RISING FOOD PRICES, SOCIAL MOBILIZATIONS, AND VIOLENCE: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE CONNECTIONS LINKING HUNGER AND CONFLICT

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In 2008, the world confronted food-insecurity situations that provoked political demonstrations in more than 50 countries. The alleged sources were production failures and spiking food prices because of bad weather and flawed food and development policies. But additional contributors were the legacies of food wars, armed conflicts in which one or both sides use food (or hunger) as a weapon and in which hunger persists as a consequence of conflict and its attendant social-economic disruptions. This article argues that UN and NGO international and national agencies responding to food insecurity challenges in particular places must consider food-and-conflict scenarios, and adopt conflict-concerned strategies, which are sensitive to the ways in which past foodwars have stymied increases in agricultural production, marketing, and livelihood diversification. Policy makers should also be attentive to political-geographic-ethnic-religious (PGER) divisions that can skew government distributions and access to aid and potentiate additional conflict. Keywords: food insecurity, conflict, foodwars

In 2008, the world confronted food-insecurity situations that provoked riots in more than 20 countries, and nonviolent demonstrations in at least 30 more (Benson et al. 2008; FAO 2008; von Grebmer et al. 2008). Involving mostly urban populations, organized political-opposition leaders made out-of-control inflation in food and energy prices a target issue for protesting the ineptitude and corruption of ruling-party governments (Karon 2008). These public expressions of outrage, however, were only the tip of the iceberg. Many other countries, where food riots have not occurred or have gone unreported, have a legacy of foodwars, armed conflicts where one or both sides use food (or hunger) as a weapon, and where hunger lingers as a consequence of conflict and its attendant social-economic disruptions (see Messer 1998). Hunger is also the outcome of structural violence, continuing from the colonial era and national liberation struggles, through postcolonial ethnic and Cold War politics, and more recent post–Cold War economic liberalization, political-economic globalizations, and post–September 11, 2001, world politics (Messer and Cohen 2008). Misguided economic development policies associated with structural adjustment and international financial (mis)management of developing

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countries contribute to the interconnections of conflict and hunger and the threat of food insecurity and violence that is ever present, especially in the context of upward-spiraling basic food prices.

This article renews the case for taking foodwars analysis seriously, as a conceptual framework for understanding the sources of the 2008 food crises in particular countries. Specifically, it reviews how foodwars affect food shortage (food availability at the national level), food poverty (food access at the household level), and food deprivation (food utilization by individuals). In an era of rising prices and diversions of human food to fodder and liquid biofuels, millions of people cannot afford to feed themselves. They lack access to adequate food, which may exist in the marketplace, and the frustration this causes can lead to desperation and violence. The article also renews a call for conflict-concerned strategies in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs that have been proposed in response to these crises. These responses generally call for more emergency and development (esp. agricultural) assistance and for revised rules of trade that will favor agricultural and livelihood developments in developing countries (UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis 2008). However, in the process of determining development strategies, aid agencies need to be sensitive to the ways in which past foodwars have stymied increases in agricultural production, marketing, and livelihood diversification (see Messer and Cohen 2008). They should also consider the political–geographic–ethnic–religion (PGER) divisions that characterize particular subnational and national food-insecurity situations, histories, and outlooks (Marchione and Messer in press). These divisions can skew government distributions and access to food aid and assets along political lines, a process that may create additional conflict. Agencies that oversee investments in agricultural production of liquid biofuels should pay careful attention to country-specific gender, land, and labor issues (see, e.g., Eide 2008). These could shape social unrest and environmental damage and undermine livelihoods and health in countries slated to be large producers of raw materials, such as Brazil, which in the future may be producing much more sugar cane and soy for fuel than food.

Finally, the current crisis should serve as a wake-up call and positive stimulus for joint consultations and actions among official and nongovernment aid agencies. Since the food crisis of 1974, and particularly across the world development summits of the 1990s, NGOs have increasingly worked with community organizations and governments as well as UN agencies in developing rights-based approaches to understanding and reversing the sources of underproduction, insufficient entitlements, and nutritional deficiencies of people who in the past were characterized as powerless and resource poor (e.g., Rights and Democracy and Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui au Milieu Rural 2008; Watkins 2008). The experiences of organizations such as OXFAM and CARE in working with grassroots communities and community organizations contribute evidence-based ways to understand the dynamics of winners and losers in the globalization process, as steps to charting paths for peaceful intervention (Rand and Watson 2008).

