

# 6. Conflict as a cause of hunger

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Throughout human history, conflict has been a source of hunger vulnerability. This chapter describes the range of ways in which "food wars" contribute to hunger, and the political and humanitarian efforts to limit food wars and why they succeed or fail. A "food war" is defined here as "the deliberate use of hunger as a weapon or hunger suffered as a consequence of armed conflict" (Messer 1990). Included in the concept are cases in which repressive measures and government policy meld to deny or restrict access to productive resources and income, as in the case of forced relocation in several African and Asian civil wars, and the discriminatory practices associated with legal frameworks or social practices of discrimination, such as apartheid in South Africa (Heggenhoughen 1995).

Scholarly, journalistic, policy, and humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO) writings annually catalogue cases of food wars and consider the ways in which hunger vulnerability can be reduced after the wars have ended. They reported in 1994 at least 32 countries in which people suffered malnutrition, poverty-related limitations in their access to food, and acute food shortages as a result of armed conflict; and at least 10 more countries where hunger persisted in the aftermath of war, civil disorder, or as a result of conflict-related sanctions (fig. 6.1). Food relief and refugee organizations estimated that up to 50 million refugees and internally displaced persons needed food and other essential assistance, largely as a result of wars (WFP 1995).

Disruptions to food systems and economies also spill over to countries bordering conflicts. Refugees on the move away from conflict and in search of food and fuel

standardly devastate livestock, trees, and other natural resources on their way. Once forcibly settled or self-settled, they compete for land and other resources and affect local markets for food and livestock. Their additional demand for food and other essentials creates scarcities that drive up prices, while their need for cash drives down prices of livestock and other assets when they enter markets to sell them to get cash to buy food. Such distortions interfere with local coping mechanisms that ordinarily allow people to respond effectively to drought and avoid destitution, and turn food shortage into famine, as was the case in Western Darfur Sudan receiving refugees from the Chadian fighting (de Waal 1989).

<b>Africa</b>				<b>Asia</b>		
<b>Western Africa</b>	<b>Eastern Africa</b>	<b>Southern Africa</b>	<b>Northern Africa</b>	<b>Western Asia</b>	<b>Southern Asia</b>	<b>South-East Asia</b>
Burundi*	Eritrea	Angola*	Algeria*	Iraq*	Afghanistan*	Myanmar*
Liberia*	Ethiopia	Mozambique	Ghana*	Turkey*	India-Kashmir*	Cambodia*
Niger*	Kenya*				Sri Lanka*	East Timor West Irian (Indonesia)
Nigeria*	Somalia*					Philippines
Rwanda*	Sudan*					
Sierra Leone*	Uganda					
Togo*	Zaire*					

  

<b>Latin America</b>			<b>Europe</b>	
<b>Caribbean</b>	<b>Central America</b>	<b>South America</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>	<b>Former USSR</b>
Haiti	El Salvador	Colombia*	Bosnia-Herzegovina*	Armenia*
	Guatemala*	Peru	Croatia*	Azerbaijan*
	Mexico		Serbia*	Chechnya-Russia*
	Nicaragua			Georgia*
				Moldova*
				Tajikistan

**Fig. 6.1 Countries affected by food wars (by region): asterisks denote cases of active conflict where hunger has been used as a weapon (source: Messer 1996)**

After adjusting to a refugee or "relief" economy, borderlands may also find themselves destitute when the refugees go home, as has been the case for

Malawian host areas when Mozambican refugees return to their native lands after years of residence. Conflicts therefore have an important regional dimension: they affect land use, food and commodity markets, livelihoods, and health, region wide, and in conflict areas it is usually wise to view hunger vulnerability of particular communities, households, and individuals in a regional context.

### **Food shortage related to conflict**

The most obvious way in which armed conflict causes hunger is deliberate use of food as a weapon. Adversaries starve opponents into submission by seizing or destroying food stocks, livestock, or other assets in rural areas and by cutting off sources of food or livelihood, including destruction of markets in urban and rural areas. Land and water resources are mined or contaminated, to force people to leave and to discourage their return.

The deliberate use of hunger as a weapon is most evident in siege warfare and "scorched earth" tactics, but it is also evident where combatants commandeer and divert relief food from intended beneficiaries and keep emergency rations from affected civilian and displaced populations. Military interests appropriate both local and externally donated provisions for their own tactical advantage. A prolonged case in point is the Sudan, where the government in 1990 had sold grain reserves to fuel their military, but refused to declare a food emergency or allow relief into starving opposition areas. Both government and opposition forces created famine as a tool to control territories and populations, and restricted access to food aid (often by attacking relief convoys) as an instrument of ethnic and religious oppression (Keen 1994).

