CONFLICT AND HUNGER
HOW THE UN & MEMBER STATES CAN HELP TO BREAK THE CYCLE

WHY ACT NOW?

Globally hunger and malnutrition are on the rise. The UN has recently estimated that the number of undernourished people in the world reached around 815 million in 2017[1]. Conflict and insecurity have been identified by the UN as the main reason for the recent reversal in a long term declining trend in world hunger[2].

In 2017 they were the primary driver of food insecurity in 18 countries[3]. In that year, twenty million people across four countries – South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Nigeria – faced famine, largely driven by conflict. This was a crisis at a scale not seen in recent memory. While the severity of famine risk has abated somewhat, the levels of people requiring live saving humanitarian food assistance continues to climb, increasing 55% between 2015 and 2017[4].

We are now in a position where the number of children under the age of five estimated to need treatment for life-threatening malnutrition has increased by nearly 20% since 2016 to 4,500,000[5]. More than half a million children in conflict zones could die from extreme hunger before the end of the year. Malnutrition is not only a direct threat to life, it also weakens children's immune systems and leaves them vulnerable to killer diseases – including cholera and pneumonia. Where children survive, the effects of malnutrition can be life-long and affect physical and cognitive development[6]. Malnutrition has also been shown to limit economic activity and social mobility, compounding a pattern of poverty[7].

Hunger and conflict can fuel each other. Inadequate investment in food security for the populations concerned can contribute to conditions conducive to the outbreak or spread of a conflict. It is impossible to effectively fight hunger without also attacking the key elements of the hunger and conflict cycle.

In May 2018, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2417. It condemns the starving of civilians as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access to civilian populations, which deprives people of essential means of survival[8]. The resolution also recognises that people can be forcibly displaced by food insecurity driven by armed conflict and violations of international law. The consensus in support of Resolution 2417 is an important acknowledgement by governments and the UN that action is needed.

To break the cycle, hunger must become a red line for the international community in the conduct of hostilities. We must improve early warning and response to the use of starvation as a weapon of war; prioritise food security and livelihoods; and minimise the impact of security responses to conflict on livelihoods and access to food. We must also effectively and consistently contribute to halting conflict-related hunger and malnutrition. This briefing sets out three proposals for how the UN Security Council and UN Member States can implement Resolution 2417 and can also go further still to help reverse the growth in conflict related hunger and malnutrition.

1   UN FAO, WFP, Unicef, IFAD, WHO, 2018. The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World: Available at: http://www.fao.org/3/I9553EN/i9553en.pdf

2   "Monitoring Food Security in Countries with Conflict Situations," n.d., 53.

3   "2018 Global Report on Food Crises | WFP | United Nations World Food Programme - Fighting Hunger Worldwide," accessed September 14, 2018, https://www.wfp.org/content/global-report-food-crises-2018.

4   FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition. Rome,

5   "Extreme Hunger Could Kill 600,000 Children in War Zones This Year," Save the Children, accessed September 14, 2018, https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2018-press-releases/extreme-hunger-children-in-war-zones.

6   UNICEF, 2017. Nutrition: unlocking children's potential. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/nutrition/

7   One, 2013. Food. Farming. Future: Breaking the Cycle of of Malnutrition and Poverty. Available at: https://www.one.org/international/policy/food-farming-future-breaking-the-cycle-of-malnutrition-and-poverty/#ftn3

8   "Adopting Resolution 2417 (2018), Security Council Strongly Condemns Starving of Civilians, Unlawfully Denying Humanitarian Access as Warfare Tactics | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," accessed August 28, 2018, https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13354.doc.htm.

THREE WAYS THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL AND UN MEMBER STATES CAN HELP BREAK THE CYCLE

1.   IMPROVE EARLY WARNING, AND SYSTEMATICALLY IDENTIFY AND RESPOND TO USE OF STARVATION AS A METHOD OF WARFARE

Reporting mechanisms to the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly should systematically include information on food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition, and humanitarian access in conflict settings, as these are indicators of the imminent escalation or aggravation of conflict.

Resolution 2417 lays the groundwork for the Secretary General to alert the Security Council to situations in which conflict is leading to deteriorating food security, but there are currently no agreed upon early warning mechanisms that can be used to trigger a political response to prevent a further deterioration. Current analytical tools like the IPC or Cadre Harmonise face a number of political and technical constraints and are not intended to act as early warning tools. A data driven early warning mechanism is needed that can trigger political action to uphold international law, and prevent a further worsening in levels of hunger in conflict settings. The Famine Action Mechanism (FAM) currently under development by the World Bank should be fully sensitive to political and security aspects.

