Addressing Food Crises in Violent Conflicts

Birgit Kemmerling, Conrad Schetter, and Lars Wirkus

Recommendations

- **Respect access to food as a human right:** Any policy action needs to be based on the common understanding that access to food is a human right. Providing safe, continuous and sufficient access to food is foremost the respective government's role. Every government should pursue preventive policies and take emergency measures to secure food equally for all segments of its population. If a government lacks the capacity to prevent or mitigate a food crisis, it should allow and facilitate relief operations as demanded by humanitarian law. Any government or warring faction that prohibits parts of the population from access to food needs to be sanctioned.
- **Build bridges linking humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding:** Food assistance, if implemented well, plays a key role in mitigating the devastating effects of conflicts and contributing to peace. While short-term assistance needs to be based on sound conflict analysis and a better understanding of the structural factors that determine vulnerabilities, long-term food assistance should actively integrate peacebuilding approaches. In line with current debates regarding the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus, improving food security requires greater cooperation and coordination among actors in humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding.
- **Integrate local capacities and perceptions:** Conflict-affected populations adopt multiple strategies to secure food, and these depend on a multitude of factors, such as the context, intensity and duration of the conflict, an individual's situation, access to resources and support, and governance. At the same time, local perceptions of terms such as "peace" and conflict narratives need to be taken into account, since they can differ from one place to another. Local capacities and

B. Kemmerling (✉) · C. Schetter · L. Wirkus
Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), Bonn, Germany
e-mail: birgit.kemmerling@bicc.de; conrad.schetter@bicc.de; lars.wirkus@bicc.de

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response mechanisms to food crises and conflict, as well as local perspectives, need to be better understood and best practices integrated into relief operations and national response strategies.

- **Improve the links between early warning and early action in conflict-driven food crises:** While early warning systems for famine have advanced over the past decades, the links to early action have been weak. Recent developments in anticipatory actions have improved the links and have already addressed disasters in conflict contexts or the impact of conflict itself, but little is known about their effectiveness, and challenges remain, especially in accessing conflict data and data on food security in conflict settings. The development of an integrated platform combining early warning systems for famine and violent conflict could add important data that might serve as the missing link to assess famine, drought and conflict risk more comprehensively while advancing anticipatory humanitarian action in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

1 Introduction

Food insecurity remains one of the greatest global challenges. Since 2014, the number of people affected by hunger worldwide has been rising again: In 2020, an estimated number of 720–811 million people faced hunger, and the prevalence of undernourishment, having been stable for the past 5 years, increased by 1.5–9.9% (FAO et al. 2021). 155 million people in 55 countries or territories were classified as being in crisis conditions or worse (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above[1]) – that number is 20 million more people than in 2019. Violent conflicts undoubtedly play a decisive role in current food crises. In 2020, more than 99 million people in 23 countries were affected by conflict-driven food crises (FSIN & GNAFC 2021). Violent conflicts, in particular, entail severe short- and long-term impacts on the nutrition status of children. For example, studies in different regional contexts find evidence that conflict-affected children are shorter than children born in regions not affected by conflict (Bundervoet et al. 2009; Akresh et al. 2011). Moreover, negative effects on child weight at birth were observed if the mother was exposed to conflict during pregnancy (Camacho 2008). Physical and cognitive impacts have also been found in adults who were exposed to conflict in their early years (Akresh et al. 2012).

Food insecurity and violent conflicts are mostly found in regions with a high degree of fragility. Africa is still the continent most affected by food crises: 66% of the population globally facing food crises or worse (IPC/CH Phase 3 or higher) are located in Africa (Fig. 1). In East Africa, particularly in Darfur (Sudan), South Sudan, and Tigray (North Ethiopia), armed conflicts, violent extremism, inter-communal violence and other localised tensions are the greatest threats to peace

[1] IPC/CH Phase: Integrated Phase Classification is a standardised classification system to describe the anticipated severity of food emergencies/food insecurity according to a five-phase scale: minimal, stressed, crisis, emergency, famine. (https://fews.net/IPC)

