

CONFLICT AND HUNGER

Context Analysis and Policy Response



The link between conflict and hunger has come into sharper focus over the last decade, with more violent conflicts breaking out and lasting longer. International reports¹ on food insecurity have illustrated this link between conflict and hunger particularly in humanitarian settings.

I use the term conflict to describe armed conflict and violence by government and non-government actors, between and within countries.

Conflict causes hunger. Conflict is not the only cause of hunger but is the major driver of global hunger today. Recent reports show conflict to be the main cause of hunger for the highest number of most food insecure people and stunted children². This was also the case between 1990 to 2015, where all but one of the countries with deteriorating food security were conflict-affected .

Does hunger cause conflict? The reverse relationship is not as clear cut. The example often used to illustrate hunger causing conflict is the 2011 protests in North Africa and the Middle East that toppled governments or sparked civil war. Early research pointed to high food prices, especially the price of grain, as a cause of the 2011 protests and earlier 2008 riots⁴. Later research⁵ reveals this not to be accurate in the case of Tunisia where the price was stable. Other factors, such as political, were identified as more significant causes of the conflict. While hunger may not be the single or major cause of conflict, it certainly contributes to conflict.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF CONFLICT AND HUNGER

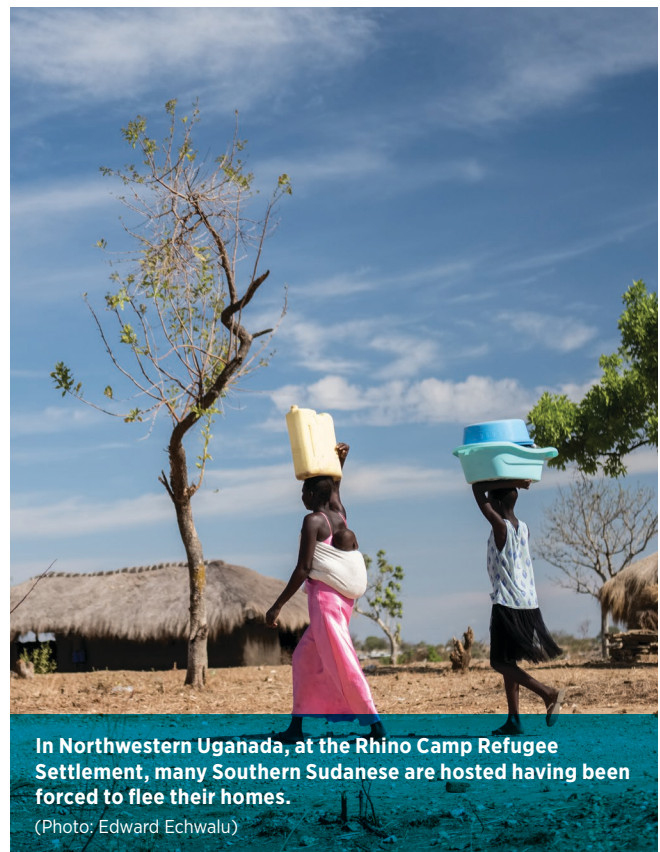
In every context of violent conflict, there is hunger. In many cases, violent conflict happens in areas where hunger is already a challenge alongside other factors such as political unrest, ineffective governance and lack of socio-economic prospects.

A deeper understanding of the different contexts of conflict and hunger is essential to designing effective

responses that meet immediate needs with longer term strategies to deal with the causes of hunger. If conflict is the major cause of hunger, we must not only respond to hunger, but also respond to conflict as the major cause of hunger.

How conflict causes hunger

As soon as violent conflict breaks out, some people are injured or killed and others are forced to flee, often carrying very little with them. Violence disrupts the daily life of those in conflict-affected areas who can no longer go to work or school because of the risk of encountering violence enroute. Many of those who flee, quickly run out of money to buy food. Those who stay are not able to move around to make money, tend to farms or buy food. Widespread violence shuts down markets and destroys infrastructure.



In Northwestern Uganda, at the Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement, many Southern Sudanese are hosted having been forced to flee their homes.

(Photo: Edward Echwalu)

When conflict goes on for months or years, the situation deteriorates even further. As people flee or hide from the violence, their social networks break down. Farming is no longer safe. Crops in the field and stored grain become a target for those fighting. As agriculture and livestock keeping is abandoned, the supply of varied nutritious food goes down, and the little food available becomes expensive. Over the months and years, the constant hunger leads to high levels of malnutrition and illness with long-lasting effects on the health of those affected, particularly children.

For three years running, from 2018 to 2020, three conflict-affected countries, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen and Afghanistan, had the largest number of people experiencing crisis⁶ levels of hunger or greater⁷. Six of the ten worst food crises in 2020 (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, Afghanistan, Syrian Arab Republic, Nigeria and South Sudan) had regions that have been in conflict for many years.

Conflict remains the major cause of humanitarian hunger, not only because of the devastating impact of conflict on the population, but because conflict also prevents humanitarian responders from reaching those affected with much needed supplies and emergency services.

