IDA RUDOLFSEN
DEVELOPMENT DISSERTATION BRIEF

FOOD INSECURITY AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

EBA

Food Insecurity and Social Conflict

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Ida Rudolfsen is a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). She has published work in international outlets such as the Journal of Peace Research, Research and Politics, Terrorism and Political Violence and International Studies Quarterly. The report summarizes the findings from the dissertation "Fighting for Food? Investigating Food Insecurity as a Source of Urban Unrest" (Rudolfsen, 2021). The dissertation was defended at Uppsala University, 3 December 2021. Faculty opponent was Professor Idean Salehyan, University of North Texas. Supervisors were Hanne Fjelde and Halvard Buhaug.

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Sammanfattning

Denna Development Dissertation Brief (DDB) sammanfattar resultaten av en doktorsavhandling som har utforskat sambandet mellan osäker livsmedelsförsörjning och urban instabilitet. Avhandlingen utgår från ett mångfacetterat perspektiv på osäker livsmedelsförsörjning och bristande tillgång till livsmedel, och undersöker dess effekt på medborgarnas vilja att medverka i sociala oroligheter och konflikter i städer, samt hur olika organisatoriska nätverk påverkar detta. Avhandlingen bidrar till tidigare forskning på området genom en fördjupad analys av en otrygg livsmedelsförsörjning. Den består av fyra separata uppsatser, där den första uppsatsen ger en översikt över litteraturen om otrygg livsmedelsförsörjning och social turbulens. De tre återstående är statistiska analyser, varav en fokuserar på urbana Afrika och två specifikt på Johannesburg, Sydafrika. Resultatet visar att en osäker livsmedelstillgång medför en ökad risk för oroligheter och konflikter.

Abstract

This development dissertation brief (DDB) summarizes the findings of a doctoral dissertation that explores the relationship between food insecurity and urban unrest. The dissertation employs a multifaceted conceptualization of food insecurity to examine its effect on citizens' willingness to participate in unrest and how organizational networks moderate this relationship. The dissertation contributes to existing literature by going beyond aggregate food insecurity proxies and direct effects. It consists of four independent essays, with the first essay providing an overview of the literature on food insecurity and social upheaval. The three remaining are large-N analyses; one focusing on urban Africa and two on Johannesburg, South Africa. The dissertation suggests that food-related grievances and a favourable organizational context significantly influence the likelihood of urban unrest.

Introduction

The number of food insecure people worldwide has increased in recent years due to factors such as protracted armed conflict, weather extremes and drought, and economic downturns. This trend has been further aggravated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic due to income loss, disrupted supply chains and transportation costs. As an additional shock, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further affected the global trade of food and fertilizer prices, leading to shortages and record high international food prices (FAO 2023). All these factors combined have undermined decades of development efforts. With the increasing number of food insecure, the social consequences of the food price fluctuations from the mid-2000s, and the current food price hike occurring worldwide, there is increasing worry about the impact of food insecurity on social upheaval.

Under what conditions does food insecurity lead to urban unrest? This brief builds on a doctoral thesis on the relationship between food insecurity and social conflict (Rudolfsen, 2021). The thesis finds that experienced food insecurity and a favourable organizational environment increases the likelihood of urban unrest.

Core concepts

Food insecurity

The concept of food insecurity has various interpretations and definitions, leading to a long-standing debate on the most appropriate way to measure it (Hendriks, 2015; Cafiero et al. 2018). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) provides the most widely recognized definition, stating that food security exists when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary

needs and food preferences for an active healthy life". (FAO, 1996). This definition encompasses four dimensions of food security: food availability (sufficient quantities of food available), food access (individuals' access to adequate resources and entitlements), utilization (adequate utilization of food through sufficient supplies), and stability (the risk of food insecurity due to interruptions in availability, access, and utilization) (FAO, 2008). Regardless of the definition, the focus is on the threats and changes to the individual's nutritional status.

The concept of food insecurity has evolved from a focus on food availability to a focus on food access. This shift is based on the influential work by Sen (1982) and reflects the view that food insecurity is more about poverty and vulnerability than agricultural productivity. The emphasis is on consumption rather than production because access to food is closely linked to an individual's or a household's well-being, and their ability to make food choices from the available options. In this context, food insecurity is understood as the inability of individuals or households to acquire food from the marketplace or other sources, with an emphasis on food access (Barrett 2010, Webb et al., 2006). However, it is acknowledged that accessibility, availability, and utilization are interconnected and hierarchical in nature, with food availability being necessary but insufficient for access, and access being necessary but insufficient for utilization (Webb et al., 2006, 1405S).

