

“What can we do?”:

The role of National Governments in tackling conflict and hunger

Introduction

Power and political influence in matters of peace, international relations and security largely lie in the hands of states. Recent years have seen a decline in multilateralism, weakening even the highest levels of inter-state cooperation, notably the UN Security Council. Increasingly, parties to a conflict – including some states – have shown disdain for International Humanitarian Law (IHL), with the deliberate use of starvation as a method of warfare becoming more apparent in numerous conflicts.

IHL establishes the right to food and demands that states create an environment conducive to the production of, and access to, adequate food for all, at all times. States, whether parties to conflicts or not, are also responsible for the erosion of humanitarian space when they politicize principled humanitarian aid or constrain humanitarian operations by imposing bureaucratic, administrative, or counter-terrorism measures, thus complicating or making impossible the delivery of life-saving food assistance.

States are signatories to the Geneva Conventions and guarantors of IHL. When they are not a party to a conflict, third-party states are obligated to take all necessary measures to ensure that all parties to conflicts respect the provisions of international humanitarian law in all conflict-affected territories¹.

What can national governments do to advance the implementation of UNSCR 2417?

1. Promote International Humanitarian Law

- *Develop a humanitarian diplomacy strategy* to promote unimpeded humanitarian access and IHL compliance, protect civilians and their livelihoods, and prevent the use of violence against food security in a systematic and context-specific manner. The conflict and hunger agenda should be leveraged in bilateral relations as part of an ambitious and coordinated state diplomacy to uphold the fundamental principles of IHL related to food security issues, including:
 - ⌞ The fundamental prohibition of the use of famine as a method of warfare (Rule 53 of the Geneva Convention)²
 - ⌞ The fundamental obligation to spare, during hostilities, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, especially those related to the production, processing, and distribution of food (Rule 54 of the Geneva Convention)³
 - ⌞ The moral and legal obligation to allow and facilitate the safe and unimpeded access of impartial humanitarian relief to civilians (Rule 55 of the Geneva Convention)⁴
- *Embed the conflict and hunger agenda* in national humanitarian strategies, foreign policy frameworks, and legal systems. A clear national strategy is key to reinforcing the engagement in this agenda and ensuring the allocation of adequate resources. National institutions, related to conflict-induced hunger. But they must be awarded a high degree of political status and influence to inform a country's foreign diplomatic relations
- *States can ratify the Rome Statute amendment* which makes starvation as a method of warfare a

crime in both international and non-international armed conflict

- *Promote the creation of parliamentary working groups* related to IHL and broader humanitarian action and food security issues
- *Invest in capacity building and knowledge of IHL and IHRL* among humanitarian aid implementation partners, national armed forces, and diplomatic personnel
- *Ensure that economic sanctions explicitly include humanitarian exemptions* to avoid impacting the food security of the civilian population. Ensure that UNSCR 2761 is transposed into national legislation to ensure the implementation of the outlined humanitarian carve-out.

2. Protect the humanitarian space

- *Integrate the promotion of IHL and UNSCR 2417* at the heart of national humanitarian and diplomatic engagement strategies with conflict parties in major conflict-driven food crises to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access, including for example in contexts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Syria, and Myanmar
- *Coordinate and support an international diplomatic initiative to address bureaucratic and administrative measures* restricting humanitarian aid in areas most affected by conflict-induced hunger
- *Translate the humanitarian exemption measures* outlined in UNSCR 2761 into all multilateral and unilateral sanctions regimes and national legal frameworks, including criminal law
- *Avoid restrictive measures* that make any contact with certain groups or individuals illegal, or that limit the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians.

Success story: In December 2024, the UN Security Council unanimously approved resolution 2761⁵, following resolution 2664. UNSCR 2761 extends the humanitarian exemptions related to counter-terrorism sanctions regimes specific to Al-Qaeda and Da'esh, and will allow the continuation of humanitarian operations while mitigating the unintended consequences of UN sanctions against specific regimes. The resolution must now be popularised across Member States and their institutions to be as effective as possible. Transposing it into regional and national laws and financial codes would allow diplomatic and financial channels to support humanitarian operations, allow safe bank transfers, and minimise donor risks.

3. Promote accountability for perpetrators of IHL violations

- *Request the UN and specifically OCHA strengthen monitoring mechanisms* in support of UNSCR 2417, including by producing White Notes on major conflict-driven food crises, with strong and actionable recommendations, which are often lacking. These should be compiled in collaboration with CSOs and made publicly available beyond the UN Security Council and limited Member States
- *Strengthen global governance and evidence-based reporting on conflict-driven hunger* by establishing a specific monitoring, reporting and accountability mechanism. This mechanism should collect and channel sensitive information on food insecurity in armed conflicts and violations of UNSCR 2417 and IHL
- *Conduct investigations* at the national jurisdiction level on IHL violations, war crimes, and the use of famine as a method of warfare⁶.