How hunger triggers conflict

Hunger can be a contributing factor to conflict. In countries that rely on imports for staple foods, a rise in global food prices may make food unaffordable for those with limited income. The lack of affordable food can be used as a tool to get support for public demonstrations that capture the attention of national and international governments. Food is an easy rallying call for protestors seeking greater changes in governance and development. In 2011, demonstrators in Tunisia chanted, “We Want Bread and Water and No Ben Ali”⁸ to protest poverty, unemployment and dictatorship⁹.

Hunger also makes a conflict more deadly. Parties in conflict have used the supply or denial of food and humanitarian supplies as a strategy to punish their opponents or reward their supporters. For example, in the ongoing conflict in Yemen, both parties of the conflict have at different times either denied food to get the population to surrender or have diverted humanitarian food assistance¹⁰. When hunger is used

2018-
2020



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to advance conflict goals, it deepens humanitarian suffering. The extreme case of this is famine.

Famine: the worst-case scenario of conflict and hunger

Famine is rare. In the last decade, there have been only two declarations of famine. Famine declarations are area specific; for example, famine was declared in some areas of southern Somalia from August to September 2011, and in parts of South Sudan in January 2017.

Declaring a famine is a rigorous process involving governments, aid agencies and independent food security experts. A famine declaration means at least 2 people in every 10,000 are dying daily from starvation.

Famines are predictable and preventable through early response and more comprehensive long-term interventions to deal with the causes of hunger and conflict. Before famine is declared, hungry people in risk areas are already experiencing catastrophic hunger and depend on emergency food assistance to survive.

Today’s famines are man-made. There is enough food produced to feed everyone in the world, and there are agencies and resources to deliver food to those in crisis. If, despite early warnings, governments fail to respond, and prevent others from responding, then famines can occur.

Though famine is rare, the world is experiencing the risk of famine more often. Every year since 2017, the UN has put out alerts on the risk of famine in different areas. These early warnings have been an effective tool to get the needed support for an early response that prevent those in catastrophic hunger from experiencing famine.

Responses include additional humanitarian resources and scaled-up diplomacy to ensure the supplies



reach the areas most at risk. In 2021, all the areas at immediate risk of famine are in the conflict-affected contexts of Yemen, South Sudan, Northeastern Nigeria and Tigray in Ethiopia.

POLICY RESPONSES TO CONFLICT AND HUNGER

Recognizing the link between conflict and hunger, governments around the world have come up with policies addressing conflict and hunger.

UN processes and resolutions

- The governments of Switzerland and the Netherlands, as chairs of the Group of Friends on Protection of Civilians and the Group of Friends on Food Security at the United Nations, led a series of discussions on conflict and hunger in 2017. The series highlighted conflict as a key driver of severe food insecurity, the re-emerging phenomenon of famine, and specific recommendations for concrete action from the UN Security Council (UNSC), member states, UN agencies and relevant organizations.
- In May 2018, the UNSC adopted resolution 2417 that recognised the need to break the vicious cycle between armed conflict and food insecurity. Resolution 2417 condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access in response to conflict-induced food insecurity.
- UN resolution 2417 is significant as the first global agreement recognizing that conflict and hunger must be addressed together to prevent extreme outcomes such as famine. Though a great starting point, a lot more work lies ahead to fully implement this resolution with effective mechanisms for reporting and accountability.

G7 Famine Compact

In May 2021, Canada and the G7 countries adopted a **Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact** in which they promised to give more funding, negotiate for safe humanitarian access and protection of civilians, respond early, strengthen countries vulnerable to crisis, and use better data and analysis.



The Famine Compact deals with the humanitarian context of conflict and hunger. **Diplomatic advocacy** for safe humanitarian passage and protection of civilians will allow responders to get food assistance to the hungry in conflict-affected areas. The G7 also promised to act sooner to **prevent the deterioration** of food security, for example to respond to those experiencing emergency levels of hunger before it escalates to catastrophic hunger or famine. Through the World Bank, the G7 **will support crisis preparedness** to strengthen the capacity of conflict-affected countries to deal with humanitarian shocks.

While the compact deals comprehensively with the humanitarian context of conflict and hunger, there is a lot more to be done to address the root causes of conflict and hunger.

One policy response that goes beyond the humanitarian is the policy process to bridge the gap between humanitarian, development and peace operations, often referred to as the triple nexus.

POLICY CASE: THE TRIPLE NEXUS – HUMANITARIAN, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

The international humanitarian, development, and peace sectors largely operate independently when responding to immediate and long-term needs. This is partly due to funding mechanisms that are separate for each sector, leading to distinct organisations within the UN and elsewhere, dealing with food security, humanitarian affairs, development or peacebuilding.

Working independently, as silos, has not been effective in ensuring that peace and development gains are sustained. This prompted the decades-long dialogue between the humanitarian and development sectors on how to create links to ensure lives are saved, immediate needs are addressed and there is long-term support to create an environment where those who have survived, can thrive.