Food shortage ripples into the larger economy and extends over multiple years when farmers, herders, and others flee attacks, terror, and destruction or suffer reductions in their capacities to produce food because of forced labour recruitment (including conscription) and war-related depletion of assets. Ancillary attacks of disease, linked to destruction of health facilities, and hardship and hunger also reduce the human capacity for food production.

These factors set the stage for multiple years of food shortage, especially where conflicts interact with natural disasters such as multi-year droughts. Combined political-environmental disasters over several years produce the "complex emergencies" that now confront the international relief community. The World Food Programme, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, other bilateral and multilateral relief agencies, and NGOs increasingly are called to respond to these emergency relief situations at the expense of peaceful development assistance aimed at increasing food production and livelihood in these same or other war zones (Maxwell and Buchanan Smith 1994).

### **Food-short countries**

To identify populations that are food short because of conflict, a first step is to locate countries and their internal divisions experiencing warfare and to assemble local descriptive evidence of the ways in which the warring parties are using hunger as a weapon or otherwise destroying local food supplies or capacities to produce or access food. Not all peoples, regions, or communities are equally affected: some individuals always profit in times of shortage and conflict, and, in recent conflicts, asset-stripping of politically marginal peoples and the "relief-and-development" aid business have produced windfalls for certain

groups (Keen 1994). Local and regional information about cultural (geographic, occupational, ethnic, religious, political) divisions can provide a guide for identifying predator "winners" versus preyed-upon "losers," pinpointing those groups most vulnerable to hunger within the region because they have suffered violent destruction or displacement or because they experience political or cultural barriers to emergency relief that need to be removed.

The extent of local damage can also be estimated by local information that can provide guidance as to whether destruction was total or partial and what barriers will need to be overcome to restore (food production and other) economic activities. Food can be replaced, but poisoned water sources or land-mines quickly make land uninhabitable and prevent or endanger people's return. Complete asset-stripping of livestock, tools, and seed stocks means that such destitute populations require restitution of all factors of production to make economic recovery or food production possible. With agricultural and food assistance, annual crops can often be regrown the next season, but perennial crops may take years to re-establish.

### **Geographic distribution of food-short conflict arenas**

Food wars take a large but selected toll in active and post-conflict zones (Messer 1996). In the 1990s in sub-Saharan Africa, food shortage prevailed in cases of active conflict, such as Angola, southern Sudan, and Somalia - where all sides in the conflicts used food and hunger as political tools - and in Rwanda, Burundi, and, to a lesser extent, Kenya - where those driven by violence from their homes faced both immediate and longer-term food shortages because they could not return to plant their crops.

As noted in chapter 3, the prolonged drought of 1991-1993 in southern and eastern Africa caused famine in politically unstable Mozambique but not in its more stable neighbours Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, which were able to organize effectively to respond to early warning signs of food shortage and to implement food relief.<sup>1</sup>

Unfavourable trends in food production continue to affect countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, where, years after their civil wars, landholding, water management, communities, and government infrastructures have yet to be rebuilt so that production and markets can be restored. Peoples in these countries are not starving, however, because they receive food aid and are sufficiently stable to distribute it.

Asian peoples in the former "rice-basket" countries of Cambodia and Myanmar similarly suffer food shortage as a result of prolonged conflicts, especially where military forces continue to use hunger as a weapon against opponents and to block food aid to affected areas. Siege warfare and armed struggle for control of relief food also characterize the new and old conflicts of western Asia, where residents of the Kabul area of Afghanistan remain on the brink of starvation despite donor efforts to rebuild agriculture, and warring peoples in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia use food as a weapon.

Siege and starvation remain tools in the persistent conflicts in Sri Lanka, and food shortage confronts those whose lands and livelihoods have been destroyed in ethnic-religious and political-economic conflicts in India.

Iraq after the Gulf War faced the dilemma of inadequate internal food

production after years of reliance on external food supplies exchanged for oil revenues. War-related destruction of infrastructure and economic trade sanctions harried any return to greater food self-sufficiency, while their leader refused to trade oil for essential food and medicines under UN mandate.

North Korea in 1996 offered a variation on the active conflict political theme. Although unfavourable weather sharply reduced grain availability, midyear the government refused to declare a food emergency and the international community remained reluctant to send relief unless it could supervise its distribution to needy civilians, not to the military.