Food insecurity is often viewed as a spectrum that ranges from food security to severe deprivation in terms of food needs. Mild levels of food insecurity can include concerns about food, while moderate levels may involve reduced food consumption. Severe food insecurity refers to situations where people consume insufficient amounts of food and experience hunger (Saint Ville et al., 2019; Frongillo et al. 2017). An adequate intake is achieved when an individual is food secure and meets all the criteria outlined in the FAO's definition. However, when theorizing about mobilization potential and

unrest behavior, food insecurity should not be viewed as a linear or stepwise experience. Instead, it is a complex phenomenon with multiple facets, and individuals can experience different combinations of food insecurity simultaneously. For example, worrying about food is typically considered a mild form of food insecurity, but it can have a significant impact on an individual's mobilization potential. I therefore conceptualize different types of food insecurity as distinct facets, where individuals who experience multiple dimensions of food insecurity at the same time are likely to experience a higher intensity of food insecurity. Thus, I see the different types of food insecurity as both distinct and interconnected.

Urban unrest

The main objective of all the essays in this dissertation is to study urban unrest, which is a term used to describe various forms of collective action in cities. Collective action refers to a coordinated effort by several individuals to pursue common interests, and this dissertation focuses on such collective efforts in urban areas. The essays examine different types of urban unrest that are non-routine and outside of institutionalized politics and elections. However, I do not view urban unrest as simply a violation of rules, as it also includes peaceful demonstrations and legal strikes. This non-routine collective action can be either organized or spontaneous, violent or non-violent, and may be regular or irregular, legitimate or illegitimate (see e.g. Tilly 1978; Opp 2009; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). I adopt the definition provided by Salehyan et al. (2012) for demonstrations, which are defined as a distinct and ongoing peaceful activity that is aimed at specific groups or state authorities. Similarly, I define riots as a distinct and continuous violent activity aimed at specific groups or state authorities, with the intention of causing harm to individuals and/or property. Both demonstrations and riots can occur either spontaneously or through

organized leadership. Furthermore, I define a strike as the organized withdrawal of labour by members of a union or organization from their workplaces and public facilities.

Knowledge gap and research question

The latest estimate from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) suggests that between 702 and 828 million people experienced hunger in 2021. In 2023, global food prices, despite being lower than in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are still at record high levels (see figure 1).

Figure 1: FAO food price index 2020–2023

Ref: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
https://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en
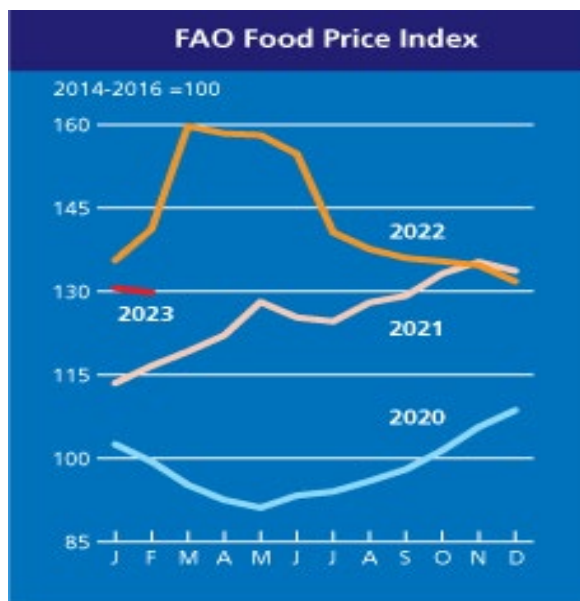
In both 2008–09 and 2010–11, significant food price shocks occurred, resulting in widespread unrest across several regions, including Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East (Abbott and de Battisti, 2011; Tadesse et al., 2014; Watson, 2017; Demarest, 2014; Sneyd et al. 2015). As the number of food-insecure individuals continues to rise, combined with the food price fluctuations since the mid-2000s and the current global food price hike, there is a growing interest in and attention to the impact of food insecurity on social upheaval (Durisin, 2021; Gopaldas and Ndhlovu, 2021).