The use of starvation as a method of warfare is manifest in several active conflicts today. In some conflict settings land and productive assets are deliberately targeted in scorched earth tactics, where parties to conflict weaponise starvation and force communities to move. As part of the urbanisation of conflict, we have also seen the emergence of siege tactics. This can have severe physical and psychosocial effects on children, and it cripples local economies. The deliberate destruction of food, livelihoods and the civilian infrastructure necessary for people to earn a living is a widespread tactic in a number of conflict situations.

Restrictions on freedom of movement and commercial trade also limit access to food. Physical and administrative barriers to humanitarian assistance are a further common occurrence in conflict settings. These tactics are a violation of both international human rights and humanitarian law and lead to the acute food insecurity that we see in conflict settings across the world.

All parties to a conflict must be held accountable for upholding their legal obligations. The UN Security Council has an important role to play in imposing targeted measures on individuals violating international law. A monitoring, reporting and accountability mechanism for violations of Resolution 2417 (2018) on conflict and hunger should be introduced[9]. When the Security Council is unable to act, regional organisations should set up a response mechanism to both prevent and punish those practices—such as the imposition of targeted sanctions and arms embargoes.

2.   PRIORITISE FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

In many countries affected by conflict today, a large proportion of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. For example, in the Central African Republic (CAR) 75% of the working population is involved in agriculture or animal husbandry. Sustained under-investment in smallholder agriculture since the 1980s has contributed to declining rural economies and reduced health, education and transport infrastructure. The absence of agricultural development is one of the main root causes of the current crisis in CAR. The enlistment of farmers, animal herders and farmer-herders can take place indirectly, when they go to work in the mines, which are disputed by armed groups and also sources of funding for them, or directly, when they become an active member of a militia[10].

In many regions affected by ongoing violence, conflict has resulted in mass displacement, forcing people to abandon their livelihoods and land, and pushing many into almost total-reliance on humanitarian assistance. Even far from the frontlines, conflict has been seen to fuel economic crises and erode local support systems. It can also contribute to the fragmentation of rural communities due to the large-scale recruitment of young men into armed groups, leaving widows, children and the elderly behind, who don't have the same capacity to farm and trade in their absence, and are then exposed to extreme violence and deprivation[11].

9
10   (ref ACF CAR study when have URL)
11   Concern Worldwide, "Conflict and Hunger: The Lived Experience of Conflict and Food Insecurity in South Sudan," 2018.

In Syria, large-scale population movements have eroded family and social networks and cut off peoples' livelihoods and purchasing power. Food prices are five times higher than before the war broke out in 2011, and many people struggle to pay for basic goods. The conflict has destroyed essential infrastructure, including water irrigation systems, whilst mines and other explosive devices contaminate agricultural lands. Populations fleeing conflict or killed by combatants have left livestock abandoned. Food production has halved since 2010[12].

In many crises, forced displacement is contributing to emergency, crisis and famine levels of hunger. More than 15 million people were displaced by just six of the worst conflict induced food crises in 2016[13], some of the highest rates of acute malnutrition can be found in displaced communities. Those who are forced to flee are unable to produce staple crops and manage livestock, severely limiting the availability of, and access to, food. The mass displacement of communities looking for peace and security – often fleeing unimaginable violence – also contributes to the failure of local food markets. There simply aren't people to buy or sell local produce. Even where demand still exists, the costs and risks of transporting produce to markets in conflict-affected areas can be prohibitively high. What's more, given the average time spent internally displaced is now 10 years[14] the likelihood of people returning to their land and recovering in the short-term is slim. In addition to those who are forcibly displaced as a result of violence and conflict, many more are displaced due to the economic effects of conflict and the collapse of livelihoods. As a result millions of people around the world are trapped in a deadly man-made cycle of conflict, displacement and hunger.

Donors, national governments and regional bodies need to increase investment in conflict-sensitive agriculture to support livelihoods and nutrition in conflict-affected and vulnerable countries. A greater investment must be made at the onset of a crisis to help affected populations restart livelihoods and move towards self-sufficiency much sooner. Development funding streams must be engaged much earlier to more effectively link short-term relief to long-term options. Where safe and voluntary return is possible, donors must continue sustained support to recovery as communities enter a critical stage for the consolidation of peace and development.

3.   MINIMISE THE IMPACT OF THE SECURITY RESPONSE TO CONFLICT ON LIVELIHOODS, ACCESS TO FOOD AND GOOD NUTRITION

Disruption of food production, trade and market access in conflict settings has profound impacts on hunger. Vulnerable populations with limited access to food through markets are often also the worst affected by restrictions on the movement of humanitarian aid. Physical and bureaucratic impediments to the operations of humanitarian actors put lives at risk. In North East Nigeria, for example, security forces have imposed movement restrictions that leave thousands of people trapped with no assistance. In Yemen, the restrictions on land, sea and air trade routes imposed by parties to the conflict has led to severe cuts of vital supplies of commodities such as food, fuel and medicines, as well as restricting access for humanitarian personnel and supplies.

