Conflict and hunger: breaking a vicious cycle
Conflict and hunger discussion series

The conflict and hunger discussion series was initiated by the Netherlands and Switzerland in their respective roles as Chairs of the Group of Friends on Food Security and the Group of Friends on Protection of Civilians at the United Nations in New York. The series of three events held over the course of 2017 sought to achieve a better understanding of the links between conflict and hunger, and to identify potential courses of action for the international community to address and prevent hunger. The events took place in New York (co-organised by Switzerland, the Netherlands and the International Peace Institute), Rome (co-organised by the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland and the Rome-based Agencies) and Geneva (co-organised by Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute). This report represents a summary of key discussions. It was written by the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute in London.
Conflict and hunger are on the rise again. There is broad recognition that the two reinforce each other in a vicious cycle, and that conflict is a key driver of situations of severe food insecurity and recently re-emerged famines. Current legal frameworks – international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law and international criminal law – are broadly adequate to the task of limiting the adverse impact of conflict on civilians, including access to food and livelihoods, and to ensuring respect of and protection for the right to be free from hunger. It is not a lack of rules but the persistent failure to comply with them and the lack of accountability that aggravate situations of food insecurity caused or exacerbated by conflict.

This situation requires both urgent and immediate attention and long-term commitments by all parties to armed conflicts, as well as the international community more broadly. Preventing conflict, mitigating its negative impacts on food security and establishing sustainable, resilient and inclusive food systems requires a comprehensive, coordinated, innovative, multi-disciplinary response, and an engagement that will have to be sustained over years rather than months. Different actors (States, humanitarian, human rights and development agencies, conflict mediators, civil society and faith-based actors, the private sector) have different skills, expertise and types of leverage that should be used in a complementary way to collectively break the vicious and mutually reinforcing cycle of conflict and hunger and prevent such situations from occurring. Affected communities and their needs must be at the centre of any response, underpinned by the principle of ‘do no harm’.

This report suggests three key pathways: prevention of food insecurity resulting from or contributing to conflict; compliance with and accountability within legal frameworks; and working towards a comprehensive and coordinated operational response. To that end, the international community should build on existing mechanisms, initiatives and previous successes, while looking for innovative ways to respond to the immediate and long-term needs of communities affected by conflict and hunger.

Recommendations

To the Security Council

• Request the Secretariat that existing reporting mechanisms systematically include information on worrying levels of food insecurity as well as diminishing levels of access for operational agencies on the ground.
• Explore the potential to use the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mechanism for matters relating to conflict and hunger, and in particular how denial of humanitarian access to civilians, including children, could be added as a trigger for a listing in the SG CAAC report.
• Follow up on the 2017 Presidential Statement and step up efforts to address the interlinkage between hunger and conflict and provide a concrete UNSC framework of action.
• Further strengthen the capacity of the Security Council to prevent and resolve situations of conflict and hunger, for example by expanding its field visiting missions to identify and address the root causes of these situations, or by discussing country situations earlier.
• Request the UN Secretary-General to identify parties using starvation as a method of warfare in armed conflicts on the Security Council’s agenda.
• Consider the use of targeted sanctions in cases of willful impediment of relief supplies, while taking into consideration guarantees of due process under international law.
• Refer to the International Criminal Court (ICC) situations in which one or more of the most serious crimes under international law appear to have been committed, including the use of starvation as a method of warfare.
• Strengthen links with the Human Rights Council through regular briefings by the High Commissioner for Human Rights focusing on conflict prevention and hunger.

To UN Member States

• Respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law. This includes facilitating rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access.
• Avoid the politicisation of humanitarian assistance by ensuring that humanitarian needs and respect for humanitarian principles are the basis for humanitarian action.

• Ensure that national legislation provides an adequate framework that recognises the State’s obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to adequate food, both in times of peace and in situations of armed conflict.

• Consider criminalising in national legislation the intentional use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in both international and non-international armed conflict.

• Ensure that counter-terrorism legislation does not prevent aid agencies from delivering assistance/protection and to negotiate with groups designated as terrorists. To that end, engage with humanitarian agencies and financial institutions to identify collectively where counter-terrorism measures have had an adverse impact and how this can be mitigated.

• Make enhanced use of relevant informal platforms of exchange (such as the Groups of Friends on the Protection of Civilians and on Food Security) to build advocacy coalitions on a given aspect of conflict and hunger, seize opportunities for action in view of developments on the ground or at the policy level and promote the exchange of best practices.