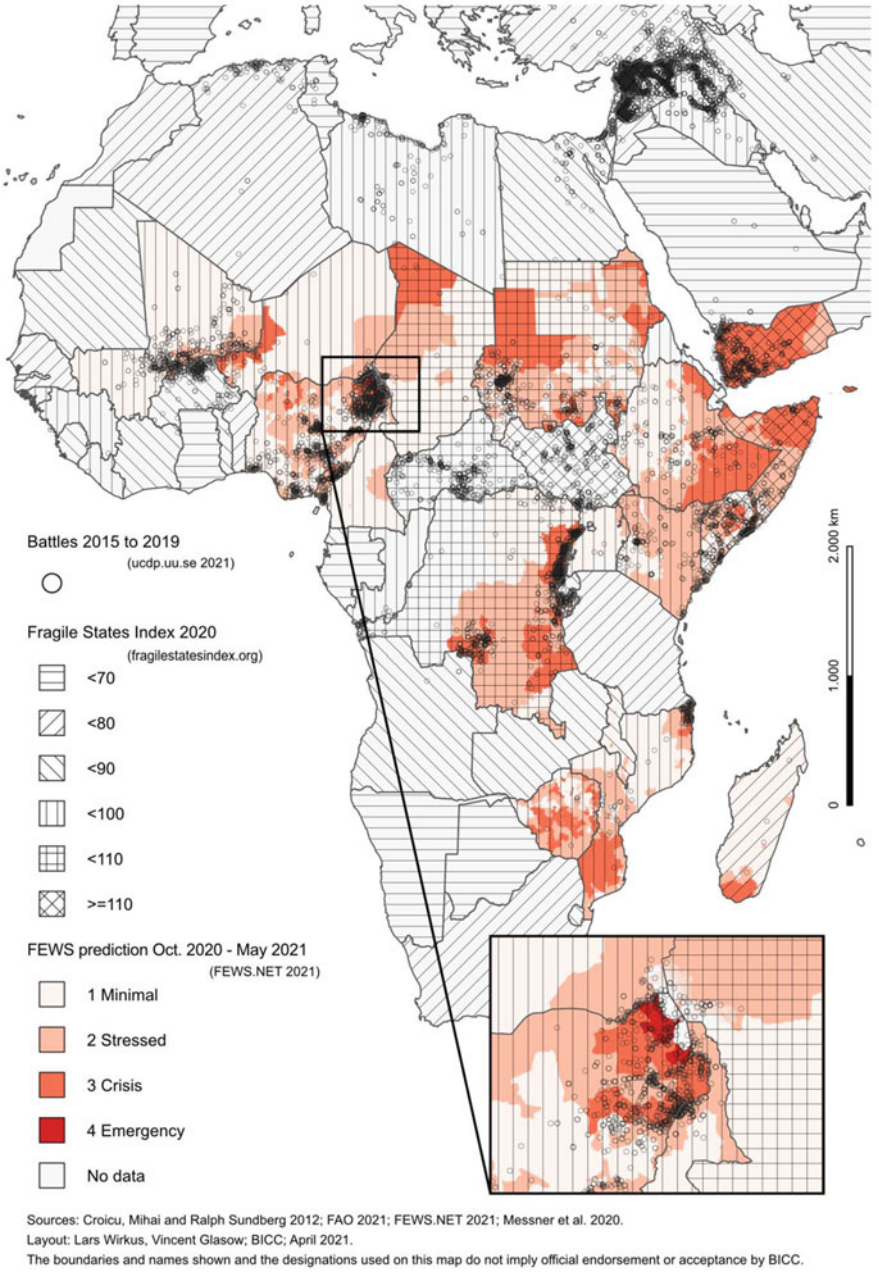

Fig. 1 Food insecurity, violent conflicts and fragility in Africa 2015–2021

and security. In Central Africa, continuous violent conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic has disrupted food production, as well as the food trade. Further conflict-driven food crises have

emerged in two other African regions: the Lake Chad Basin, comprising the borderlands of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and northern Nigeria, and the Central Sahel, affecting Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (FSIN & GNAFC 2021). In both areas, insecurity and jihadist groups' expansionist aspirations have led to massive violent incidents and the displacement of populations, the destruction or closure of basic social services, and the disruption or permanent breakdown of productive activities, markets and trade flows. In Asia and the Middle East region, more than 39 million people are affected by conflict-driven food crises, especially in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria, where political, social and economic grievances or geopolitical tensions have sparked protracted violent and armed conflicts (FSIN & GNAFC 2021).

This chapter looks at the multiple dimensions between current food crises and violent conflicts and identifies four key areas for a comprehensive response that addresses food insecurity amid such violence.