FAO in its *Crop Prospects and Food Situation* (July 2008) reported 34 countries (down from 37 in April 2008) as dangerously food insecure, requiring emergency external assistance. The greatest number (21) were in sub-Saharan Africa; followed by Asia (11), with one each in Latin America/Caribbean (Haiti) and Europe (Moldova). The report cited as the main reasons for the "aggregate shortfalls," "widespread lack of access," or "severe localized food insecurity" in African countries: low productivity, HIV/AIDS, adverse weather, deepening economic crisis, natural disasters, and poor market access, but also "conflict" (Somalia, Chad, and Guinea), "war-related damage" (Liberia), "conflict-related damage" (Cote D'Ivoire), "civil strife" (Burundi, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], Kenya, Sudan [Darfur]), internally displaced persons ([IDPs] Eritrea, Uganda) or "refugees" (Congo), and "insecurity in parts" (Central African Republic [CAR], Guinea-Bissau). The 11 Asian countries are categorized to have suffered natural disasters and adverse weather conditions (Myanmar, Philippines, Bangladesh, and China), as had Haiti and Moldova, which had faced economic challenges to accessing agricultural inputs. Almost all of these nations share recent histories of foodwars, where violent or nonviolent political conflict interferes with food access at national or subnational levels. Such observations continue to confirm FAO's year 2000 finding that armed conflict is the most important source of food insecurity in the world today (FAO 2000).

Significantly, the 34 countries listed in the FAO report overlap in only a few cases (e.g., Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea, Kenya, Mauritania, Bangladesh, Haiti) with media, World Bank, and International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) reports on countries that have experienced food riots in response to rising world food and energy prices. IFPRI's "Global Food Crises" (Benson et al. 2008) report covering 104 developing and transition countries, found political protests took place in a total of 54 countries: 21 violent, 44 nonviolent, and 11 reporting both (Benson et al. 2008). Similarly, IFPRI's 2008 Global Hunger Index (GHI) report (Von Grebmer 2008), released for World Food Day (October 16, 2008) noted that fully one third of sampled countries registered some kind of public protest against rising food prices, but that violent protests did not characterize the seven worst off, which were DRC, Eritrea, Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (all with no record of protests) and Ethiopia and Niger (which registered nonviolent protests).

This evidence reinforces the impression that recent food riots do not necessarily engage all the hungry or poorest of the poor. As media analysts suggested in the case of Haiti, many who joined protests, which took place in relatively advantaged urban areas, tended to be upwardly mobile or stationary middle class, who saw their standards of living eroding in the face of food and energy price increases. Their discontent with their government's capacity to prevent or dampen price increases was one important dimension of a larger dissatisfaction with a government that had shown itself incapable of improving current living conditions and protecting future economic prospects. When spiking food prices presented the political trigger issue, these discontented people responded—with violence. Yet, the key underlying factors leading to the food riots were persistent poverty, historical misrule promoting disposition to political and social violence, military repression, and desperation (Karon 2008). In the African case of Cameroon, a leader's attempt to overturn term limits, coupled with a meeting of international development banks, prompted the political opposition to rally in protests, which the government put down by some combination of repression and promises of amelioration (*New York Times* 2008). In the West Bengal, India case, opposition-organized protests against food-insecurity orchestrated larger discontent with provincial and local government corruption and mismanagement of subsidized food plans, which were not reaching the intended (poorest of the poor) beneficiaries (Sethi 2007).

Media reporting of dramatic violence may be diverting attention from the more pervasive situations of food-insecurity connected to foodwars, risking further conflict and hunger. Drafts of recommended actions by UN high-level task forces, with its Comprehensive Framework for Action (UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis 2008) and reports summarizing situations of food insecurity, political demonstrations, and government responses (e.g., Benson et al. 2008) challenge policy makers not to lose sight of these more pervasive dynamics connecting food insecurity to social and political conflict.

