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

The problem of food insecurity is expected to become worse as a result of 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 the Ministry of Health collaborated on it. While the findings of this Report pertain to 2022, a section has been added with a preliminary discussion of the consequences of the war on food waste and food insecurity in Israel, and the feasibility of food rescue in light of the current events.

Food rescue is a tool for expanding food reserves and ensuring food security during normal times as well as in times of crisis. The Swords of Iron war highlights the importance to the nation of implementing food rescue as a key policy tool to address the problem of food insecurity. This war has harmed vulnerable populations in Israel, and exacerbated food insecurity on two levels.

1. **Less food is available for rescue, as a result of damage to local agriculture.**

The war has decreased the amount of agricultural produce available in the market, and has increased food waste due to:

* Loss of approximately 30,000 foreign and Palestinian workers, who represent about 40% of the workforce in the industry
* Restricted access to approximately 30% of the agricultural areas in Israel located in the Western Negev and the conflict areas
* The result has been an increase in imported food by 60,000 tons, and double-digit increases in the prices of agricultural products

About 30% of Israel’s agricultural land lies in the frontline areas of the war. About 20% of all the country’s agricultural land is located in the area around Gaza, which is known as “Israel’s vegetable patch.” This includes about 60% of the potato fields, 50% of tomato fields, and 40% of the areas where carrot and cabbage are grown.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, about 10% of Israel’s agricultural land is in the northern frontline conflict areas. This includes about 60% of the apple orchards and over 35% of the peach orchards. The northern border is also a major source of eggs and turkey meat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Many agricultural areas in the Gaza border region and along the frontlines have become military zones. Crops have been destroyed by military activity, and fields have been abandoned, either because it is impossible to reach them, or because there is nobody to work the land. One immediate impact of the war was the loss of approximately 30,000 agricultural workers, representing about 40% of the workforce in the industry. This includes about 10,000 foreign workers who left Israel, and about 20,000 Palestinian workers who are no longer given permits to enter Israel.[[3]](#footnote-3) The result has been a fatal blow to farmers and the agriculture industry.

Ripe agricultural produce was not harvested, and animals were not properly cared for. This increased food waste, and caused a shortage of produce in the markets, and higher prices. To deal with this shortage, between October 8 and December 1, Israel imported an additional 60,000 tons of fresh produce; twice the volume of imports during corresponding months in previous years.[[4]](#footnote-4) The main countries from which produce is being imported during this war are Turkey, representing about 44% of the imported produce, Jordan, which sends about 14% of the imported produce, and the Netherlands, with about 11% of the imported produce. Experience has shown that replacing local production with imports does not resolve the problem of food insecurity that was caused by damage to agriculture, because it is accompanied by a sharp increase in prices.

1. **Higher prices for agricultural products decrease food security and lower the standard of living due to:**

* Double-digit increases in the prices for fruit and vegetables
* Decreased economic growth and diminished purchasing power

Despite the increased imports, the war has caused in a significant increase in the wholesale prices of agricultural products. In the first week after the outbreak of war, tomato prices rose by about 50%, and by December the wholesale price was still 33% higher than it had been just before the war. The price of cucumbers increased by about 90% during this time. The price of potatoes rose by about 40% in the first two weeks of the fighting, and by December the wholesale price was still about 20% higher than their pre-war price.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is expected that the war will continue to impact the supply of agricultural produce. It has been predicted that this winter there will be a shortage of tomatoes to the extent of about 30% of the average production, a 10% shortage of cucumbers by January 2024, and that cabbage production will be lower by about 20%.[[6]](#footnote-6) These shortfalls have a dual impact. Decreased agricultural production limits the potential for rescuing food in the field and distributing it to people in need. Additionally, increased prices of agricultural products mean that disadvantaged populations will eat even less fruit and vegetables.

Higher food prices, especially the prices of fruit and vegetables, alongside damage to the economy as a whole, and especially to small, independently-owned businesses, the families of military conscripts, and evacuated families, plus higher unemployment rates, will exacerbate food insecurity among disadvantaged populations, and increase the number of people lacking food. This Report, as well as the *Report on Poverty and Social Gaps Report for 2022* published by the Israel National Insurance Institute (Bituach Leumi), have shown a positive correlation between economic status and accessibility to healthy food. The war is expected to increase the number of people who are unable to consume a healthy food basket.

The *Food Waste and Rescue in Israel Report* published this year includes, for the first time, an examination of the health costs of food insecurity. The excess healthcare costs in 2022 to the Israeli economy due to food insecurity were NIS 5.2 billion, equivalent to about 5% of the total national expenditures on healthcare. A larger number of people unable to consume a healthy food basket will further increase healthcare costs in Israel.

The current situation as a result of the war, including an unstable local food supply and higher prices, highlights the importance of local Israeli agriculture for the country’s resilience and continued existence. The government’s policy of importing produce did not successfully solve the problem of rising prices and the shortage of produce that resulted from this crisis. Even during routine times, importing agricultural produce cannot adequately ensure food security, and even represents a risk to it.

The economic reality after this war will be a larger percentage of the population facing food insecurity, and an exacerbation of the situation for those already experiencing food insecurity. At the same time, a greater volume of food is being wasted. This highlights the need to implement a policy tool of rescuing food and distributing it for consumption by vulnerable populations, to help them cope, also in times 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](file:///Users/avivaloew/Downloads/Domestic%20Producer%20Price%20Index), prices of agricultural products in Israel (<https://prices.moag.gov.il/#/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Data from the Ministry of Agriculture [↑](#footnote-ref-6)