2 Multiple Dimensions of Food Crises and Violent Conflicts

Over the past decade, a growing body of research has examined the mutual impact between violent conflicts and food insecurity (for an overview, see Brück et al. 2016; Martin-Shields and Stojetz 2019) and has indicated strong correlations on multiple layers. However, food insecurity, as well as violent conflicts, are characterised by a high degree of complexity and contextualisation. Thus, discussions about the state of food insecurity and the typology of violent conflicts tend to become objectives in themselves. Criteria for determining the state of food insecurity are usually based on the four dimensions of availability, access, stability and utilisation, and encompass a range of variables covering different sectors, such as health, food prices and agricultural production, as well as different levels, from the individual to the global. Reports on the state of food security usually include a general analysis of conflicts as one of the drivers of food insecurity.

Typologies of violent conflict differentiate between the duration and intensity of said conflicts, among root causes, key drivers or ways of mobilisation, and among domestic, regional and inter-state constellations (for an overview, see Demmers 2016).[2] Each of these typologies entails a certain interpretation of violent conflicts. However, a categorisation of violent conflicts that centres on food (in)security is missing so far. To narrow this gap, we will link the logics of war to food (in)security. We will identify three dimensions of how violent conflicts have an impact on food (in)security.

[2]The question of when a violent conflict can be labelled as 'war' is still ongoing. Its definition in International Law (declaration of war) diverges from the one in Peace and Conflict Studies (e.g., number of causalities).

2.1 Destruction and Food Insecurity

The general principle of violent conflicts is that belligerent parties aim to harm, defeat or even eliminate their 'enemy'. Consequently, the emergence of frontlines, battlefields and war zones is an inevitable effect of violent conflicts, even if the current technological upgrading of modern armies and warfare (e.g., drones) aims to increase the accuracy of military attacks (Prinz and Schetter 2017). This is why, by and large, violent interactions go hand in hand with physical destruction, affecting people's vulnerabilities in various ways and leading to vicious circles of violence and hunger (Buhaug and von Uexkull 2021).

In general, Collier (1999) finds that the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declines at an annual rate of 2.2% during civil wars. However, since the majority of people in many of today's conflict-affected countries depend on small-scale farming to provide food and income for their households, small-scale agriculture is particularly affected. The destruction (e.g., bombing) or contamination (e.g., land mines, chemical weapons) of agricultural areas, as well as infrastructure (irrigation networks, roads, bridges, buildings, etc.), might force farmers to abandon agriculture altogether. Farmers may also no longer be able to cultivate their fields for lack of access to seeds and fertiliser, credits and capital, due to the uncertainty of access to buyers and markets and the displacement or killing of people (Baumann and Kuemmerle 2016).

Especially when the expansion of war zones provokes forced migration on a large scale, the impacts on food security are direct and severe, not only in the short term, but often also in the long term. Forced migration not only leads to the collapse of agricultural production and infrastructure, but also disrupts or interrupts local and regional supply chains and increases food prices in local markets. At the same time, displaced people have to give up their livelihoods as producers of food (farmers, pastoralists, etc.), and are thus exposed to food insecurity themselves (Brück et al. 2016), especially if they become dependent on food aid from humanitarian organisations and cannot restart agricultural activities.

The rehabilitation of war zones for food production and food supply takes decades. Clearing battlefields (de-mining), re-building physical infrastructure and establishing operational governance structures is costly and takes time. Moreover, such phases of post-war reconstruction are overshadowed by fierce disputes over access to and ownership of land and water, as property rights often change hands in times of war (Van Leeuwen and Van Der Haar 2016). Thus, food insecurity, for poor populations in particular, often persist beyond the end of a violent conflict.

2.2 Food (In)security and Warring Factions

Food supply is of strategic importance to any armed group, from large-scale armies to vigilante gangs (Justino and Stojetz 2018). This is why armed groups' presence and rule directly impact local food security and the control of production areas. Historically, the supply of large armies with food went hand in hand with the plundering of

food storages and the looting of civilian households and markets. Although looting is still a common strategy, the links between armed groups' presence and food security are more complex. Armed groups might show a strong interest in local food production and other goods. Combatants can take direct control over agricultural resources and livestock for sustenance or levy taxes on these products. For example, the Taliban have taken a *zakat* (Islamic tax) of 10% for any agrarian crop produced in the territory under their control in Afghanistan (Giustozzi 2019). Also, in Syria and Iraq, the agrarian zones seized by the Islamic State were maintained to a large extent, despite massive forced displacement (Eklund et al. 2017).

People in conflict-affected contexts also adjust their practices to changing politics and (local) political actors. To protect their livelihoods and food security, people might (voluntarily or under coercion) cooperate with armed groups (Martin-Shields and Stojetz 2019). On the one hand, individuals might participate in and support armed groups because they may benefit from the conflict through improved economic opportunities, such as access to food, looting and appropriation of agricultural land or livestock (Keen 1998). On the other hand, people, such as farmers in agricultural off-seasons, might be recruited as part-time fighters.