Interruptions in local food production also accompany internal conflicts in Latin America, especially in Colombia, Mexico, and Guatemala. Nicaragua and El Salvador are struggling to rebuild their economies and resettle otherwise military personnel after their bloody decades of civil war.

In the warring European states of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, loss of livelihood accompanying the violence has left many entirely dependent on relief sources of food. Like their counterparts in developing countries, food shortage may be the situation of the affected countries, communities, households, and individuals for many years to come, as countries take years to rebuild agricultural infrastructure and productive populations after the wars end.

More positively, as a result of famine early warning and international response, the only places to have reported famines in recent years are the war-torn African and Asian zones of active or impending conflict. Only in conflict-affected areas does drought produce famine that kills. Post-conflict countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea in the aftermath of war have experienced severe drought but not famine. They successfully appeal for, receive, and distribute food relief donated by the international community, but such external food sourcing is likely to be necessary for years to come.

### **Food poverty related to conflict**

Conflict-related food shortages are also entitlement failures: people lose access to land, water, and other resources necessary for them to access food that they may or not grow themselves, and these deficits usually far outweigh losses in subsistence food production. To identify conflict-related food poverty, a straightforward approach is to locate zones of active and recent conflict, to chart gaps in productive and market capacities and in income, and to trace the relationships to recent conflict.

Food poverty related to conflict is most obvious in regions also experiencing food shortage, as described above. In addition, access to food may disappear as commerce is disrupted, either unintentionally (as in the Nigerian civil war, where all trucks were diverted to the war effort) or intentionally (as where Angolan rebels deliberately destroyed markets). In the Sudan, ethnic peoples such as Dinka and Nubians suffered food poverty as they were systematically stripped of livestock and other wealth, rendered destitute, and displaced, by rival groups armed by the government, which also profited from their demise (Keen 1994).

Entitlements also are reduced where individuals can no longer migrate to wage schemes or send remittances. Rural households suffer where they are cut off from cities, markets, and networks that ordinarily provide them with livelihoods

or buffers against scarcity. Rural pastoralists suffer special hardship where mobility is circumscribed, traditional pasturage ranges are devastated, and local grazing zones undermined by resultant overgrazing. Precipitous drops in the price of livestock remove household buffers against shortfalls and eliminate assets available to invest in their future food supply. The end of manure to nurture agriculture or of income to purchase seed can lead to longer-term deterioration of crop production and income.

Similarly, people cannot risk holding crops over multiple seasons as insurance; the "safer" strategy of converting them immediately into mobile resources may cause them to lose income as well as future food security. As a general rule, coping mechanisms are undermined by violence and social disruption.

Rural populations also suffer increased hunger vulnerability where their own urban or other refugees, fleeing conflict or related hunger, retreat to the countryside, where they try to live off the land. Resultant changes in the local units of food production, distribution, and consumption, in response to these wartime additions, in most cases do not manage to feed all the new mouths, nor does additional production usually suffice to replace losses in marketed food.

### **Distribution of conflict-related food poverty**

Unfortunately, aggregate statistics (country-level estimates are usually the only data available) cannot indicate the extent or precise distribution of shortfalls in food and livelihood. Market and other entitlement losses may far exceed crop losses as multiple and diversified sources of income shrink and people lack exchange entitlements for food. They also have consequences for local, household, and individual food security far into the future.

After the wars, communities decimated and depopulated by physical and human losses can remain underproductive and hungry for years, as food wars and the conditions leading up to them remain a legacy of armed conflict that is not easily remedied without outside assistance. Individuals, households, and communities must regain access to land, water, and other sources of livelihood, and human resources and social infrastructure must somehow recover. Communities in many cases must be re-formed, especially where areas have experienced complete or selective depopulation. Production and markets must be re-established, so that goods can flow and livelihoods rebound.

During prolonged warfare, whole generations may be conscripted into the military; with no other schooling, they must later be socialized into peacetime occupations if they are not to revert to violence and brigandage as a source of entitlements. In the African conflicts of Mozambique, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, destruction of kinship units was a deliberate military strategy to remove intergenerational ties and community bonds and create new loyalties to the military. These grown youths now need sustenance, and basic and specialty education, if they are to contribute to a peacetime economy and society, and to general food security. After decades of civil war, these countries also lack skilled agricultural, social, and health professionals to speed recovery. They require agricultural, health, educational, and economic services to rebuild societies, as well as physical infrastructure such as agricultural works, transport and communication lines, and market-places destroyed in the wars.