FOODWARS, VIOLENCE, AND HUNGER

Conflict as a Cause of Hunger

Armed violence leads to ongoing cycles of food loss, which has an impact on food availability, access, and nutrition (see Messer 1998). The most direct way armed conflict causes hunger is through deliberate use of hunger as a weapon or political tool. Adversaries deliberately starve opponents into submission by siege, theft, or destruction of crops and livestock, bombing of markets and infrastructure, and diversion of food relief from intended beneficiaries to the military and their supporters. These hostile actions reduce agricultural outputs and marketed food supplies, contributing to food shortage. They also reduce agricultural output by diminishing farming populations, whose numbers are further reduced by direct attacks, terror (land mines and threats to life), forced military recruitment, and malnutrition, illness, and death. As the FAO "Crop Prospects and Food Situation" (2008) attests, food shortages linked to conflict set the stage for years of food emergencies, well after fighting has ceased.

Food shortages related to conflict become entitlement failures where asset-stripped communities, households, and individuals lack livelihoods and income to access food, even where it is available (see Macrae and Zwi 1994). Food poverty may be exacerbated as violence disrupts migratory labor and remittance patterns over wide regions, as has been the case across multiple African areas, also Afghanistan and Iraq, whose violence, and interruptions to livelihood and security, impact neighboring countries. Downturns in oil production and economic downturns in general also have impacts, which may be linked to conflict, and through conflict, to food insecurity. All also conspire to favor growth in violent economies, including war occupations, trade in arms, and illicit commodities, including narcotics (Messer and Cohen 2008).

Multiple years of conflict, which remove entire age cohorts from formal schooling and ordinary socialization, additionally cause longer-term multigenerational underemployment and underdeveloped peacetime work skills. Consequently, poverty-related hunger persists years after Cold War–related peace agreements were signed in Angola and Mozambique, Western and Eastern Africa, South and Central America. These are all places where access to resources like land, water, and government social protection programs is still limited, and where government favoritism or exclusion of different groups based on PGER means resource scarcities for some, benefits for others, and potentially violent political responses on the part of those who have been left out (Collier and Hoeffler 2000).

Individual food deprivation, including energy-protein or micronutrient malnutrition, is also a legacy of foodwars, which deprive women, children, the elderly, and politically marginal household members of food and livelihoods, especially where men and youth have been recruited to fight or otherwise fled in search of safety and sustenance. War-affected individuals, in addition to experiencing the trauma of direct violence, face elevated risks of illness and malnutrition where health care and social services and communications and infrastructure have been destroyed. Emergency food rations are often insufficient to meet energy and nutritional needs, even as home-produced and marketed food sources are unavailable. Displaced and refugee populations are particularly vulnerable to nutritional deprivation, whether in unhygienic camps or self-settled where they face continuing threats of violence.

These conflict-hunger scenarios must be kept in mind as various agencies ponder food-system interventions. They are particularly important because unmitigated hunger also can provoke new political discontent and violence.

Hunger as a Cause of Conflict

In recent history, the most obvious connections between hunger, violent protest, and regime change have occurred in the Horn of Africa, where in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s drought devastated food-insecure and oppressed populations, and triggered famines and civil wars. Ethiopia, as a case in point, erupted into a civil war, where Derg insurgents chased out Emperor Haile Selaissie's government after it failed to respond to food shortages in 1974; then in the 1980s, this Derg regime was itself ousted by political opponents from the province of Tigre, who alleged the Derg were using starvation as a weapon against them. Famines in the Sahelian nations of Upper Volta and Niger in the 1970s also triggered coups when governments proved unwilling or incapable of responding to food insecurity. The international community responded to these conditions by strengthening FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture, and through additional U.S. and French famine early warning systems. The international community also established grain reserves and minimal food-aid obligations for donor nations, and improved the response capabilities of the World Food Program and bilateral agencies; all mechanisms whose funding and operations are under review in the current era of high food prices and financial crisis.