In recent years, a growing number of scientific studies have examined the link between food insecurity and domestic instability (Abbs, 2020; Bellemare, 2015; Raleigh, Choi and Kniveton, 2015; Smith, 2014; Arezki and Brückner, 2014; Berazneva and Lee, 2013, Bush, 2010; De Winne and Peersman 2021; Jones et al. 2017), building on a large historical literature (see e.g. Tilly, 1971; Popkin, 1979; Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976, Walton and Seddon 1994). Despite the diverse theoretical pathways suggested in the literature, there is a growing consensus that food insecurity predicts social unrest, particularly in urban areas where food prices are rising (Rudolfsen, 2020). However, while food insecurity is a common and widespread issue, social instability is relatively rare, raising questions about the circumstances under which food-related unrest may occur (Hendrix and Haggard, 2015; Heslin, 2021; Weinberg and Bakker 2015, Simmons, 2016).

While established evidence links food insecurity and unrest, lack of food alone may not be enough to trigger a revolt. Therefore, the question remains: Under which conditions does food-related unrest occur? The existing literature's emphasis on grievances alone appears insufficient in explaining food-related unrest, and the variation in outcomes calls for going beyond aggregate proxies and direct effects. Therefore, a more nuanced

understanding of food insecurity is needed, along with a contextually sensitive approach to the relationship between food and social instability, to advance our understanding of food-related conflicts.

To address this gap, the dissertation theorizes and systematically explores the conditions under which food insecurity leads to unrest. The thesis introduces a multifaceted conceptualization of experienced food insecurity and a context-specific framework for food-related unrest. The proposed argument is that the interaction between the specific context of organizational networks and the experienced intensity of food insecurity has much explanatory leverage in our understanding of the conditions under which food-related unrest occurs.

The dissertation includes one comprehensive literature review and three empirical studies that assess the relative importance of food insecurity and its interaction with organizational conditions for mobilization potential, at both macro and micro levels. The studies use a variety of research designs and methods, including observational data and experimental designs both at the country-month level from urban Africa and at the individual level from Johannesburg, South Africa. The dissertation argues and shows that the relationship between food and unrest is conditional on the intensity of experienced food insecurity and the presence of favourable contextual conditions in the form of organizational networks.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used emphasizes that for individuals to engage in collective action, they must experience dissatisfaction with their situation and have the means to act collectively to address grievances (Gurr, 1970; Oberschall, 1978; Olson, 1965). Thus, while the thesis argues that food insecurity affects urban unrest by contributing to deprivation, it also asserts

that the occurrence of unrest is dependent on the severity of the experienced food insecurity and the organizational opportunities available for collective action in response to food-related grievances.

Motivation

In order to shed light on an individual's motivation for participating in collective action in response to growing food insecurity, I rely on theories of perceived grievance. Broadly speaking, grievances can be understood as a response to perceived unfair treatment, which can take the form of both absolute and relative deprivation. Absolute deprivation refers to the bare minimum subsistence necessary for survival (Maslow, 1965; Sen, 1982), while relative deprivation pertains to a negative shift in an individual's food security status (Østby, 2008; Stewart, 2011). The perceived negative shift in food security can arise from various factors, such as temporal changes or disparities between different groups. For instance, rising food prices may increase pressure on household budgets and exacerbate grievances, while some groups may be better equipped to deal with these changes or even benefit from them. Deprivation-induced discontent is a necessary condition for collective action, highlighting the role of perceived injustice in triggering social unrest.

Capacity

Grievances related to food represent a plausible theoretical mechanism for why urban unrest occurs. At the same time, whether we see unrest or not is likely to be conditional on more static contextual conditions that enable collective action. Individuals must have the capacity to mobilize to address grievances. This is shaped by the available networks and resources, contingent on the opportunity structure given by the domestic institutional

setting. Previous research suggests that integration within social networks is an important precursor for participation in unrest (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Butcher and Svensson 2016; Dorff 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2018; Ley, 2022; Parkinson, 2013). The thesis therefore also draws on theories that focus on the presence of mobilizing structures in the form of organizational networks, both in terms of providing established mobilizing structures and framing food-related grievances (Benford and Snow, 2000; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Opp, 2009; Oberschall, 1978; Olson, 1965).