To the UN system and relevant organisations

• Support further evidence-based analysis on how food insecurity can lead to conflict. In this regard, take into account the results of the UN-World Bank Study Pathways to Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Prevention of Violent Conflict that identify root causes of instability and insecurity, and support further evidence-based research on the causal relationship between food insecurity and conflict.

• Use information on food insecurity and hunger as early warning indicators to alert the General Assembly and the Security Council of escalations into or deepening of conflict.

• Intervene in support of food security and livelihoods by making major investments in rural development and agriculture, natural resource management and social protection. Young people and women merit particular and distinct consideration in these interventions.

• Provide more flexible and less earmarked funding to prevent and respond to shocks effectively. Explore innovative funding models such as forecast-based financing.

• Further strengthen the link between the Rome-based Agencies and the Committee on World Food Security with discussions in Geneva and New York, for example via regular food security briefings. In addition, ensure regular exchanges with the newly created UNDP/IASC Steering Committee on Famine Response and Prevention.

• Strengthen collaboration between humanitarian, development, human rights and peace-building actors. Work closely with the private sector and civil society in addressing immediate needs, as well as recovery and longer-term development.
1 Context

After a steady decline following the end of the Cold War, armed conflicts are once again on the rise. Hunger statistics too are moving in the wrong direction: after a steady fall, hunger is on the rise again as well. According to *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report, there were 815 million undernourished people in the world in 2016, up from 777 million the year before, though this is lower than the 900 million recorded in 2000 (FAO et al., 2017). Both trends are threatening the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 2 – zero hunger by 2030.

In his letter to all Member States in February 2017 on the four famines (in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria), the Secretary-General clearly highlighted their common denominator: conflict. His letter followed the formal declaration of famine in parts of South Sudan. Thankfully, famine was averted there owing in part to the early raising of the alarm and a swift humanitarian response, although staggering numbers of people remain extremely food insecure. The outlook is bleak, with estimates predicting a further deterioration in food security in areas affected by drought and conflict (FSIN, 2017).

In many places conflict and hunger intersect, one reinforcing the other, forming a vicious cycle that is hard to break. There is broad recognition of the
negative interplay between conflict and hunger. Of the 815 million chronically food-insecure and malnourished people worldwide, the vast majority – 489 million – live in countries affected by conflict. For stunted children under five, the correlation is even stronger: an estimated 122 million of 155 million stunted children worldwide live in countries affected by conflict (FAO et al., 2017).

The adverse impacts of conflict on food insecurity are evident, though conflict alone is rarely the single determinant factor causing food insecurity or even famine. There is usually a combination of drivers, including climate change, social exclusion, weak governance and demographic growth. Conflict affects food security in a number of ways. It can directly impact on food security, for example when stocks are looted or destroyed, basic infrastructure is damaged, access to fields is blocked or populations are forced to flee.

Conflict can also cause economic recession, drive up inflation, increase unemployment and disrupt the functioning of essential services, all of which negatively impact on the availability of and access to food. Moreover, parties to armed conflicts may erect bureaucratic hurdles or block humanitarian organisations from accessing affected populations to deliver much-needed relief. Lastly, deliberate attacks on humanitarian personnel significantly affect their ability to provide assistance and protection at a time when populations need it most. These examples clearly point to the heightened risks of food insecurity during conflict, and the interplay between conflict and hunger is understood well enough that it is possible to design conflict-sensitive programmes. However, the ways hunger can lead to conflict are less known, and a more granular analysis is needed to design appropriate interventions in this regard.

Given that conflict is a major cause of food insecurity, this report suggests three key pathways: prevention of food insecurity resulting from or contributing to conflict; compliance with and accountability within legal frameworks; and working towards a comprehensive and coordinated operational response.
2 Three pathways

Prevention of food insecurity resulting from or contributing to conflict

With conflict as one of the leading causes of hunger, addressing the root causes of conflict and investing in conflict prevention and conflict resolution are seen as a critical area for intervention. This was made clear in the Presidential Statement on the four famines, in which the Security Council reiterated its ‘commitment to work with the Secretary-General to pursue all possible avenues to end conflicts, including through addressing their underlying root causes in an inclusive and sustainable manner’ (S/PRST/2017/14).

Disputes over agricultural and other natural resources such as water, increasing food insecurity and malnutrition as well as spikes in food prices may exacerbate existing instability and conflict. On average, 56% of the population in countries affected by conflict live in rural areas, where livelihoods largely depend on agriculture (FAO et al., 2017). The agricultural sector is often disproportionately affected during an economic downturn resulting from conflict. In addition, land and livestock, two key agricultural assets, may be directly targeted by belligerents. As such, interventions in support of food security, nutrition, natural resource management, social protection and agricultural livelihoods can contribute to conflict prevention and sustaining peace.

