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# AFRICA

## Breaking the Links Between Conflict and Hunger in Africa

Ellen Messer and Marc J. Cohen

**A** **rmed conflicts frequently lead to the destruction of food systems. Often, warring parties manipulate starvation as a deliberate tactic, using their control over access to food to attract and reward friends and humble and punish enemies. Such conflicts are “food wars,” not only because hunger is used as a weapon but also because food insecurity is both an effect and cause of conflict.**

**In February 2004, United Nations agencies calculated that over 45 million people in developing countries experiencing or recovering from conflict were in need of food and other emergency humanitarian assistance (see table). More than 80 percent of those affected lived in Sub-Saharan Africa.**





**I**nternational humanitarian relief and development operations provide opportunities to build peace and create sustainable food security, especially in situations where operations are carried out with explicit frameworks attending to human rights and sustainable livelihoods. Achieving lasting peace is a complex proposition because there is no single set of causes of conflict or a sure way to remove them. Nevertheless, there are food and agricultural policy actions that can foster peaceful outcomes that promote food security.

**Table 1—People in Need of Food and Other Emergency Assistance in Sub-Saharan African Conflict and Postconflict Countries, February 2004**

Country/Region	Population in Need of Humanitarian Assistance	Total Food-Insecure Population (2000)	Notes
Angola	2,500,000	6,400,000	Postconflict
Burundi	1,100,000	4,500,000	Active conflict
Central African Republic	2,200,000	1,600,000	Active conflict
Republic of the Congo	150,000	900,000	Postconflict
D.R. Congo (DRC)	6,500,000	38,300,000	Active conflict
Côte d'Ivoire	1,000,000	2,400,000	Active conflict
West Africa (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, and Togo)	2,000,000		Refugees from Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, repatriated workers
Eritrea	2,300,000	2,200,000	Postconflict, drought
Ethiopia	7,200,000	26,400,000	Pockets of active conflict, internally displaced people (IDPs) from past conflicts, drought
Great Lakes Region (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda)	1,100,000		Displacement, drought, disease, forced recruitment of child soldiers
Guinea	300,000	2,300,000	Refugees from neighboring conflicts
Liberia	1,700,000	1,200,000	Shaky ceasefire
Mozambique	600,000	9,700,000	Postconflict
Sierra Leone	500,000	2,200,000	Postconflict
Sudan	3,600,000	7,700,000	Active conflict
Tanzania	2,400,000	15,200,000	Refugees
Uganda	2,400,000	4,500,000	IDPs, refugees
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	<i>37,400,000</i>	<i>198,000,000</i>	
<i>Developing World</i>	<i>45,200,000</i>	<i>842,000,000</i>	

Sources: Figures calculated by the authors using data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and the World Food Programme.

Notes: In some instances, the population in need of humanitarian assistance includes refugees from other countries and may therefore exceed the total food-insecure population of the country. Countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, which suffer from endemic food insecurity and unrest but are not in a declared state of civil war, are excluded from this discussion.

# CURRENT

## STATE OF FOOD INSECURITY AS EFFECT AND CAUSE OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA

Conflict causes food insecurity and, under most circumstances, depresses production and income from cash crops and livestock. This reduction in production and income further decreases food security and reduces the coping capacity of those dependent on these sources for their livelihood. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, conflict cost Africa over \$120 billion worth of agricultural production during the last third of the 20th century. Given the importance of agricultural livelihoods to overall economic well-being, especially in conflict-prone countries in Africa, these losses were devastating. The United Nations Children's Fund reports that conflict countries have also failed to make much improvement in child malnutrition and mortality rates, in part because of the destructive violence and in part because of underinvestment in health, education, and nutrition programs relative to military spending.

By contrast, the ways in which food insecurity currently contributes to conflict are less well understood, including the circumstances under which food insecurity triggers conflict. Recent theories of civil war, for example, ignore the linkages between the agricultural sector, which employs the majority of people, and other primary-commodity sectors, which are usually implicated in funding arms and troops—and in funding their warring political leaders.