Food insecurity is a widespread issue among the poor, who often lack organizational support. However, the existence of societal organizations can provide mobilization potential for collective action, which is crucial for transforming individual grievances into collective dissent. I argue that organizational networks are especially important for addressing food insecurity because they provide existing mobilizing structures that people can benefit from. These networks can easily marshal resources and provide an infrastructure for mobilization, which is crucial for individuals who are time-constrained due to their food insecurity. Additionally, food insecurity is often perceived as an individual-level issue, which makes it difficult to politicize on a broader scale. In this context, societal organizations can play a crucial role in translating food-related grievances into a community-based phenomenon by using existing resources and channels. Therefore, societal organizations can politicize food insecurity through grievance frames and transform a ubiquitous individual-level grievance into a group phenomenon.

To understand food-related unrest, we also need to consider the macro level, which refers to the political opportunity structure within which individuals and groups operate. The state influences the extent and nature of food insecurity and the degree of freedom for organizing. Repressive states can create high levels of food insecurity and quell resistance, making collective action difficult. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical linkages in the thesis

between food insecurity, the organizational context, and urban unrest. The presence of societal organizations affects the relationship between food-related grievances and individual unrest activities by influencing feasibility. The depth of experienced food insecurity combined with the presence of organizational networks can lead to collective action. Food grievances and mobilization capacity jointly shape contention.

Figure 2: Suggested theoretical linkages between food insecurity and urban unrest in the thesis
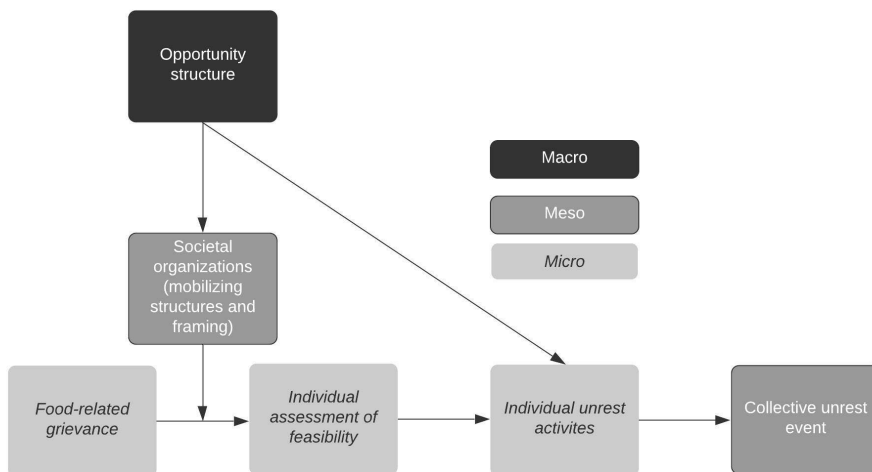
Source: The figure is developed by the author and features in the thesis.

Methods and data

The dissertation is based on empirical material collected through one cross-national study covering urban centres in 41 African countries between 1990 and 2014, and two individual-level studies using survey data from

Johannesburg, South Africa. Each study uses different research designs and methods to explore the relationship between food insecurity and urban unrest.

I investigate the issue of food-related unrest utilizing cross-sectional time-series data covering urban Africa from 1990 to 2014, including monthly domestic food prices (International Labour Organization) and data on urban unrest from the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD) (Salehyan et al., 2012). Though not directly measuring food insecurity, the use of food price fluctuations is established in the literature and has concrete implications for food insecurity. I also sought to understand if unrest participation by individuals is influenced by food insecurity. Therefore, I collected original survey data from Johannesburg, South Africa in 2017. Most current literature uses aggregate proxies to measure food insecurity, which limits attempts to directly test theoretical assumptions about individual-level food insecurity and unrest participation. Using survey data enables the study of various dimensions of food insecurity directly, such as experienced hunger, reduced food consumption, and the extent to which people worry about food. This approach mitigates the risk of measurement error that arises when using proxies, such as the percentage of cropland, which may capture aspects unrelated to food insecurity.

Findings

Based on the four independent studies, the dissertation finds that food insecurity increases the likelihood of various forms of urban unrest. The risk of urban unrest increases with the experienced intensity of food insecurity, and when the organizational context facilitates collective action. Below, I present a summary of the findings of the dissertation's the four essays.