Food insecurity may be a sign of future instability or even conflict, and therefore information on food insecurity and hunger could be used as an early warning indicator – similar to existing indicators related to human rights violations – to alert the
General Assembly and the Security Council of escalations into or a deepening of conflict. Human rights violations are known precursors of instability or conflict. Thematic or country-specific reports by Special Rapporteurs should serve, not only to highlight such violations, but also to signal the need for early action to defuse tension. Specifically on food insecurity, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) or the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) are useful early providers of information and analysis on food insecurity.

Together, these mechanisms each add a piece to an overall picture that would otherwise remain patchy. However, they could be made more effective with additional resources, better streamlining and more specific recognition of the links between the individual topics they report on, for example increasing food insecurity as a potential trigger for conflict. In addition, in order for the Security Council to ensure early action, it needs to be made aware of indicators ahead of, rather than at the outbreak of, famine.

Obtaining early warning indicators in a timely and reliable manner can be a challenge especially when access is curtailed. Organisations concerned have the difficult task of deciding whether to wait for better data to become available, while risking a further deterioration, or warning of an impending famine and perhaps getting it wrong. However, experience has shown that raising the alarm ahead of a potential famine will trigger a response from aid agencies and donors, while also potentially having a deterrent effect on belligerents whose actions may exacerbate food insecurity.

Whether on conflict or food insecurity, when accurate data is available and the alarm is raised, the key is commensurate early action to prevent an already fragile situation from deteriorating further. Such early action is often lacking. This may be due to a lack of political will, lack of consensus among Member States in relevant UN fora (in particular the UNSC), general insecurity or lack of funding. In some cases, counter-terrorism legislation potentially criminalises humanitarian action, undermines humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality and leads to challenges in providing assistance and protection for populations in need living in areas controlled by listed terrorist groups.

Legal frameworks: compliance and accountability

The primary responsibility for meeting the needs of civilians lies with the parties to armed conflict with control over the territory civilians reside in. Unfortunately, all too often belligerents insufficiently respect or outright violate provisions aimed at protecting civilians and ensuring that their basic needs are met – or they are not in a position to meet these needs on their own. The Security Council regularly deals with issues pertaining to the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Such engagement has yielded important results, such as the authorising of cross-border operations in the conflict in Syria or the adoption of a resolution on the protection of medical personnel and facilities (S/RES/2286 (2016)). Apart from the annual report by the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the Security Council also receives annual reports on thematic issues such as Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), which specifically recognises the denial of humanitarian access as one of the six grave violations on which to report. However, this particular violation – unlike the other five – does not trigger listing, thereby denying the UNSC potentially useful information. More context-specific information is needed to transform recognition of the protection of civilians as an important issue for conflict prevention into concrete actions, in particular where hunger and conflict are concerned.

Impartial humanitarian organisations can offer their services in order to carry out humanitarian activities, in particular when the needs of populations affected by armed conflict are not met. When this is the case, parties to armed conflict must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of relief. However, passage is often neither rapid nor unimpeded. There is a wide range of access constraints. In most cases, it is a combination of different constraints – whether deliberate or not – that prevents aid from reaching those in need, including administrative obstacles, insecurity, difficult terrain and counter-terrorism measures. The latter may have a negative impact on humanitarian financing, and as noted above may lead to challenges in providing assistance and protection for populations in need living in areas controlled by listed terrorist groups. Access constraints are a significant challenge in many conflicts, yet they are not used as an early warning indicator in the same way as human rights violations. Addressing these access issues is an important way to reduce food insecurity in conflicts.
Improving compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) is a multifaceted process. Promoting better implementation of and respect for IHL can involve a multitude of approaches and may require complementary actions at various levels and by different actors, including at the national, regional and international levels. As regards dialogue among States, note should be taken of the ongoing intergovernmental process on strengthening respect for IHL, jointly facilitated by Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).1

Access to adequate food is a core human right. Freedom from hunger is accepted as part of customary international law, and is thus binding on all States (UNGA, 2017). It is critical that States ensure that national legislation provides an adequate framework that recognises the State’s obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to adequate food, both in times of peace and in situations of conflict.

