

High Food Prices, Revolutions, and the Future



Reuters

A vendor exchanges money with a customer at a shop selling garlic, onions and potatoes at a wholesale market in Mumbai. India's food price index rose 8.76 percent in the year to April 16, government data showed.

VOA Special English (voaspecialenglish.com) is Voice of America's daily news and information service for English learners. Read the story and then do the activities at the end.

This is the VOA Special English Agriculture Report.

Food prices are down from their record highs in February. But prices are still higher than they were a year ago. In a year of Arab protests, high food prices helped fuel the anger against oppression, corruption and poverty.

Many experts think the political fires that burned across North Africa and the Middle East started last year in the wheat fields of Russia. A combination of heat, drought and wildfires during the summer of twenty-ten destroyed one-third of Russia's winter wheat crop. World food prices rose after Russia halted wheat exports.

Shenggen Fan is head of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington. He links higher food prices to the uprisings in Egypt and other Arab countries.

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

The last time food prices jumped was in two thousand eight. At that time, Egypt was also among the countries where food riots and demonstrations took place.

Ghiyath Nakshbendi is a professor in the Department of International Business at American University in Washington. He agrees that food prices played a part in the Arab revolutions.

GHIYATH NAKSHBENDI: "At the end of the day, the most crucial reason for the Arab Spring is basically economic. And so consequently when a citizen cannot have enough money to purchase food and feed his family, definitely that will create a kind of upset with the system."

Professor Nakshbendi says an event like climate change can affect food production in many countries. But in a globally connected economy, even an event in one country can be felt worldwide.

GHIYATH NAKSHBENDI: "Something happening in Thailand is going to have an impact on rice export to other countries."

Cornell University economist Chris Barrett says another problem is that gains in farm production have slowed.

CHRIS BARRETT: "What we are seeing right now is the bitter harvest of very poor investments in agriculture research over really the last twenty years."

Shenggun Fan says the return of high prices in twenty-eleven offers some important lessons. If investment in food production does not increase, he says, then the world will continue to see high prices.

SHENGGUN FAN: "Food price hikes will come more often and more frequent. Second, food prices obviously will remain very high."

He says food supplies are not growing enough to meet the demand of seven billion people. The world is expected to add two billion more by the middle of the century. And people in emerging economies like China are eating more meat, which requires more animal feed. But in twenty-eleven, for the first time, the United States used more maize, or corn, for biofuels than for animal feed.

The good news is that high prices always encourage farmers to grow more. A record harvest in twenty-eleven is helping to ease food prices in many parts of the world, but not all.

Now do the worksheet ...

Level: intermediate

Time: 20 -30 minutes

This worksheet will help you learn new vocabulary about the economy. You will answer questions about high food prices, and write a short paragraph about the price of food in your country.

1. Match the words on the left with the words on the right to make five phrases. Write the phrase on the line. The phrases are in the article.

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-------|
| a. food | 1. food prices | _____ |
| b. high | 2. economies | _____ |
| c. Arab | 3. change | _____ |
| d. climate | 4. prices | _____ |
| e. emerging | 5. revolutions | _____ |

2. What does *high food prices* mean?

- it costs less money to buy food
 it costs more money to buy food

3. Look again at the title of the article: *High Food Prices, Revolutions, and the Future*. What is the article about?

- the cost of food leads to revolutions in some countries
 the high cost of food is good for the future

4. Complete the blanks in the following sentences with *lower* or *higher*.

Food prices are _____ than their record highs in February. But prices are still _____ than they were a year ago.

5. What did high food prices lead to in the Arab protests?

- anger against oppression
 anger against healthy food
 anger against corruption
 anger against poverty

6. What destroyed one-third of Russia's winter wheat crop in 2010?

7. Who is head of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington?
[] Shenggen Fan
[] Ghiyath Nakshbendi
[] Chris Barrett
8. Who says an event like climate change can affect food production in many countries?
[] Shenggen Fan
[] Ghiyath Nakshbendi
[] Chris Barrett
9. Complete the following sentence with two words to make it true.

Chris Barrett says one problem is that gains in _____ have slowed.

10. What is a record harvest in 2011 helping to do?

OVER TO YOU

Are food prices higher than usual in your country right now? Has the price gone up or down in the past year?

Write 5-8 sentences explaining your answer.

ANSWER KEY

- 1.** food prices, high food prices, Arab revolutions, climate change, emerging economies
- 2.** it costs more money to buy food
- 3.** the cost of food leads to revolutions in some countries
- 4.** lower, higher
- 5.** anger against oppression, anger against corruption, anger against poverty
- 6.** A combination of heat, drought and wildfires
- 7.** Shenggen Fan
- 8.** Ghiyath Nakshbendi
- 9.** farm production
- 10.** ease food prices in many parts of the world