Across the Sahel and particularly in Mali, 'counter- terrorism' measures limiting population movements, in particular through the restriction on the use of motorcycles and pick-up trucks . This affects humanitarian access and access to basic social services, and the lack of free movement also severely slows economic activity, a problem aggravated by widespread extreme poverty. Meanwhile the increasing instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid by military forces for their own objectives threatens humanitarian actors' capacity to carry out lifesaving interventions in the Sahel region.

UN member states can and should play a key role in enabling the safe, unhindered and rapid access of populations to humanitarian aid by promoting needs-based responses and engaging with national and regional authorities to apply diplomatic pressure to remove access constraints. The UN Security Council should consider use of targeted sanctions against states that have wilfully impeded critical humanitarian relief supplies.

12   FAO, "Counting the Cost: Agriculture in Syria after six years of crisis" (2017).,
13   Food Security Information Network, Global Report on Food Crises 2017: Available at: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_up-load/newsroom/docs/20170328_Full%20Report_Global%20Report%20on%20Food%20Crises_v1.pdf
14   European Commission, 2018. Forced Displacement: Refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced peoples (IDPs). ECHO Factsheet. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/refugees_en.pdf

More broadly, research suggests humanitarian needs are becoming less predictable, with a growing gap between anticipated needs at the beginning of the year, and year-end revised requirements to address crises[15]. In these conditions, inadequate, inflexible, and short-term funding means that humanitarian organisations cannot effectively address complex needs that require long-term engagement and adaptive responses.

To enable a better and effective response to needs and adapt to fast changing operational contexts, donors should provide sufficient, rapidly dispersible and flexible funding to support conflict-sensitive, multi-year, integrated responses to conflict and hunger. Integrated response should be based on a continued dialogue between security and aid agendas but keeping a clear differentiation of mandates, channels and means to deliver both types of action. Donors should also invest in their own capacities for conflict-sensitive analysis and response, while supporting partner governments and humanitarian and development actors to do the same.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1   Hunger must become a red line for the international community in the conduct of hostilities. The UN and member states should hold parties to a conflict to account for upholding their legal obligations by imposing targeted measures in response to violations of international humanitarian (IHL) and human rights law (IHRL), potentially through prosecution of these crimes in the national and international legal system. When the Security Council is unable to act, regional organisations should set up a response mechanism to both prevent and punish those practices, such as the imposition of targeted sanctions and arms embargoes.

2   To implement Resolution 2417 a data driven early warning mechanism is needed that can trigger political action to uphold IHL and IHRL, and prevent a further worsening in levels of hunger in conflict settings.

3   The UN should introduce a specific monitoring, reporting and accountability mechanism for violations of Resolution 2417 (2018) on conflict and hunger in the form of a single, UN-led cross-sectoral and coordinated annual report on Food as a Weapon of War.

4   The UN and member states should expand UN Resolution 2286, intended to prevent attacks on medical staff and facilities, to include all humanitarian aid workers, and hold to account those who violate this resolution.

5   Donors should invest in their own capacities for conflict-sensitive analysis and response, while supporting partner governments and humanitarian and development actors to do the same. In particular by increasing investment in conflict-sensitive smallholder agriculture and improving local markets to support livelihoods and nutrition in conflict-affected and vulnerable countries.

6   Donors should provide sufficient, rapidly dispersible and flexible funding to support conflict-sensitive, multi-year, integrated responses to hunger and malnutrition in conflict settings. Whilst dialogue between security and aid agendas is needed, a clear differentiation of mandates, channels and means to deliver both types of action must be maintained. Responses should be based on early warning and action, and support community based interventions that build resilience – targeting the most marginalised and deprived first.

7   Donors should also increase support to initiatives that (re-)establish livelihoods of displaced populations earlier, and support return, reintegration, recovery and resilience-building for a longer period for displaced, host and returning populations.

8   Humanitarian access in conflict settings should be safeguarded and expanded by improving the documentation, prevention and mitigation of the denial of humanitarian access, and holding violators to account.

15   Hannah Krebs and Stephen Zyck, "As the UN Launches Its Biggest Ever Humanitarian Appeal, Here Are Five Things the Numbers Tell Us," ODI, 2014, https://www.odi.org/comment/9127-un-launches-its-biggest-ever-humanitarian-appeal-here-are-five-things-numbers-tell-us.