Conflict in developing countries stems from a constellation of factors, including ethnic rivalries and environmental scarcities, as well as intergroup competition over resources such as land, water, and development aid. In conflict situations, there is usually some combination of perceived unfairness in resource distribution, injury to a group's sense of cultural identity, struggle for control over access to high-value primary resources, and a precipitous decline in household incomes due to a natural disaster or a plunge in the price of key mineral or agricultural commodities. Studies of the economic correlates of war—or of the motives and opportunities of the combatants—rarely investigate food insecurity directly, although they often find that conflict is strongly associated with factors closely related to food insecurity, for example, high infant mortality, destitution, inequality, and declining per capita incomes.

The 22 countries listed in the table have recently suffered from some interrelated combination of conflict, underdevelopment, and food insecurity. Some conflict analysts assert that the civil wars that proliferated in Africa and elsewhere in the 1990s are now reaching peace settlements and the countries affected are entering the postconflict reconstruction phase. While the number and intensity of conflicts in Africa have

declined during the past few years, peace appears to be breaking out only if hostilities do not resume in former areas of long-term, high-intensity conflict such as Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia. Local and lower-intensity conflicts continue in some of these countries, notably Ethiopia, and may scale up. Peace negotiations in zones of conflict and severe food insecurity, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, may well break down, as may shaky ceasefires such as the current one in Liberia. Meanwhile, conflict rages on in Burundi and northern Uganda, leaving millions uprooted and malnourished. Impoverished countries such as Tanzania bear the heavy burden of receiving refugees from wars in neighboring countries.

In postconflict countries such as Mozambique, the consequences of previous wars exact a toll on food security and economic development long after the end of fighting, as combatants deliberately destroyed agricultural production capacity, markets, health posts, and human and social capital. Despite more than a decade of peace and favorable economic growth, Mozambique is still hampered by landmines and unexploded ordnance that continue to kill and maim agricultural workers and make land hazardous to farm. Roads, schools, and teachers, all decimated by conflict, remain in short supply, and the country, like all of Sub-Saharan Africa, now faces the additional labor and food security challenge of HIV/AIDS.

As the table indicates, most of the conflict and postconflict countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are home to substantial numbers of food-insecure people. In most cases, the population in need of food and other emergency humanitarian assistance accounts for only a small share of the total food-insecure population. Hence, African conflict countries are zones of high, *chronic* food insecurity.

# PRIMARY

## AGRICULTURAL PRODUCT EXPORTS AS SOURCES OF GRIEVANCE, GREED, AND GUNS

Much of the conflict analysis of the 1980s and 1990s argued that the causes of conflict wedded some combination of identity politics to perceived scarcity of primary resources (“grievance”). Recent studies of civil war, however, have found that competition for control over such primary commodities as oil or diamonds (“greed”) is a far more significant precipitating factor. The point is not that reliance on primary-product exports necessarily causes conflict and food insecurity. Rather, in politically volatile settings characterized by poverty and inequality, global trade in these high-value commodities creates conditions that increase the likelihood of conflict. Primary-product revenues then fund military expenditures.





Although most of these studies of greed and grievance have concentrated on nonrenewable, nonagricultural resources, high-value agricultural resources may also be implicated in at least two ways. First, competing political-ethnic groups may fight over access to land and water sources to produce high-value commodities such as coffee and cotton. Alternatively, a sudden precipitous decline in the price of cash crops—such as coffee and cotton, again—may cause catastrophic losses of income and drive would-be farmers into more violent military and illicit trade occupations because they see no other option. For example, in Rwanda, competition over land and access to agricultural improvement programs directly preceded the genocidal violence of 1994, and the plummeting price of coffee was clearly a contributing factor not only to low and falling incomes but also to the conflict itself, which was yet another chapter in the country's violent history of strife between and within ethnic groups.

Under the right conditions, agricultural exports can provide small farmers with opportunities to earn income, enhance food security, and improve household nutrition, as in Uganda, where small farmers' export production has been accompanied by poverty reduction and increased staple food output. But public policies must ensure that these small farmers have access to land and other productive resources, markets, and infrastructure if they are to benefit from export-crop production. Agricultural production and trade can be expected to lessen or counteract incentives for violence only when other internal political stressors, such as intergroup competition over resources, are absent. Otherwise, primary agricultural commodity production may contribute contextual or trigger causes of conflict.