Summary of the essays

Essay 1

The first study, titled 'Food insecurity and domestic instability: A review of the literature', has been published in the journal Terrorism *and Political Violence*. It provides an analysis of the existing literature on the relationship between food insecurity and social unrest. The essay gives an overview of this rapidly growing research field and synthesizes its main empirical findings and explanations.

Given the vastness of this literature, which spans different periods, regions, and theoretical and methodological approaches, it can be challenging to identify commonalities. Nevertheless, the essay suggests that deprivation lies at the heart of how food relates to unrest. However, the source of grievance tends to vary across studies, with theoretical mechanisms operating at the individual, group, and state levels.

While the literature on food insecurity and unrest has grown significantly, unsettled issues and room for theoretical and empirical advancement remain. The essay identifies four specific challenges that should be addressed in order to push the research field forward. The first challenge is related to the various definitions of food insecurity and the different theoretical mechanisms proposed, which tend to be empirically tested in a similar way. Going forward, it is necessary to explicitly define the understanding of food insecurity that underpins the research, what aspects of food insecurity are in focus, and how this understanding relates to unrest. Secondly, the definition of food insecurity should have implications for empirical tests, and the theoretical definition of food insecurity and how it is captured in the applied measurement should be made explicit. The third challenge facing the literature on food insecurity and unrest is that it tends to primarily focus on "food riots", which assumes that such events are the typical or expected response to food insecurity. However,

it is unclear if this is always the case, and there are other potential forms of food-related unrest that could occur, including peaceful and violent demonstrations, communal conflicts, and even civil wars. Future research should either broaden the scope of potential outcomes or establish a more clearly defined type of unrest based on theoretical expectations. Finally, there is also room for improvement in terms of causal inference within the research field of food insecurity and social conflict.

Essay 2

The second study, entitled 'Food price increase and urban unrest: The role of societal organizations', is published in the *Journal of Peace Research*. It investigates the variation in public reactions to food price increases. The paper emphasizes the role of state institutions in shaping people's ability to mobilize and engage in collective action over food. The essay argues that food-related grievances are typically mass-based and lack organizational support, and when active societal organizations focus on increasing food prices, this can increase the risk of urban unrest by politicizing the cost of food. The essay contends that the degree to which states repress societal organizations moderates the relationship between increasing food prices and urban unrest. The availability of organizational space for these groups helps explain why unrest during food price shocks occurs in some instances but not in others. The essay uses data on urban unrest, food price fluctuations, and civil society organizations and political party organizations in urban Africa between 1990 and 2014. The findings suggest that a constrained or repressed organizational environment reduces the likelihood of urban unrest when food prices increase, but it is not the most open societies that see the most unrest. Moderate repression and barriers to formation are more likely to trigger unrest.

Essay 3

The third study, a working paper titled 'Nothing compares? Investigating the cost of food as a driver of urban unrest', is co-authored with Todd G. Smith. It examines the role of food prices in driving collective action in comparison to other living expenses. While previous research has identified food prices as a key contributor to social unrest due to its importance for basic survival, price visibility, symbolism, volatility, and inelasticity of demand, it is unclear how consumers view food relative to other living expenses, and whether it is a more powerful driver of unrest behaviour.

To investigate this, the paper uses an individual-level approach, where consumers are asked about their willingness to engage in unrest following an increase in the price of food, fuel, and electricity. We employ a research design that takes into account endogeneity and use a vignette experiment, where respondents are randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions consisting of fictional news stories about upcoming price hikes. The study maps consumer reactions and explores how information on different commodity price hikes affects the willingness to engage in unrest, using data from Johannesburg, South Africa.

The study does not support the proposition that food prices are a more potent driver of unrest behaviour than other living expenses. While previous observational research has shown that food prices are related to social upheaval, the study does not find additional evidence that the price of food is a stronger motivator than other living expenses for engaging in unrest activity.

Essay 4

The fourth essay in the dissertation is entitled 'Food insecurity and unrest participation: Evidence from Johannesburg, South Africa', and is forthcoming in the journal *International Studies Quarterly*. It investigates the proposition that

food insecurity motivates unrest participation. While there is emerging agreement in the literature that food insecurity leads to social upheaval, the relationship remains theoretically and empirically ambiguous. Existing work on the issue of food-related unrest tend to study the relationship at the aggregate level, using proxies. The study therefore contributes to the literature by studying experienced food insecurity and unrest participation at the individual level.