Although these mechanisms have been largely successful in heading off famines and civil disruptions, implementation in particular countries still depends on government capabilities and political will: to monitor and assess food insecurity information, to identify regions and localities where food is lacking, to import food in the form of aid or trade, and to administer relief programs where food access is severely limited. In the early 1990s, food aid flowed more effectively to Botswana, which had a relatively stable government committed to food security, and functioning infrastructure to respond, than to neighboring nations, who were recovering from recent civil wars and distributed food aid only selectively, to reward political friends and deprive political opponents. The three most dramatic cases may be Ethiopia, where three regimes across three decades have shown selective use of food aid and withheld food as a weapon; Zimbabwe, where the Mugabe government has consistently denied emergency assistance and development aid to Matabeleland and the Ndebele political opposition (Marchione and Messer in press); and the Sudan. There, denial of access to development resources and asset-stripping have been integral parts of the civil wars and erosions of livelihoods in the South, Nubia, and Darfur, but conflicts are blamed on either environmental scarcities and competition for economic resources or political–cultural–religious cleavages (Keen 1994; Young et al. 2009; see also Messer et al. 2001).

In Asia, the regional financial crisis contributed to rising food prices and food insecurity in Indonesia in 1998, where the currency collapse led to unemployment and protests in urban and rural areas alike. This violence contributed to ending President Suharto's 30-year term.

Food insecurity and protests against economic inequalities in access to natural resources, social-protection programs, and economic opportunities also characterize the Cold War era civil wars of Central America and South America and their post–Cold War, globalization-era successors (see case studies and discussions in Arnson and Zartman 2005). The most recent (1994) Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico presents a case where political organizers, over more than a decade, mobilized indigenous settlers who favored a government opposition party to protest their unequal access to government programs (Collier and Quaratiello 1999). Significantly, these rebels framed their case—via the World Wide Web—as a denial of their human right to food.

Additional econometric studies find a strong relationship between indicators of deprivation (such as low per capita income, economic stagnation and decline, high income inequality, and slow growth in food production per capita) and violent civil strife (Collier 1999). A U.S. government task force found that infant mortality, a surrogate measure of food insecurity and low standard of living, was one of three variables best correlated with national case studies of civil conflict (Goldstone et al. 2003).

The Nexus of Causation from Hunger to Conflict

The exact sequence by which food insecurity contributes to conflict tends to involve complex factors, including environmental scarcities and identity-based competition for access to and control over what are perceived to be limited resources. These factors combine to deepen a sense of unjust deprivation and unfairness. In the late 1980s, Toronto geographer Thomas Homer-Dixon analyzed a series of conflict case studies that featured violently contested access to land, water, or other essential resources, all of which involved food insecurity, but not, in his analysis, as a central issue. In the 1990s, attention focused more on identity conflicts, especially in Asia, Africa, and the former USSR and Yugoslavia; although arguably, all of these could also be interpreted as resource wars. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, World Bank economist Paul Collier and colleagues, reviewing primary-commodity data, asserted that most wars of the late 20th (and into the 21st) century involved struggles to control primary commodities; this added the motivation of "greed" to the prior notions of "need" and "creed" (Collier and Hoeffler 2000). Political scientists Arnson and Zartman (2005) then commissioned a series of case studies to follow the historical trajectory of particular conflicts, which showed that in most cases, all three components were involved. But their discussions concluded that the most useful framework for understanding the progression from need or creed to violence might be to focus on "human security," a concept introduced by the UN Development Programme in the 1990s, to emphasize how individuals meet basic needs for subsistence and personal security. "Human security" moved "security" and "development" discussions away from a simple focus on national defense or economic growth to government impacts on individual people: their freedoms from violence of political repression, terror, but also hunger and devastating disease. This framework increasingly conceptualizes "hunger" and "livelihoods" in terms of individual, household, and population "vulnerability" (Guha-Khasnobis et al. 2007; Young et al. 2009).

