

# **“What can we do?”:**

## **The role of the European Union in tackling conflict and hunger**

### **Introduction**

The European Union (EU) is one of the largest humanitarian donors and actors on a global level. Promoting compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is a core priority for the EU, in order to achieve its humanitarian objectives, ensure the safety of its staff and partners, and protect civilians disproportionately affected by conflict<sup>1</sup>. In some contexts, the EU actively engages in advocacy and diplomacy to secure humanitarian access in conflict zones and to prevent starvation from being used as a weapon of war<sup>2</sup>.

When addressing issues of conflict-induced hunger, EU officials can draw on several established policy and legal frameworks, including:

- The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005, ratified by all EU countries
- The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid
- The European 2018 Council Conclusions on “Strengthening global food nutrition and security” and the 2024 Council Conclusion on “Stepping up Team Europe’s support to global food security and nutrition”, which reference UNSCR 2417
- The 2021 European Commission Communication on “EU’s humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles”
- The European Union Guidelines on Promoting Compliance with IHL (adopted in 2005; updated in 2009) “An operational tool guiding the EU’s external relations aimed at mitigating the impact of armed conflict on civilians”.

Other EU instruments also reference IHL compliance, without making specific linkages to hunger, food security or starvation as a method of warfare. For example, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024) plan integrates human rights considerations into all EU external actions, including compliance with the IHL and safeguarding the humanitarian space. The plan calls to “enhance efforts to ensure the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, including civilian and humanitarian infrastructure”.

Looking at the EU external action and conflict resolution policies, several policies and strategies set out the principles of the EU external action as the Common Foreign Security Policy (2016) and the EU Integrated Approach to Conflict and Crisis (2018). Overall, they provide an integrated approach to conflicts and crises through a coherent use of EU policies at different levels of governance.

They recall that the EU humanitarian aid is not influenced by any political, strategic, military or economic objective, a critical prerequisite to ensure that aid can be delivered to people affected by crises in complex political and security environments, without tackling the impact of IHL violations in conflict-affected contexts on food security.

## What can the European Union do to advance the implementation of UNSCR 2417?

The EU and its Member States can take various actions, individually and collectively, to address conflict-driven hunger through an integrated, preventative, and long-term approach.

### 1. Align and strengthen collaborative humanitarian diplomacy

- *Include the conflict and hunger agenda in a consolidated EU humanitarian diplomacy strategy.* This approach should build on existing EU and Member State initiatives and common guidelines. It should be reflected in national humanitarian strategies and prioritize unimpeded humanitarian access, compliance with IHL, protection of civilians and their livelihoods, and prevention of the use of violence against food security. Efforts should be systematic and context-specific
- *Formulate joint positions and messages on conflict and hunger.* A unified stance will enhance the EU's response to hunger crises. Include stance on leveraging UNSCR 2417 as a tool in conflict zones, including for negotiations on humanitarian access
- *Update the 2009 European Union Guidelines on Promoting Compliance with IHL.* This update will ensure alignment with contemporary challenges.

### 2. Integrate UNSCR 2417 into the global and regional agenda

- *Include conflict and hunger in strategic dialogues with local, national, and regional stakeholders.* Work with regional bodies such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the League of Arab States, as well as national and local stakeholders, to incorporate diverse perspectives and approaches to the UNSCR 2417 agenda
- *Advocate for the appointment of a Hunger & Conflict special envoy within the UN system.* This role would help elevate the agenda and ensure a consistent focus on it
- *Strengthen national and international legal accountability mechanisms.* Demonstrate support for mechanisms that enforce international law related to starvation, and ensure domestic compliance.

### 3. Shift the perception of UNSCR 2417 from humanitarian to political agendas

- *Promote UNSCR 2417 consistently.* Explicitly reference the resolution in political engagements, including through private humanitarian diplomacy
- *Comply with, and promote, UNSCR 2664 and UNSCR 2761.* Ensure that humanitarian exemptions are included in all sanctions and counter-terrorism regimes to enable the delivery of lifesaving humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need.

### 4. Reinforce the preventative aspect of UNSCR 2417

- *Advocate for UN Arria-formula meetings on conflict and hunger.* These meetings provide a platform for evidence-based advocacy
- *Enhance public access to data on IHL violations.* Leverage open-source databases to enhance transparency and accessibility of information and enable evidence-based advocacy
- *Strengthen global reporting mechanisms.* Promote regular and evidence-based reporting on food insecurity in armed conflicts. Share transparent reporting guidelines, clear responsibilities and accountability mechanisms, and include contributions from civil society organisations (CSOs)
- *Ensure early warning systems systematically translate into anticipatory and early action.* The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has brought significant progress but early action interventions need to be scaled up through increased prepositioned financing. Ultimately, we

must establish systems that can swiftly react at the onset of crises, emergencies or famine, to ensure a proactive approach to IHL compliance and crisis prevention

- *Increase investments in capacity-building initiatives.* Focus on IHL and IHRL compliance, emphasizing the impact of breaches on food security.

## **5. Increase funding allocation to the food security agenda within the EU budgetary framework**

- *Leverage the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)* to provide long-term, flexible humanitarian and development assistance.
- *Address the underlying drivers of conflict and violence* by promoting sustainable and local food production, building social cohesion among host communities and ensuring fair access to resources and services
- *Increase funding for conflict-related early warning action.* Investment in early warning is predominantly focused on natural disasters, such as droughts and floods. Early warning funding must also include conflict-driven crises.

## **Conclusion**

The EU has a critical role to play in addressing hunger driven by conflict, leading global efforts to prevent starvation from being used as a weapon of war, ensure humanitarian access, and protect civilians. To achieve this, the EU must strengthen its humanitarian diplomacy, integrate political and humanitarian agendas, and reinforce preventative measures. Strategic collaborations with local, regional, and global stakeholders, alongside increased funding and capacity-building, are essential to advancing sustainable solutions to food insecurity in conflict zones. By prioritizing UNSCR 2417 as both a humanitarian and political imperative, the EU and its Member States can contribute to a long-term vision of peacebuilding, resilience, and accountability.

## Endnotes

- 1 Council of the European Union. (2024). Working party on public international law (COJUR): Report on the EU guidelines on promoting compliance with international humanitarian law January 2023 - December 2023. Brussels. Available at:  
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ahzanx-gy/7th-ihl-report.pdf>
- 2 Ibid. Pg. 30.