In the essay, I emphasize the importance of both motivation and capacity for unrest participation over food. I argue that the experienced intensity of food insecurity increases the motivation to participate in unrest. To assess when the willingness is more likely to lead to participation, I argue that the presence of structural conditions in the form of organizational networks would be especially beneficial for the emergence of collective action over food. This is both because high levels of food insecurity can have negative effects on mobilization potential, and because the mundane nature of food as a grievance often causes it to remain an invisible issue. Organizational networks could facilitate participation in unrest over food by both providing mobilization structures and politicizing grievances related to food.

I evaluate the relationship between food insecurity and unrest participation in the context of Johannesburg, South Africa. I find that higher experienced intensity of food insecurity predicts unrest participation. I find the strongest effect for participation in demonstrations and strikes, but lower certainty regarding participation in violence. Also, I find that organizational networks moderate the effect of food insecurity on unrest participation. Looking at the types of organizational network separately, it appears that union ties drive the interaction effect, whereas community and political party ties have less explanatory power.

Contributions to the field

The thesis makes several contributions to our knowledge about food insecurity and social conflict. First, a central contribution of the thesis is its incorporation of a multi-dimensional conceptualization of food insecurity. In prior quantitative studies of food-related unrest, changes in food prices have often been used as a proxy for food insecurity (e.g., Hendrix and Haggard, 2015; Smith, 2014). To address the limitations of objective proxies and to reduce the risk of measurement error, the dissertation also applies an experiential and subjective understanding of food insecurity. Previous studies have paid little attention to individual-level food insecurity and its relationship with unrest participation. Thus, the dissertation investigates the impact of increasing food prices while also examining the multiple dimensions of experienced food insecurity at the individual level. The experience of food insecurity can vary significantly among individuals within the same country, and this is something that cross-national studies are unable to account for. Second, the four studies shift the focus from examining the direct effects of food insecurity on unrest to examining the conditional relationship between the two using both micro and macro data.

The thesis advances our knowledge of the micro-level factors that contribute to the relationship between food insecurity and social unrest. This is achieved by studying this relationship at the individual level and examining whether food has a unique mobilizing potential. Secondly, while each essay provides specific insights, the thesis as a whole contributes to our understanding of food-related unrest by taking a disaggregated approach that emphasizes the significance of experienced food insecurity intensity and the organizational context in which it arises.

Ways forward

The dissertation offers directions for future research. Firstly, it emphasizes the need to comprehend the relative significance of food as a trigger for collective action. While parts of the literature emphasize the fundamental nature of food, some studies suggest that it functions as a catalyst for unrest over various issues. I suggest that both are relevant, in that food insecurity serves as a fundamental grievance that affects the willingness to engage in unrest over a range of issues, while food price shocks can act as a pretext for expressing a range of grievances. However, more precise measurements and research designs are required to assess the importance of these suggested mechanisms accurately.

Secondly, it is important to assess not only the impact of increasing food prices but also of rapidly decreasing prices and their effects on poverty and mobilization potential among consumers and producers. Although increasing food prices can have adverse effects on urban consumers, little is known about how the net effect of increased incomes versus increased food costs affects mobilization potential. There is also a parallel literature that suggests that a decrease in agricultural yields increases the risk of conflict through lower opportunity costs. Therefore, future research can investigate how both increasing and decreasing food prices may lead to different outcomes depending on consumer/producer categories.

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Under what conditions does food insecurity lead to urban unrest? This Development Dissertation Brief answers this question by examining the effect of food insecurity on citizens' willingness to participate in unrest and how different organizational networks moderate this relationship. The results show that food-related grievances may significantly influence the likelihood of urban unrest.

På vilket sätt bidrar osäker livsmedelstillgång i städer till social turbulens och oroligheter i låg- och medelinkomstländer? Denna rapport studerar effekten av osäker livsmedelstillgång på medborgares deltagande i sociala oroligheter. Resultatet visar att en osäker livsmedelstillgång i kombination med olika organisatoriska förutsättningar kan öka risken för oroligheter avsevärt.

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