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Food from Peace: Breaking the Links Between Conflict and Hunger

by Ellen Messer, Marc J. Cohen, and Jashinta D'Costa

Creating a hunger-free world in the 21st century will require prevention and resolution of violent conflicts, as well as a concerted effort to rebuild war-torn societies. Between 1970 and 1990 violent conflicts led to hunger and reduced food production and economic growth in 43 developing countries. The reverse is also true, however: hunger and lack of access to basic necessities often lie at the root of violent conflicts.

In the 1990s, complex humanitarian emergencies, as the result of conflicts, proliferated. By 1996, armed hostilities and their aftermath put 80 million people at risk of hunger, including 23 million refugees, 27 million displaced within their own countries, and 30 million trapped within combat areas. Resolving hostilities and reversing associated agricultural and economic losses are critical if agriculture and human development outlooks are to improve in the 21st century. Conflict prevention must also be a goal of development and emergency assistance programs.

Conflict Links to Hunger

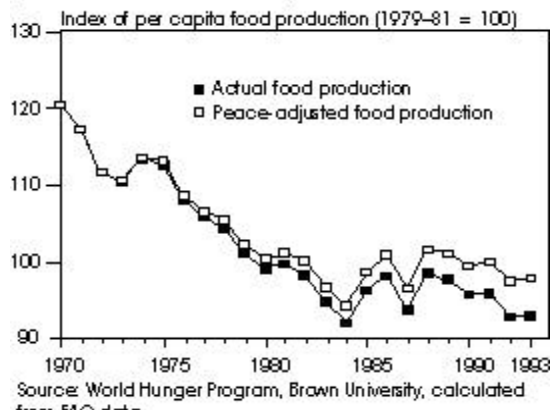
Conflict destroys land, water, biological, and social resources for food production, while military expenditures lower investments in health, education, agriculture, and environmental protection. Conflict leads to food insecurity through such deliberate acts as sieges of cities, stripping of victims' assets, destruction of markets, elimination of health care, and breakup of communities. Other consequences of war are less intentional: people, including farmers and pastoralists, lose their livelihoods when workplaces become inaccessible. Once conflict ends, land mines must be removed, water systems refurbished, trees replanted, housing rebuilt, and communities revitalized. Without essential food and infrastructure, fragile peace can easily revert to conflict.

“Food wars,” defined here to include the use of hunger as a weapon or hunger that follows from destructive conflict, are implicated in the famines of the 1980s and 1990s in Africa, and in chronic underproduction, food insecurity, and resource-poor postconflict economies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

A methodology designed to measure differences between food production in peaceful and war years suggests that a close relationship exists between conflict and declining per capita food production in Sub-Saharan Africa during 1970–93.

This shows that countries experiencing conflict on average produced 12.4 percent less food per capita in war years than in peacetime. Comparison of wartime and “peace-adjusted” trends shows that since 1980, peace would have added 2 to 5 percent to Africa’s food production per capita per year. In the 1990s, war reduced food production per capita by 3.9 to 5.3 percent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1—Actual and peace-adjusted food production growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1970–93



Hunger Links to Conflict

Food and economic insecurity and natural resource scarcities—real and perceived—also can be major sources of conflict. When politically dominant groups seize land and food resources, deny access to other culturally or economically marginalized groups, and cause hunger and scarcities, violence often flares. In Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Sudan, food crises resulting from drought and mismanagement of agriculture and relief and development aid led to rebellion and government collapse, followed by even greater food shortfalls in ensuing years of conflict. Denial of the right to food has been linked to uprisings and civil war in Central America and Mexico. Food insecurity is also integral to civil conflicts in Asia. Competition for resources has generated cycles of hunger and hopelessness that have bred violence in Sri Lanka as well as Rwanda.

Since the 1980s, aid agencies have moved food into conflict zones to prevent noncombatant famine deaths. Unfortunately, combatants often hijack food aid and use it to reward supporters, starve opponents, and keep conflict alive. The challenge is to deliver aid that saves lives and renews productive capacities without fueling further fighting.

