twitter.

These disinformation campaigns are hard to combat because they tap into a number of legitimate concerns and grievances. In the early days of the invasion, Russian propaganda leant heavily on reports of African students being barred from leaving Ukraine, fuelling pre-existing ideas of European racism. Similarly, the narrative that says the US and EU are primarily responsible for soaring food prices often plays into a genuine sense that the West is too willing to put its own needs and values before those of developing countries. While these narratives may have some elements of truth, the problem is they present Russia as an innocent and well-intentioned actor, allowing it to consolidate its already growing

influence over large parts of the continent – all without any real commitment to securing the future food security of African countries.

What needs to come next is an aggressive dismantling of Russian attempts to manipulate the food-security crisis. The first step must be to actively work to reduce any impacts on food and fertiliser that may have developed as an unintentional result of sanctions. Doing so will make it clear that US and EU officials, among others, are committed to fighting for greater and fairer access to food resources. In turn, these actions will work to weaken the anti-West claims promoted by the Russian presence in digital Africa.

Furthermore, instead of placing blame on African citizens for hesitating to fully object to Russian power, proactive changes need to take place in order to shift the prevailing narrative. Investing in domestic-food programmes or agricultural companies, providing monetary aid and being mindful of the global impact of certain sanctions will disprove Russian disinformation through a tangible response. Doing this will prove to countries that Russian disinformation on food insecurity only serves to promote Russian interests – not those of African nations.

Short Term: Address Issues When We Are Genuinely in the Wrong

It's not only a question of tackling Russia's disinformation. Any smart response to the world's looming food crisis must also acknowledge and address the elements of truth in Russian propaganda.

As set out earlier, there are three key issues that countries applying sanctions on Russia should urgently address to limit any inadvertent knock-on effects.

1. **Address private-sector overcompliance.** The Biden administration has already started working with private-sector companies to help alleviate their concerns of accidentally failing to comply with Western sanctions. However, more must be done to create clear guidance on best practices for the logistics and insurance companies that are essential to alleviating food shortages around the world.

Countries imposing sanctions on Russia should work out a framework that outlines how companies can avoid tripping over sanctions inadvertently, as well as dedicated support for any individual cases if they arise. The EU needs to better engage with the private sector and follow the lead set by the US in this type of logistical support. The US and EU should also ramp up outreach efforts to encourage developing countries to flag issues about specific products or industries to ensure their efforts are being targeted effectively.

1. **SWIFT payments for Russian food and fertiliser**. The AU has called on the EU to allow African countries to pay for imported foodstuffs and fertiliser from Russia. While the products themselves are exempt from sanctions, the exclusion of many Russian banks from SWIFT has made it difficult

to pay for them. There is a precedent for how this could be achieved: the EU has already carved out payment-method exemptions with SWIFT for gas and oil payments to Russia. Taking steps in this direction would not only provide immediate relief, alleviating some of the pressure on developing countries bearing the brunt of rising commodity prices, it would also send a signal that the US and EU are prepared to listen to the concerns of developing countries and make similar exemptions to those already provided on energy.

There is a risk this will open up a cascade of calls for other exemptions, but that does not change the urgency of addressing many developing countries' liquidity crises. Exemptions would not only keep populations fed in the short term, they would go some way to unblocking the supplies of fertiliser needed to limit the damage to harvests next year and beyond.

1. **Mitigate the impact of rising energy prices.** Rising energy prices are not the direct result of any sanctions, but the EU in particular should be aware of knock-on issues around the world as advanced economies attempt to apply an additional layer of financial pressure on Russia by curbing their reliance on its energy. To limit the fallout, financial incentives could be offered to firms to prioritise shipments of fertiliser, grain and other agriculture goods from Russia, which are exempt from sanctions. These incentives would be directed to the companies, not to the Russian government, to ensure no funds are directly flowing to fuel the war effort.

The rise in the cost of energy exacerbated by the invasion, in tandem with higher inflation across the world due to the Covid-19 economic recovery, have resulted in more hazardous political conditions and may mean companies are less willing to take investment and operational risks. These financial incentives could help alleviate some of the hesitation, particularly by making up for the rise in transportation costs.

Long Term: Commit to Structural Changes That Make the World Less Vulnerable to the Next Shock

Russia's invasion has exposed fault lines both in global food security and Western alliance-building. These fissures had been deepening long before the war broke out – and will still need to be addressed after the conflict ends. The food crisis is a very real present threat, but it is also a chance for a much-needed, long-term readjustment to our engagement strategies. As former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said last month: "If you lose the war on food security, there will never be any hope that these countries can come to the side of the alliance, because they will naturally feel betrayed."

To create a future-proofed strategy, we first need to look to the past. The past few months have shown that many countries around the world are unwilling to condemn Russia's invasion or willing to give airtime to false Russian propaganda. But condemning these countries, as has often been the response, will do little to help anyone.

In some countries, leaders oppose the West on an ideological basis. Meaningful change will be far harder in places such as Cuba, Eritrea, Iran and Syria. But among the majority of "neutral" countries, there's real scope for improvement. For many countries, the refusal to condemn Russia outright is not an anomaly, it is the result of a long-standing strategy of non-alignment and neutrality that first found traction in the Cold War, as developing countries tried to avoid being sucked into the ideological demands of competing superpowers.

