

2011 Food Price Spikes Helped Trigger Arab Spring

Difficulty:

DIFFICULT

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Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson

Today's report is about one of the possible causes of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a period during 2011 when many Arab countries faced political unrest. What possible cause is described? How did it affect the political problems? Will it happen again?

Extension discussion topics

A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text

Introduction = What was the Arab Spring and what events took place during it? What happened to food prices in 2011 and why? How did food prices affect the Arab Spring? What are the trends for world food prices and the factors affecting these trends?

1. What was the Arab Spring, and what events took place during it?

- The Arab Spring took place over 2011.
- There were protests in many Arab countries against corruption, oppression and poverty.
- Many of the Arab countries had autocratic leaders.
- High food prices put extra pressure on the people of these countries and political fires were lit.
- Egypt was one of several countries hit by food riots and demonstrations, as it had been in 2008.

Do you have any personal experience of any of the events which happened in the Arab Spring?

2. What happened to food prices during 2011 and what were the causes?

- Food prices shot up.
- There were droughts and then wildfires in Russia.
- These caused the loss of a third of Russia's wheat harvest.
- Russia then decided not to export any more of its wheat.
- High food prices are also the result of a larger world population and thus greater demand.
- In the U.S. more maize went to make ethanol fuel than to feed animals.
- Experts also say farms have been less productive because of a lack of investment in agricultural research.
- \$22 billion which was promised by the G8 for developing farming in the emerging economies in 2009 was not delivered, because of the G8 countries' economic problems.

Did you notice any changes in the prices of food this year, for example of wheat based products?

3. What are the trends for world food prices and the factors affecting these trends?

- Food prices became high back in 2008 also.
- Rises in food prices are likely to become more frequent, and prices are going to remain high and unstable.
- Small occurrences of bad weather can cause large disruptions to the world food markets and therefore also to prices.
- Climate change is going to lead to a greater incidence of bad weather.
- Farm ministers from the G20 leading and emerging economies met for the first time this year to discuss the crisis.
- But as the G20 countries have economic problems of their own, giving more money for agricultural development in emerging countries is unlikely.
- However the good news is that high prices will encourage farmers to grow more food.
- The 2011 harvest was a record, which may help to lower food prices in some regions.

If these trends continue, what other suggestions do you have to make the prices of food more stable and affordable? What might be the results of even higher food prices for different countries and for their people?

B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = Sources of food.

1. Do you grow any of your own food? If so, what, how and why? If not, would you like to be able to? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of growing your own food? Did your parents or grandparents grow more of their own food than you do? Do you know any farmers? What do they produce? Where do you buy the food which you eat; supermarket, local shop, market, or from a farm? Do you buy different things from different places? What are the benefits and disadvantages of buying food from each place?
2. What crops does your country grow - think about the different cereals, fruits and vegetables? What foodstuffs come from your country which are world famous? Are there any crops grown in your country which are not common in other countries? What are they, and what do they taste like? What dishes are they used in? What are your favorite fruits and vegetables from your own country?
3. What animals are farmed for food in your country? What animals are most popular as food eaten in your country? Does your country have access to any fish or seafood? Are any unusual animals eaten in your country? Are you, or any of your friends, vegetarians? Are there many vegetarians in your country? Is farming animals for food justified? Why are some animals eaten in some countries, but not in others e.g., dogs, pigs, or shark fins?
4. What foods, or drinks, does your country export and import? Is your country famous for any of its drinks? What is the most unusual dish eaten in your country? Do you like it, or can you cook it? Do you eat different types of food to your parents or grandparents? If so, why do you think this is?

C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = Population growth and changes.

1. The report predicts that the population of the world will increase by 2 billion to 7 billion people by 2050. What is the current population of your own country? What percentage of the world's population live in your country?
(See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population)
Is the population of your country increasing or decreasing? What reasons are there for these changes, do you think? Make a list of three factors affecting population changes in your country and compare these with a friend's list? Why are the populations of the developed world's countries decreasing? (suggestions: contraceptives; education; better employment opportunities for women, economic pressures and choices)
2. Which countries, do you think, have the fastest growing populations? Write down your top five countries and discuss your choices and reasons for them with a friend. Then compare your lists with the lists here:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_growth_rate
What do you think are the reasons behind these countries' population growth rates? Why do low-income countries seem to have larger population increases? (suggestions may include: availability of food, non-use of contraceptives, better medical care, public health, and increasing familial economic wealth). What do you think happens to population growth rates when countries become wealthier? (See this [World Bank document](#) for much more detail)
3. In many countries the population is not growing, it is decreasing. Examples of such countries are Czech Republic, Russia, and Latvia, where the birth rate has gone down in the last 100 years? Why might that be? (Suggested answer: economic uncertainty with a change of political regime.) There are also social class differences in population growth and decline rates. What do you think the different rates and reasons might be? (See this [World Bank document](#) for much more detail)
4. Imagine your country is overpopulated, having three times as many people as now. What would life be like? What major problems would arise? Would there be any advantages to such a situation? What could be done to prevent such a situation ever happening? Do you think this is likely to happen in your lifetime?

Audioscript

In a year of protests in the Arab world, high food prices helped to make oppression, corruption and poverty under autocratic leaders even more intolerable.

Political fires that burned across North Africa, many say, were kindled in Russia last summer. Extreme drought triggered wildfires and destroyed a third of the country's wheat harvest.

Russia refused to export the rest of its harvest. Markets panicked and food prices shot up, says Shenggen Fan, director-general of the International Food Policy Research Institute.

"Definitely, it is one of the factors that really caused the Arab Spring."

In 2008, the last time global food prices spiked, Egypt was one of several countries hit by food riots and demonstrations.

The return of high prices in 2011 offers some important lessons says Shenggen Fan.

"The food price hikes will come more often, and more frequent. Second, food prices obviously will remain very high."

Food prices will remain high and volatile, Fan says, because demand for food is increasing and supply is not keeping up. This year the world population hit seven billion, with another two billion expected by mid-century. People in emerging economies like China are eating more meat, which requires more animal feed.

But demand for food is just one factor, says Cornell University economist Chris Barrett. "It's also the diversion of food and feed to the production of biofuels."

In the United States, twenty eleven was the first time more maize went to make ethanol fuel than to feed animals.

Meanwhile, the pace of farm productivity gains has been slowing, Barrett says.

"What we're seeing right now is the bitter harvest of very poor investments made in agricultural research over, really, the last twenty years."

So today a few bouts of bad weather can cause serious disruptions in world food markets. And those disruptions are becoming more likely with climate change.

Farm ministers from the G20 leading and emerging economies met for the first time this year to discuss the crisis. In 2009, G8 leaders pledged twenty-two billion dollars to developing-world agriculture. But not much came of the meeting, or the pledge, from countries with financial troubles of their own.

The good news is high prices always encourage farmers to grow more. A record harvest in 2011 is helping to temper food prices in many, though not all, regions of the world.

Experts do not expect much downward movement in the cost of food. High and volatile food prices are in the forecast for 2012 and beyond.

Steve Baragona, VOA News, Washington.