There is little evidence specifying what points of resilience or socio-cultural mechanisms help war-destroyed societies and food systems to "bounce back" after conflict.

## **Food deprivation related to conflict**

Even where food resources are available from domestic or external (relief) sources, access is selective. As already noted in the case of Sudan, governments selectively deny access to opposition groups, and opposition leaders reciprocate by denying food to government-controlled forces and towns, where possible. In addition, certain members of households and communities have less access to regular food sources or emergency rations because they are relatively powerless as a result of their age or gender status. These include women, children, and the elderly, who are the most frequent victims of hunger in food wars, because they are left behind when active males migrate in search of food or are commandeered into military service where they are fed. Women often are forced to give up local assets (land, seeds), go without extra labour (especially of absent males), suffer lack of protection (against violence, as local community moral and social structures are destroyed), and enjoy less health care. Both women and children suffer disproportionately from illness, where malnutrition and destruction of healthcare services render them more vulnerable, especially if, in the end, they are forced to flee in search of survival.

Children lose access to material and social resources at all social levels and are therefore more at risk of malnutrition, illness, and death. The most immediate and dramatic victims of hunger and war tend to be children, who die in great numbers of malnutrition-related illness; in Somalia in 1992, some estimate that up to 90 per cent of children under five died. It is a truism that governments at war invest fewer resources in child welfare: they favour military expenditures, and international assistance and investment (especially under conflict conditions) do not make up the deficit. UNICEF attempted to measure these investments by assessing which countries are least likely to meet World Summit for Children goals for improved child survival by the end of the decade. In their sample, those least likely to meet them are all "countries currently or recently affected by war or internal strife: Angola, Burundi, Haiti, Lesotho, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Zaire" (Mason et al. 1996).

War-related refugee and displaced persons who have fled to situations that lack sanitation, water, and health services are especially susceptible to respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders that threaten lives (Winter 1995). Children are, in addition, exceptionally vulnerable to micronutrient deficiencies that generally characterize emergency food rations, which supply predominantly calories through cereals, legumes, and edible oils. Women are special victims of both violence and hunger in refugee settings, where male thugs often control distribution of emergency rations.

Everyone is rendered more vulnerable to malnutrition as a result of higher levels of illness, a by-product of the deliberate or accidental destruction of health services and underinvestment in health programmes that accompanies war. The most vulnerable members of society are also more at risk of hunger as a result of underinvestments in food security and development because of relatively high military or defence expenditures. In most cases of conflict, the longer-term economic and fiscal burden of war appears far more costly in terms of human lives than is direct killing (Macrae and Zwi 1994).

## **The hunger costs of sanctions**

Another source of conflict-related hunger is the economic sanctions that are meant to forestall or replace military actions and bring about political change. Although essential foods and medicines are explicitly excluded from embargo,

the poor have less access to nutrition and medicine because cut-backs in petroleum and other items essential for moving food, and higher prices for now-scarcer foods and medicines, are magnified by their reduced earning power in a failing economy. Those delivering humanitarian aid have still not found a good way to reach those most disadvantaged by sanctions. Significant excesses in child mortality in Haiti and Iraq have been attributed to the sanctions levied against Haitian military leaders (who seized power from President Aristide in 1993) and the Iraqi ruler, Saddam Hussein, in the aftermath of the Gulf War. In the latter case, journalists reported that an excess 500,000 Iraqi children have died in the five years that sanctions have been imposed. In each case, food and health care became unaffordable for the lower economic classes of population. Critics of this humanitarian argument against sanctions counter that it is not the sanctions but the repressive regimes that are largely to blame. Underlying political economic and sociocultural conditions also contribute in additional ways to conflict-related hunger.

### **Underlying conditions**

Food wars tend to be fuelled by the quiet or active violence of preceding conditions - colonial or subsequent land regimes that favour social inequalities, commercial over subsistence production, and export agriculture that benefits landholders over workers or encourages highly specialized commodity production that is extremely vulnerable to world market fluctuations. The collapse of the coffee economy in Rwanda, as a case in point, left local cultivators vulnerable to hunger and hopelessness, and also ripe for political manipulation into violence that led to more widespread hunger and destruction (Uvin 1996).