Protracted conflict has revived the dialogue on how to effectively work beyond siloes. The goal is to enable fast response to save lives, while also paving the way to towards sustainable peace and development. The triple nexus approach is not about humanitarians doing peace or development or vice versa, but the three sectors working together in ways that contribute to greater collective good.

From an international humanitarian perspective, the triple nexus dialogue has been contentious, with some fearing that it may compromise humanitarian principles. The four principles of humanitarian action are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. A study of nexus programming in Mali found that security actors who were party to the conflict, took over responsibilities to assess humanitarian needs, and protect humanitarian actors, in ways that politicised the relief efforts¹¹. In this case, the humanitarian response failed to live up to the operational principles of neutrality and independence. Does this Mali case spell doom for the triple nexus approach?

In some ways, the Mali case study highlights what is lacking in the triple nexus debate – a clear articulation of the concept of peace. Peace is a word that everyone is familiar with, but it means different things to different people in different contexts. According to the 1992 UN Agenda for Peace, the activities of the international peace sector include peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding¹². In triple nexus discussions, people use peace more often to refer

to the more visible peacemaking and peacekeeping, rather than to longer term peacebuilding.

Peace may include the process to a peace agreement, UN peacekeeping to protect populations and monitor the peace in a post-conflict zone, or national processes of truth and reconciliation. Peacebuilding is an ongoing long-term activity to transform root causes of conflict for peace. This could include efforts towards social cohesion, reconciliation or civic engagement and advocacy for policies that promote a just peace.

The scope of peace will determine the risks in a triple nexus approach. For example, the Mali case study focused on internationally supported state-level peace processes which have different risks compared to smaller scale localised long-term peacebuilding. The challenge of the triple nexus from the Mali case, is how to work better together while remaining distinct and faithful to respective mandates.

The triple nexus is not just a concept on how to work better between the sectors as discussed through the Mali example, it is also a new way of thinking for the three sectors. Considering the triple nexus as a new way of thinking opens up space for the different sectors to learn from each other and strategize for transformational change that addresses both immediate and long-term needs for humanitarian, development and peace interventions¹³.

A key outcome of a good triple nexus approach is a better understanding of conflict. With an adequate analysis of the conflict, humanitarian and development actors will design more effective programs in conflict settings. For example, MCC in Syria successfully partnered with a local interfaith network to respond to the humanitarian crises in an inclusive approach that fostered trust and solidarity¹⁴.

In development contexts, there is more time to deepen a triple nexus approach and contribute to peacebuilding goals through food security initiatives. One common example in food security programming is communal gardening as an activity for diverse groups to grow food together for their mutual benefit as the build trust and goodwill.

Triple nexus considerations can contribute to more effective humanitarian, development and peace programs benefiting people suffering in protracted conflict contexts.

- ¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2017. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017. Building resilience for peace and food security. Rome, FAO; FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises. Global Report on Food Crises 2017/18/19/20/21. Rome.
- ² Ibid
- ³ K. von Grebmer, J. Bernstein, A. de Waal, N. Prasai, S. Yin, and Y. Yohannes. 2015. 2015 Global Hunger Index: Armed Conflict and the Challenge of Hunger. Bonn, Washington, DC, and Dublin: Welthungerhilfe, International Food Policy Research Institute, and Concern Worldwide
- ⁴ Marco Lagi, Karla Z. Bertrand, and Yaneer Bar-Yam, The food crises and political instability in North Africa and the Middle East, arXiv:1108.2455 (August 10, 2011).
- ⁵ Cincotta, Richard, High Food Prices an Unlikely Cause for the Start of the Arab Spring. 7 April 2014 <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2014/04/high-food-prices-arab-spring/>
- ⁶ Data based on the Integrated Phase Classification process with five levels of food insecurity. People in level three to five (crisis, emergency and catastrophic) need daily humanitarian food assistance to survive.
- ⁷ FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises. Global Report on Food Crises 2021. Rome.
- ⁸ Appiah, Sandra. Tunisians and African Youths: "We Want Bread and Water and No Ben Ali". <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/tunisians-and-african-youths-we-want-bread-and-water-and-no-ben-ali#.U0Lu2q1dWhU> 12 April 2011
- ⁹ Randeree, Bilal. Violent clashes continue in Tunisia. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/1/4/violent-clashes-continue-in-tunisia>. 4 January 2011.
- ¹⁰ Policy Brief. Accountability for Mass Starvation: Starvation in Yemen. By the Global Rights Compliance & the World Peace Foundation, 3 September 2019.
- ¹¹ Harvard University - Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. Realities and Myths of the "Triple Nexus": Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Action in Mali. 14 June 2019
- ¹² https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/A_47_277.pdf
- ¹³ Marc DuBois, The triple nexus - threat or opportunity for the humanitarian principles? Discussion paper. May 2020
- ¹⁴ <https://mccanada.ca/centennial/100-stories/if-you-wish-defile-church>