We need to be clear on when it's worth asking countries to deviate from this decades-long approach to foreign policy – and be prepared to support them when there are costs to picking a side. We also need to be clear on when it's not worth it: should we really be using finite diplomatic capital to encourage countries that have minimal sway in the war's outcome to come out in rhetorical opposition to Russia? And is it any surprise that smaller countries are unwilling to incur the wrath of Russia at a time when they are struggling to feed their own populations?

In those cases where the active support of countries really is essential, we need to be prepared to recognise that geopolitical alliances are a two-way street. Reluctance to support the West is precisely because we are seen as an unreliable partner, one that is quick to demand support when our own interests and values are at stake, but slower to offer it to other countries in need. As Michael Young, a senior editor at the Carnegie Middle East Centre, notes, tragedies in Yemen and Syria have "provoked no reactions in the West remotely comparable to the solidarity shown with Ukraine". Admittedly, these conflicts are rarely as clear-cut as Russia's invasion, but this is a criticism levelled repeatedly, making clear that a commitment to greater dialogue is missing from Western countries' engagement strategies.

So, what should we be doing going forward? The food-security crisis is a chance to demonstrate a fresh approach to our alliances that puts capacity building and self-sufficiency initiatives ahead of rhetorical bluster. Our priority should be reducing vulnerability on food security because this benefits not only developing countries but also broader global security. Boosting self-sufficiency involves avoiding protectionist measures by developed countries because they only increase panic in global food markets. Beata Javorcik, the chief economist at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, has cautioned that rising protectionism falsely inflates prices, leading to an increase in global poverty rates.

In the developing world, especially among African countries dependent on Russian and Ukrainian wheat imports, diversifying import portfolios is essential. This will mean supporting exploration of new technologies and regulatory structures to increase crop yields for the future, from gene-editing to fertiliser production. Multilateral organisations, including the World Trade Organisation, have a responsibility to encourage coordination between developed countries to prevent further price increases and ensure that goods are able to reach countries in need.

Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area must be implemented to encourage diversification and intra-regional trade. It is particularly important to note the importance of fertiliser in

ensuring self-sufficiency. As Russia is currently the largest exporter of fertiliser, this makes Europe and Africa especially vulnerable. Since several African countries have untapped reserves of the materials required to produce fertiliser, financial support should be directed towards harnessing those reserves.

Long Term: A Strategy for Western Engagement

Underpinning all these measures should be a fundamental rethinking of the West's global strategy of engagement so that we do not end up in a position where two-thirds of the world's population live under a government either neutral or sympathetic towards the invasion of a democratic country. To achieve this, we need to be a better ally and more strategic in our foreign policy. What does this mean in practice?

First, a clear strategy that identifies which countries to prioritise for engagement to create strong and sustainable global alliances. This should focus on countries whose support we need, and whose influence is strong on the countries around them.

Second, this strategy must sit alongside the right engagement plan for the world as a whole. The West must show it can be a dependable partner; engaged, loyal and straightforward, and committed to fostering sustainable and progressive development wherever it can.

Third, we need coordination among allies. Countries within the Western alliance have deeper reach in different parts of the world. The right engagement strategy does not mean a post-Brexit Britain trying to be all things to all people, for example. It requires like-minded allies working collectively to project and protect our values globally by securing the right partnerships, but it also means not closing ourselves off to those who do not share our values.

It is important that we look at the cause, not just the symptoms, of the loss of influence the West is now experiencing globally.

Conclusion

Food security as an issue is vital for the West to understand and address. In the words of Royal United Services Institute Associate Fellow Natia Seskuria: "The weaponisation of food is straight out of Vladimir Putin's war playbook. Since Russia has been unable to achieve its military goals in Ukraine, Putin is now counting on using existing vulnerabilities to achieve victory in war."

But it would be short-sighted and counterproductive to penalise developing countries because they appear to be accepting Russian support. The current situation is a wake-up call for the West on two fronts.

First, we need to engage effectively and quickly to alleviate the situation on the ground. This should not include any actions that substantially weaken sanctions, but should include steps to ease the disruption felt by countries facing immediate food insecurity. This activity should be linked with the right communications strategy to counter Russian propaganda, debunking that narrative where it is wrong, and making it clear how we are willing to act and do better when there are elements of truth.

Second, the West must repair and deepen its relationships around the world, especially those we have neglected in recent years. Russia, China and others have acted to bolster their connections in the developing world while the West has been absent or even a neglectful friend. The current crisis in Ukraine has presented short-term acute challenges, but it will not be the last geopolitical shock the world faces. For this reason, we must act to put in place the right alliances around the world.

The following steps are required to both navigate short-term threats and implement a longer-term plan.

Recommendations

1. **Ramp up short-term support.** Ensure provision of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable, but also boost investment in initiatives that promote longer-term self-sufficiency, particularly in fertiliser production, immediately.
2. **Provide extra support for those most affected.** Actively reach out to developing countries to identify any areas in which sanctions may be complicating their ability to access or afford food, fertiliser and equipment.
3. **Deploy the right communications strategy.** Do not shy away from highlighting the wilful damage that Russia is inflicting on Ukraine's farms, storage facilities and logistical capacities, which will make life difficult for developing countries not just during this year, but for many to come.
4. **Put in place the right long-term strategy.** The West urgently requires the right strategy to ensure

we are more effective and reliable partners, particularly in the developing world. We need to ensure this is a moment that accelerates, not derails, our commitment to greater capacity building in and self-sufficiency for developing countries while working to reverse our reputation as a disengaged or self-interested partner.

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