4. Ensure that military strategies and training align with the rules on the conduct of hostilities

- *Implement policies and guidance* that integrate international law in armed conflicts (IHL, IHRL),

particularly on the conduct of hostilities, military manuals, and rules of engagement

- *Train military and diplomatic personnel on IHL* and concrete measures to mitigate the impact of conflicts on civilians and hunger (Rules 141, 142)⁷
- *Include the prohibition of forced displacement* in national military manuals, reaffirming the protection of civilians and essential civilian infrastructure, and the requirement to protect natural environments
- *Formally recognise the essential nature of principled humanitarian aid.* Study and anticipate the impact of conflicts on hunger and food security to inform military planning in case of new armed conflicts, and plan emergency mitigation measures. Study planting and harvest periods in main intervention theatres, identify market days and locations, transhumance routes, and the locations of essential infrastructure for civilian survival related to food production, processing, and distribution
- *Evaluate the impact of conscription measures on the agricultural and food sector*, and, if necessary, plan exemption measures for farmers, herders, fishers, and people involved in food production, processing, and distribution.

5. Align funding commitments with a triple-nexus approach, aligning humanitarian, development and peace to fight food insecurity

- *Strive to meet existing commitments*, such as the G7 Elmau commitment of June 2015 to lift 500 million people out of food insecurity and malnutrition by 2030⁸ and the commitments under the G7 Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact⁹
- *Increase investment* in anticipatory action, humanitarian early recovery, peacebuilding and resilient livelihoods to prevent humanitarian crises from becoming catastrophes
- *Address protracted displacement* caused by conflict by facilitating voluntary return in safety and dignity. Invest in reintegration, recovery and resilience-building for displaced, host and returning populations
- *Provide long-term and flexible humanitarian and development assistance* to tackle the underlying drivers of conflict and violence. This includes promoting sustainable and local food production solutions to boost food availability and diversity, therefore reducing reliance on emergency food provision
- *Ensure that humanitarian programmes go beyond conflict sensitivity* by building social cohesion among host communities, internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees and returnees using a triple nexus approach and ensuring fair access to natural resources and services
- *Support farmers by strengthening good governance* in line with the Sphere Handbook's standards on security of tenure in shelter and settlement¹⁰, which ensures that people can live in their homes without fear of forced evictions. Promote consensual land use and dispute resolution and ensure equitable access to land for farmers and herders
- *Ensure that Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is accompanied by diplomatic action* aimed at upholding humanitarian law and protecting food producers and food markets from attacks
- *Promote and support the security of humanitarian personnel* by adequately and non-competitively funding the security costs of international and national humanitarian organisations.

Conclusion

National governments have a critical opportunity and responsibility to address the links between conflict and hunger and ensure that their actions do not lead to civilian suffering. By upholding IHL,

embedding the conflict and hunger agenda in national strategies, and fostering diplomatic initiatives to protect the humanitarian space, states can mitigate the catastrophic impact of armed conflicts on food security. Promoting accountability for IHL violations, aligning military and diplomatic strategies with international legal frameworks, and supporting the resilience of affected populations through a triple-nexus approach are indispensable steps. These actions not only uphold legal and moral obligations but also contribute to long-term stability, reducing the human cost of conflict paving the way for sustainable peace, and reversing this rising sense of impunity.

Endnotes

- 1 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (1949). Geneva Conventions, Common Article
- 2 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2005) Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 144. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2016). Updated Commentaries to the Geneva Convention, Common Article 1, 131; 143-149; 153-183 https://ihl-data-bases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gci-1949/article-1/commentary/2016?activeTab=#_Toc452378931.
- 3 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2005) Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 53 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule53>
- 4 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (1977). Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Art. 54(2) https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule54#refFn_560A1CEA_00012
- 5 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2005) Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 55 [Customary IHL - Rule 55. Access for Humanitarian Relief to Civilians in Need](#)
- 6 United Nations Security Council. (2024). Resolution 2761, S/RES/2761
- 7 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2005) Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, Rules 157, 158, 161 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule157>
- 8 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2005) [Customary International Humanitarian Law Database. Rule 141 and 142 Customary IHL - Rule 142. Instruction in International Humanitarian Law within Armed Forces](#)
- 9 G7 Germany (2015). Leaders' Declaration G7 Summit, 7-8 June 2015. Scholss Emau. Pg. 21. Available at: <https://www.g7germany.de/resource/blob/998440/436680/e077d51d67486b1df34e-539f621aff8c/2015-06-08-g7-abschluss-eng-en-data.pdf?download=1>
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- 11 Sphere Project. (2018). The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (Fourth edition). Geneva: Sphere Association. P.266