In southern Sudan, for example, both government and opposition forces have used food and hunger as weapons to control territory and people. Armed groups have commandeered food aid. By 1998, 2.6 million people required emergency food aid, and a third of the country’s children were malnourished. Northern Arab Islamic interests vie with those of southern Black animists and Christians in a protracted struggle over the south’s fertile land, water, and petroleum, in addition to hearts and minds.

Linking Relief to Development and Peace

Breaking the links between hunger and conflict must become a goal of food, agricultural, environmental, and economic development policy. For the international community this will entail paying closer attention to relief of food insecurity that can lead to conflict; delivery of development aid in ways that prevent competition leading to conflict; distribution of essential food aid in ways that do not prolong conflict; and special attention to reconstruction assistance.

By 1996, 10 cents of every aid dollar went to emergencies; at the same time official development aid had decreased 15 percent from 1991. This means fewer resources for investments in human well-being—including primary health care, clean water, sanitation, education, agricultural research, environmental restoration, and food security—that could help forestall conflicts.

To address this dilemma, aid officials have emphasized aid that links relief to development, leading to long-run economic growth and averting the need for further aid in the future. But emergency relief also must include conflict mitigation whenever possible. Once the conflict ends, aid agencies need to engage the affected communities in transforming humanitarian programs into reconstruction and development activities. Aid should provide incentives for intergroup cooperation, rather than reinforcing the competition that led to violence to begin with, and should draw, where appropriate, on traditional social structures and conflict resolution mechanisms.

For example, postconflict Eritrea has established an ambitious reconstruction plan. Demobilized troops and returning refugees receive credit and training for reconstruction and income generation activities. Workers are often paid with food aid. But administrative costs are high, financial constraints are severe, and the government has not consistently forged partnerships with communities for project design and implementation.

Policy Recommendations and Further Research

It is essential to include conflict prevention in food security and development efforts, and to link food security and economic development to relief. Savings from conflict avoidance should be calculated as “returns” to aid. Humanitarian assistance must include agricultural and rural development components that lead to secure livelihoods and build sustainable social and agricultural systems, such as efficient water management, biodiversity in seed selection, and community participation. Such new thinking would shape new policies:

- Official aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations, in partnership with developing-country governments and communities, should develop conflict early-warning systems incorporating social, cultural, political, and economic factors.
- Relief and development assistance in pre-, active, and postconflict zones must reach the most vulnerable civilians and nurture peaceful development.
- Aid agencies should work with both women and men in affected communities to identify appropriate seeds, tools, labor organization, land and water management, and links to government agencies and markets to achieve rehabilitation of agricultural production and build local capacity to respond to hunger and prevent conflict.
- Aid should be delivered in ways that demand accountability from those delivering it, so that it reaches those who need it most.
- Government planning and aid programs should consider whether policies will promote peace, assessing their likely impact on food security, equity, and poverty alleviation.

Supportive research should identify immediate and underlying causes of conflict, key early-warning indicators, and social, political, and economic dynamics that can foster peaceful change in resource-poor areas. Research is also needed on emerging local groups with whom development planners might devise strategies for monitoring conflict prevention, resolution, and reconstruction, and on ways to integrate sustainable management of natural resources and food and livelihood security for conflict-prone populations at local, national, and regional levels.

The relationships among conflict, agricultural underproduction, food insecurity,

and natural resource scarcity are clear. Positive scenarios for food, agriculture, and the environment in 2020 depend on protecting peace where conflict is imminent, achieving peace where conflict is active, and sustaining peace where conflict has ceased.

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"A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment" is an initiative of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to develop a shared vision and a consensus for action on how to meet future world food needs while reducing poverty and protecting the environment. Through the 2020 Vision initiative, IFPRI is bringing together divergent schools of thought on these issues, generating research, and identifying recommendations. The *2020 Briefs* present information on various aspects of the issues."

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