**Agriculture and Food Insecurity in Israel during the “Swords of Iron” War**

Food insecurity, a chronic problem in the State of Israel, is expected to get worse due to the “Swords of Iron” war and its economic impacts.

The eighth annual *Food Waste and Rescue in Israel Report* has been published by Leket Israel and BDO. This was the fourth year that the Israel Ministry of Environmental Protection collaborated on the Report, and the first time it was published in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. While the findings in this Report pertain to 2022, its publication at this time, during the “Swords of Iron” war, makes it imperative to address the consequences of this conflict on food waste and food insecurity in Israel, and the feasibility of rescuing food in light of current events. The preliminary data presented below are primarily based on surveys that the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics conducted immediately after the outbreak of the war, and data from the Ministry of Agriculture.

The “Swords of Iron” war highlights the importance to the nation of food rescue as a key policy tool to address the problem of food insecurity. The war has caused (among other impacts), damage to Israeli agriculture, increased risk of food waste, and higher prices of agricultural produce. All of this exacerbates the problem of food insecurity. Food rescue is a means to increase food reserves and ensure food security during routine times, and even more so in times of crisis.

About 30% of the agricultural land in Israel is in the frontline areas of the war. The land bordering Gaza is known as “Israel’s vegetable patch.” About 20% of all the agricultural land in the country is in this region, including about 60% of the potato fields, 50% of the tomato fields, and 40% of the area where carrots and cabbage are grown.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, about 10% of the agricultural land lies in the frontline conflict areas in the north, including about 60% of the apple orchards and over 35% of the peach orchards. Besides agricultural crops, the northern border region is also a major production area for eggs and turkey meat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The war has damaged Israeli agriculture. Many agricultural areas in the Gaza border region and along the frontlines have become military zones. Some crops were destroyed by military activity. Agricultural fields have been abandoned, either because it is not possible to reach them, or due to a shortage of workers. The war caused a drastic decrease in agricultural workers: by some 30,000 workers, representing about 40% of the workforce in this sector industry. Of these, about 10,000 were foreign workers who left Israel and about 20,000 were Palestinian workers who have been denied entry.[[3]](#footnote-3) The result has been a mortal blow to farmers and the agriculture industry.

Ripe produce was not harvested and animals were not cared for properly, leading to an increase in food waste, a shortage of agricultural produce in the markets, and rising prices. Between October 8 and December 17, some 60,000 tons of fresh produce were imported into Israel;[[4]](#footnote-4) twice the volume of imports in corresponding months in previous years. The war has caused a significant increase in the prices of agricultural produce in the wholesale market. The price of tomatoes increased by about 50% in the week after the outbreak of the war, and in December the wholesale price was still 33% higher than it had been before the war.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In December 2023, about two months after the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Agriculture published a review with estimates of potential shortages of agricultural products in the upcoming months, which would further increase produce prices. The review indicated that during the winter months, there could be a shortage of tomatoes by an estimated 30% of the average for the season, a shortage of cucumbers by about 10% by January 2024, and that cabbage production may be lower by about 20%.

This increase in food prices, particularly fruit and vegetables, is in addition to overall damage to the economy. This may exacerbate food insecurity for needy populations, including the approximately 130,000 people who were forced to evacuate their homes. It is likely that the number of people lacking food in general will rise, and especially the number of people who are unable to consume a healthy food basket.

In 2022, the excess healthcare costs to the Israeli economy that resulted from food insecurity was NIS 5.2b, representing about 5% of national expenditures on healthcare. An increase in the number of people who are unable to consume a healthy food basket will lead to a further rise in healthcare expenses in Israel. Given this scenario of instability in the local food supply, food rescue is a tool for expanding food reserves and ensuring food security during this time of crisis.

The current reality, with more people experiencing food insecurity, and worsening food insecurity among those who were already in this situation before the war, alongside an increase in the volume of food waste, highlights the need to implement the policy tool of rescuing food and distributing it for consumption by vulnerable populations, to help them cope in this time of crisis.

1. Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, *Economic Impacts of the "Swords of Iron " War on the Agricultural Sector*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, [*United for Victory!*](https://www.cbs.gov.il/EN/Pages/default.aspx) (<https://www.cbs.gov.il/EN/Pages/default.aspx>) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Data from the Ministry of Agriculture. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Data from the Ministry of Agriculture. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ministry of Agriculture, [Domestic Producer Price Index](Domestic%20Producer%20Price%20Index), prices of agricultural products in Israel (<https://prices.moag.gov.il/#/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)