The principal way in which trade in primary agricultural commodities may contribute to food insecurity and conflict is through global and national overexpansion of production of particular cash crops. Prices plunge, and with them fall the livelihoods, living standards, and hopes for the future of those who have become dependent on their income. Since the 1990s, coffee and cotton prices have fluctuated hugely, in

some years dipping to half of prior levels and carrying down with them the livelihood expectations of small farmers. The extent to which such losses are politically destabilizing depends on preexisting political and socioeconomic contexts, as is seen in the Central American contrast between the distribution of land, coffee production improvements, and profits among small-farmer operations in Costa Rica and the more skewed distribution favoring privileged, elite, large-scale landowners in El Salvador. In El Salvador, struggles over more equitable access to land and coffee-production capacities fueled decades of bloody civil war.

It is evident in Central America that coffee is the agricultural commodity with the clearest connections to violent conflict. Its conflict potential has been less intensively explored in Africa and Asia, where nonagricultural commodities have absorbed trade and conflict analysts' attention. In 2000, coffee was the second-largest export commodity in developing countries after petroleum. Moreover, coffee accounts for a substantial share of export earnings in the conflict and postconflict countries listed in the table: 50 percent for Ethiopia and over 60 percent for Burundi. Control of revenues from the "bitter brew" is a source of both greed and grievance in Africa. Historically, coffee revenue supported Idi Amin's bloody dictatorship in Uganda, rebel forces in Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia's changing spectrum of political leaders.

In some cases, primary-commodity pricing and policies also fuel tensions over access to land, water, and markets while diminishing food security, thereby contributing to conflict potential. Reliance on primary-commodity exports brings opportunities for income, but also the risk of external shocks, especially when there is little diversification in exports, a lack of effective leadership and good governance, or both. The likelihood of strife increases as a result of declines in both household and national income. While sometimes a source of greed (with the revenues used to purchase arms), export crops can, like food crops, suffer declines due to conflict, thus constraining national revenues for investment in peaceful development.

## INTEGRATING PEACE AND FOOD SECURITY IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRADE POLICY

The international community, through its influence on national food, agriculture, and trade policy, can do much to help prevent the outbreak of conflict. International financial institutions responsible for development loans and debt relief can pressure government leaders to use foreign exchange earnings for food and nutrition programs, education, health care, and broad-based agricultural development, rather than weapons purchases. Debt relief in Côte d'Ivoire and other



African countries was designed to limit the use of these transfer payments to finance food imports and prevent arms acquisitions.

International sanctions and regulations can also make it less lucrative for rebels to exploit primary resources. UN efforts to control the flow of “blood” diamonds, through the Kimberly program, engage the global diamond trade in certifying the origin of gems. Conflict diamonds have funded military operations in the DRC, Sierra Leone, and Angola, as well as the operations of international terrorist groups. The international community could, in an analogous manner, encourage “fair trade,” that is, the purchase in developed countries of export crops produced, processed, and marketed under equitable conditions by small farmers in developing countries.

Other international agreements and initiatives could likewise promote peace and food security. The convention banning land mines plays an active but not yet sufficient role in making farming safer in postconflict countries. Improvements in famine early-warning systems and emergency nutrition interventions—building on global integration of information and communications technology and transportation—enhance the international community’s ability to detect and respond to food crises. But relief and development assistance must promote and protect livelihoods, especially the livelihoods of those whose only other option is the war economy. Education and employment interventions must pay attention especially to disaffected youth, including those in households that have lost income due to plunges in export crop prices, lest these youth become cheap labor recruits for additional cycles of violence.

Because most Africans affected by conflicts live in rural areas, many or most relief and postconflict development efforts focus on restoring, rehabilitating, and enhancing agricul-

tural potential. Settling people into labor-intensive farming is thought of as a good way to start building markets and civil society, because farming probably requires the least capital investment and infrastructure. Subsistence and cash-crop (including livestock) incomes are considered the main peaceful alternatives to military employment or involvement in the war economy in environments in which other sources of investment are lacking. But projects and programs designed to generate local livelihoods and national economic recovery and growth must contend with structural inequalities that heighten intergroup struggles for land, water, credit, crop-improvement technology, and markets—competitions that can lead to additional conflict. Furthermore, it may not be a simple proposition to integrate former combatants, who are mostly male, into the agricultural sector, where women traditionally dominate food-crop production and engage in export-crop labor.