Government allocations to military, rather than social, expenditures have led to national societies characterized by limited basic skills, food insecurity, malnutrition, and ill health as well as discontent, violence, and despair (Sivard 1994; Stewart 1993; Smith 1994). Military preparedness in this way creates conflict potential and constitutes one of the underlying causes of food insecurity that can lead to war.<sup>2</sup>

International donors sometimes exacerbate such underinvestments by demanding more fiscal responsibility from governments, a directive that policy makers often translate into lower levels of expenditures for food subsidies, health programmes, and education programmes. Critics of economic-adjustment programmes see them as a potential source of hunger and conflict. Specific indices of government social and military expenditures, however, reveal a mixed picture and are not in themselves good guides to pockets of hunger, although conflict potential may be linked to indicators of under-development (Stewart 1993; Smith 1994).

One proposed solution to the conflict potential of differential underdevelopment is for international donors and governments to target zones experiencing economic hardship with additional economic assistance. Efforts may be ineffective because, among other reasons, the underlying conditions are more cultural and psychological than political-economic, and the hungry are those out of power suffering discrimination or overt violent attacks. To locate and intervene, in these special instances of disadvantage and under-privilege, then becomes the task of humanitarian rather than development aid, although the two increasingly are interlinked to limit hunger in cases of conflict and its aftermath.



## **Humanitarian and political principles and institutions limiting conflict-related hunger**

Conflict-related hunger in the shadow of the post-World War II United Nations is both counted and countered by UN inter-governmental and other bilateral and international agencies. Every society has traditions that restrict permissible violence against fellow human beings, the environment, and livelihoods. They usually limit application of these principles, however, to those of their own cultural kind.

By contrast, international human rights and humanitarian covenants, which specifically provide for feeding of civil populations in international and intranational wars, are meant to be universal. The second, third, and fourth Geneva Conventions (1949) and Additional Protocols (1977) provide international guidelines to combatant parties for meeting essential humanitarian needs and ensuring basic subsistence rights of civilian populations experiencing armed conflict.

The International Federation of the Red Cross-Red Crescent Societies and NGOs, in accordance with these principles, intervene to move food into zones of armed conflict. Following humanitarian principles adopted by the United Nations, the UN High Commissioner on Refugees, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also are engaged with limiting destructive hunger due to war and promoting survival. International NGOs, such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Concern, Save the Children, and Médecins sans Frontières ("Doctors Without Borders"), along with regional NGOs, also move food into conflict and refugee areas. They also try to assist the restoration of order and to rebuild while providing food after the wars. All follow the Human Rights principles expressed in the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights that declare that food is a basic human right and a principal component of the universal human right to life.

International legal instruments, such as the International Conference on Nutrition World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition (1992) and the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights (1993), support the principle that food should never be used as a political tool nor hunger as a weapon. They provide a reference point and standard for action for the United Nations, its member states, and its agencies.

A third set of principles protects the refugee victims of conflict who have crossed borders or are otherwise stateless and therefore beyond protection of any UN member.

A principal concern for all those using these legal principles to justify food relief interventions is to handle food flows in ways that reach the neediest victims and do not further nourish the oppressors, combatants, and conflict. Even allegedly "successful" multilateral efforts to feed the hungry on both sides of the conflict, such as Operation Life Line in the Sudan in 1989, have been criticized as prolonging the war effort by providing recognition and legitimacy to insurgents and giving everyone time for a respite that encouraged them to fight on.

Also criticized for prolonging conflict are food relief operations implemented by "military humanitarianism." In very recent conflicts, large-scale food aid has been delivered by an international military force, a solution favoured in circumstances where logistics and security concerns make it unlikely that civilian

operations can deliver food successfully, as in Iraqi Kurdistan, Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. But use of the military in support of humanitarian action, such as movement of food into zones of armed conflict, also has been criticized for its war-prolonging potential. None of these operations have met humanitarian needs very successfully, and the combined military and food dimensions of aid intensify armed aspects of conflict by providing food, employment, income, and opportunities for further pilferage (Duffield 1994).

Another concern is to use relief in a manner that can help restore livelihoods and food security. Food-for-work theoretically is the relief mode of choice, especially in circumstances where people need food and income and where public works, such as land and water management, must be rebuilt. In conflict, or post-conflict, situations, however, the logistics of food-for-work may be impossible or inadvisable for at least two reasons: first, social infrastructure is needed to organize labour and communities, where none may exist; second, the most needy may not be fit for work, and may be excluded from food distributions if labour participation is the criterion for receiving food. These constraints, which have been described recently in the case of Ethiopia, are specific examples of the difficulties of calculating and remedying the multidimensional and longitudinal "hunger" costs of war (Davies 1994; Maxwell and Lirensu 1994).

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