The human security framework seeks to explain that conflict is not an inevitable outcome of environmental scarcities and food insecurity or identity divisions. For conflict to occur there must also be present additional factors, including human rights violations, oppressive social inequalities, and cultural values that legitimate violent resistance as an appropriate response to unjust or intolerable conditions, such as denial of access to adequate and accustomed food. In situations in which economic conditions have deteriorated, people may feel that they have nothing more to lose and so are willing to fight—behind provocative leadership—for resources, political power, and cultural respect. But the trigger causes for final violent action may be natural (prolonged drought or floods), economic (change in the price of a principal staple food or market crop, such as rice in Indonesia or coffee in Rwanda), that deprives the rebelling population of its perceived just standard of living, or struggle for power, as where peasants in Latin America take up arms to protest denial of access to land, water, or social programs (Messer and Cohen 2008). In all cases, the government under attack usually has failed to respond to the disastrous conditions suffered by the afflicted population, or deliberately used food and hunger as political weapons.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAYS FORWARD

In sum, the basic, underlying, and trigger cause of conflict are not exclusively environmental, ethnic, or political-economic, but interactive, and also historical and cultural. Some analysts suggest that a critical factor to break cycles of food insecurity and conflict may be the ability of local people in resource-poor areas to intensify agricultural production or otherwise diversify livelihoods without degrading the environment. Proximity to markets and alternative-to-agricultural employment opportunities may also be relevant, as may participation by community-based organizations. But there are still few case studies showing how peaceful development activities are deliberately mobilized at the community level. Nor are there many examples specifying how viable community projects scale up to include greater numbers of participants, incorporate additional functional areas of activity (e.g., moving from health and nutrition to water and education), or achieve successful alliances with governments, NGOs, UN agencies, or other sources of technical or financial assistance, which help them compete more effectively in global markets.

In postconflict environments the challenge in many places is for people to return and rebuild or start new communities, where they can regain land titles, work together to reconstruct waterworks, replant and manage forests and trees, access seeds, animals, and tools that are necessary to restore livelihoods. Processes of reconciliation are essential to overcoming hostilities and distrust that may predate active fighting, and the forging of connections to new governments. Yet reconciliation is often a long, drawn-out process, during which underdevelopment and poverty can threaten renewed violence and distrust.

The way forward to a more peaceful and food-secure world must be not only reliable funding for (emergency and nonemergency) food-security programs but also consistent attention to the "conflict" factors in food-security situations, and especially the PGER factors that skew participation in programs, from planning through implementation and monitoring (Marchione and Messer in press).

As UN agencies proceed to implement the Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA) issued by the UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis (2008), efforts to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable populations, to raise agricultural production, to build resilient food systems that contribute to global food and nutrition security, and to protect low-income people with safety nets through these transitions, must not lose sight of the legacy of conflict, especially in Africa. Program implementation strategies must proceed in manners that will dampen, not heighten, conflict potential and also protect vulnerable social categories, including women and children, within a human-rights framework (e.g., Eide 2008).

Although a chief reason for the process that produced the UN CFA is that "rising food prices bring the threat of unrest and political instability, particularly in institutionally fragile countries," in fact, the proposals take very little account of foodwars and conflict factors that might jeopardize successful implementation of their proposed actions. Thus, the value added of this paper is proposed recommendations for conflict-concerned strategies, which also take into account PGER factors in access to proposed program interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Acknowledge the legacy of foodwars when producing global information and monitoring. Country-specific analysis of the impacts of increasing food prices should take into consideration histories of conflict and pay special consideration to those groups that are likely to be most disadvantaged while negotiating a food-security recovery process.
2. In designing food aid and safety net programs, consider the PGER factors here described and their influence on access to resources.
3. When deciding on agricultural investments, examine how they impact relationships of people to land, especially in regard to control over land and water resources. On what terms will indigenous and other "vulnerable groups" like ethnic minorities be integrated into planning and implementation processes? How does the change in these relations add conflict potential?
4. In examining biofuels strategies, most attention has concerned their impact on food and environment. One must also consider how land and labor implications could affect conflict dynamics. Conflict-concerned strategies would consider how and which farm and producer groups impact this process.

In conclusion, the way forward to a more peaceful and food-secure world must be not only reliable funding for emergency and nonemergency food-security programs but also consistent attention to the "conflict" factors in food-security situations, and especially the PGER factors that skew participation in programs, from planning through implementation and monitoring.

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