“Livelihood-security” efforts consider food security as a problem of household access to food. They examine the diverse ways in which males and females in otherwise food-insecure households manage resources to gain livelihoods and food without loss of life in potential famine situations, and to smooth consumption over insecure seasons. Livelihood-security approaches also pay careful attention to the division of labor in production and differences in the distribution of food, to make sure no one is left out—a rights-based approach. Both livelihood and rights-based strategies involve analysis and program implementation in smaller-scale social units, such as communities or districts, rather than whole countries or regions. These strategies point out the limitations of national or international political economy studies, which in many cases (such as that of Ethiopia) have failed to look below the level of the state at the distorting impacts of food aid and other assistance.

Rights-based approaches analyze existing social-structural, ethnic, and power relations and aim to deliver services and meet basic needs in ways that include all social agents. A rights-based approach begins with a deep respect for the inherent dignity of all human beings who are potential beneficiaries and requires program implementers to work closely with communities to help people understand their basic rights and find ways to articulate rights demands through program participation. Agriculture and rural development projects can deter conflict, but only if they help construct social contexts that promote greater equity.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- It is essential to monitor the impact of the global prices of developing countries’ key agricultural exports, such as coffee and cotton. The trade regulations and market structure for particular agricultural commodities may also prove important when coun-

- tries depend heavily on a single export crop that is subject to sudden price declines. These factors also have a bearing on more widespread human-rights violations and livelihood disruptions. They need greater emphasis in development-agency assessments, which tend to focus on national production and trade statistics. The idea, advanced by the World Bank, of a compensatory fund merits further development. This would assist the “losers” from globalization in adjusting and diversifying their sources of income. The elimination of developed-country subsidies and tariff protection could also help reduce economic shocks, conflict potential, and the need for humanitarian assistance.
2. Donors must provide aid—whether emergency humanitarian assistance in active conflict situations or agricultural development aid in postconflict countries—in an inclusive manner, without reinforcing local and regional power structures that promise more conflict. Humanitarian food aid programs must monitor the distorting effects of external subsidized grain flows on agricultural production and trade in recipient countries.
  3. Policymakers must pay attention to low-intensity and local conflicts. These struggles, often over access to agricultural resources, can establish pockets of discontent, reduce food production significantly, and flare up into greater conflicts.
  4. The positive or negative effects of economic liberalization, much debated among policy analysts, are due less to trade and more to the structures of production and markets, and to a policy context that determines peaceful or belligerent outcomes. Efforts to promote liberalization must take all these factors into account.
  5. The “livelihood-security” and “rights-based development” frameworks offer positive ways to analyze and strategize conflict response and prevention at the local level, but it is essential to link local efforts more effectively to national political-economic programs. Some aid donors and nongovernmental organizations have begun integrating these approaches into their development activities and efforts to provide emergency aid.

National governments in Africa, together with global investors, whether private or public (aid donors), must include conflict-prevention considerations in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programs and projects. They should calculate savings from conflict avoidance as part of the returns to development spending. Such an approach can help break the links between conflict and food insecurity.

**For further reading:** T. Addison, ed., *From Conflict to Recovery in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); P. Collier, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2003); M. Eriksson, P. Wallensteen, and M. Sollenberg, “Armed Conflict, 1989–2002,” *Journal of Peace Research* 40 (No. 5, 2003): 593–607; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *The State of Food and Agriculture 2003–04* (Rome, 2004); E. Messer, M. J. Cohen, and T. Marchione, “Conflict: A Cause and Effect of Hunger,” *Environmental Change and Security Project Report No. 7* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution, 2001); and E. W. Nafziger, F. Stewart, and R. Väyrynen, eds., *War, Hunger, and Displacement: The Origins of Humanitarian Emergencies*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the World Institute of Development Economics Research, 2000).

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