Existing legal frameworks are broadly speaking sufficient. The problem lies in the all too frequent failure to comply with these rules. This requires urgent and immediate attention, as well as enhanced, consistent and long-term commitments by States generally, and parties to armed conflict specifically. This must include measures to investigate violations and hold perpetrators to account. Chronic impunity and lack of accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law not only contribute to further violence during conflict, with potentially significant consequences for food security, but also significantly reduce the prospects for peace-building. In this regard, it may be noted that the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court currently only recognises the war crime of starvation in relation to international armed conflicts, not non-international armed conflicts. This constitutes a gap in the accountability system.

---

1 Based on a resolution of the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, States regularly meet in Geneva within this framework to ‘find agreement on features and functions of a potential forum of States and to find ways to enhance the implementation of IHL using the potential of the International Conference and IHL regional forums’.
Towards a comprehensive and coordinated operational response

The link between conflict and hunger is multifaceted, and therefore requires a multifaceted response encompassing conflict prevention, immediate response, peace-building and post-conflict engagement. These phases neither follow a linear path, nor do they necessarily affect all regions of a particular country in the same way. Understanding such dynamics and how they affect communities (in particular marginalised groups) requires thorough analysis and conflict-sensitive programme design, underpinned by the principle of ‘do no harm’.

Different actors (States, humanitarian, human rights and development agencies, conflict mediators, civil society, faith-based actors and the private sector) have different skills and expertise that should be used in a complementary way to achieve collective outcomes. Such a complementary and collaborative approach should be the norm, while also remaining respectful of the distinct approach of each actor, notably during periods when humanitarian space needs particular protection. This is also recognised by the General Assembly in its regular and unanimous reiterations of the applicability of humanitarian principles.

Stepping up collaboration between humanitarian and development actors including the World Bank is critical if food insecurity is to be addressed in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. This was also made clear by the Secretary-General in his letter to Member States in February 2017, in which he proposed that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Emergency Relief Coordinator set up a steering committee to link UNDP and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for humanitarian assistance to ensure a more coordinated approach to food insecurity, not just in terms of saving lives during emergencies, but also building longer-term resilience to shocks.

Similarly, in an appeal made at the Human Rights Council opening session in June 2016, the Swiss government, supported by 69 States, stressed the need to put human rights at the heart of conflict prevention by making better use of the Human Rights Council and the information it provides, as well as enhancing cooperation between the Human Rights Council and the Security Council.2 This would allow a better flow of information, thereby raising the Security Council’s attention to issues pertaining to conflict as well as hunger. Individual agencies and existing mechanisms and fora (for instance the Committee on World Food Security) based in Rome, Geneva and New York regularly cooperate closely when crises erupt. The response to the situation in South Sudan is testament to this. However, cross-fertilisation should usefully start much earlier, thereby ensuring that vital information on conflict triggers such as food insecurity are brought to the attention of organs such as the Security Council at an earlier stage than is currently the case.

Numerous examples show the positive effects of collaboration, including between the private sector and humanitarian agencies, where the former’s financial contributions are as valuable as its expertise related to the use of technology and innovation that can usefully enhance the response to food insecurity (Zyck and Kent, 2014; Oglesby and Burke, 2012). Financial institutions such as the World Bank are also collaborating with humanitarian and development agencies, providing emergency funds as well as building safety net programmes and strengthening community resilience. In this regard, the partnership framework signed in April 2017 between the World Bank and the UN, which aims to build resilience and sustain peace in conflict areas, is a promising development.

Exclusion, poverty and inequality are often contributing factors to food insecurity and conflict. As such, it is essential to support local communities and restore trust in a way that includes disadvantaged groups and builds partnerships with civil society. Youth and women are two categories that merit particular attention when designing resilience programmes. Youth unemployment/underemployment feeds grievances such as social alienation, and can thus be a contributing factor in social instability (Stewart, 2015). Creating employment opportunities for young people while also addressing inequalities and marginalisation more broadly are therefore key elements in contributing to peace and stability. Research shows that poor women face additional challenges in accessing services and resources (FAO et al., 2017). Improving their level of education and their access to land and credit can help contribute to improved food security and nutrition, including child nutrition.

There is recognition that such a multi-faceted response to conflict and hunger requires long-term commitment from donors. There is a need, not only for more money, but also for smarter, more innovative money. Multi-year, unearmarked funding allows organisations to respond flexibly to shocks while also pursuing programmes over a sustained period. For instance, forecast-based financing releases funds before disasters strike, while also providing funds for resilience-building activities. This shifts the emphasis from a reactive model to an anticipatory one, with the potential to save lives, time and money in the long run.
References