2.3 Hunger as a Weapon

When violent conflicts are directed against certain social segments, food insecurity can become "a weapon of war" (Messer and Cohen 2015), either as a direct strategy or a by-product. The goal is either to deprive a particular warring party of the population's support or eliminate entire population groups (ethnic cleansing, genocide). Direct strategies include cutting off food supplies to harm hostile armies and the population supporting them (De Waal 2018). Similarly, blocking food access and destroying food infrastructure ("scorched earth") are calculated military techniques that not only serve to ignite mass starvation, malnutrition and hunger among the population, but also to foster forced migration. Although the number of victims of mass starvation has declined in the past decades, it is still a widely used military strategy in ongoing conflict zones such as Yemen, South Sudan or the Central African Republic.

Strategies may also include preventing humanitarian access. In recent food crises, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Islamic State in Syria and commanders in South Sudan refused aid from humanitarian agencies. Governments themselves often violate the humanitarian principle and reject international relief operations, especially if they form part of the conflict, as could be witnessed in Syria and Yemen. The bypassing of humanitarian principle can also extend to donor governments; one reason for the delayed response to the food crisis in Somalia in 2011 was US anti-terrorist legislation, which made it difficult for humanitarian organisations to provide assistance to areas controlled by Al-Shabaab (De Waal 2018).

We have shown how the three interrelated dimensions of war logics – destruction, rule of armed groups and hunger as a weapon – have multiple effects on people's food insecurity. However, other factors, such as (conflict-related) increases in food and seed prices, as well as (changing) climatic conditions, often amplify the exposure to conflict

and food insecurity (Martin-Shields and Stojetz 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions it caused in the global food system especially affect the food security of millions of vulnerable people (Zurayk 2020). In many of today's conflict-affected countries, smallholder farmers, who are already vulnerable in the absence of conflicts (natural hazards), represent a large portion of the population. Conflict is an additional 'shock' that affects these populations' livelihoods and well-being (Brück et al. 2016). In times of war, natural hazards affect the population much more severely and increase the difficulty of gaining access to food dramatically. As the most severe natural hazards, droughts exacerbate the effect of food (in)security. Droughts as 'creeping' or slow-onset disasters usually affect larger land areas than other types of disasters and make mitigation and adaptation strategies difficult to implement. Many of the adverse effects of drought often accumulate slowly and may persist for years after the event has ended (Wirkus and Piereder 2019).

What is less clear is whether food insecurity in turn sparks, intensifies or perpetuates conflict. While food insecurity alone is not likely to cause violent conflicts, it can increase social grievances in combination with socio-economic and political inequalities. These exclude parts of the population (particularly youths) from economic activities and participation in political decision-making processes, which ultimately can fuel civil unrest or conflicts (Brinkman and Hendrix 2011; Vestby et al. 2018). Besides structural conditions, rising food prices have been found to exacerbate the risk of political unrest and conflicts, particularly in urban settings. The dominant explanation for the vicious circle of price and violent conflict are consumer grievances: higher prices create or increase economic constraints and/or sentiments of (perceived) relative deprivation, which activate grievances that, in turn, can lead to conflict, whereas conflict is likely to increase food prices again (Raleigh et al. 2015). These grievances can be directed against the state if it fails to secure food for the population in the face of rising global food prices. In Africa, rising food prices and unrest were associated with more political repression (Berazneva and Lee 2013).

3 Addressing Food Crises and Violent Conflict

The complex relationships between food crises and violent conflicts require comprehensive and adapted policy actions. These actions must refer to the reduction of food insecurity as an effect of violent conflict and consider the reduction of violent conflict or conflict risks itself. We thus suggest four key areas for a multi-faceted response that addresses food insecurity and violent conflict.

3.1 Respect Access to Food as a Human Right During Violent Conflict

Access to food is a human right. Any government should pursue preventive policies and take emergency measures to secure food equally for all segments of its population. If a government lacks the capacity to prevent or mitigate a food crisis, it

should allow and facilitate relief operations as demanded by humanitarian law (Akande and Gillard 2019). However, national governments or belligerents are often unable or unwilling to respond adequately to food crises. At the same time, international relief operations face the challenges of reaching the people most in need and avoiding exacerbation of the conflict.

Therefore, all actors must comply both with the provisions to protect the population from intended starvation and with humanitarian principles to guarantee humanitarian access. Any government or warring faction that prohibits parts of the population from access to food needs to be sanctioned. UN Security Council Resolution 2417 is a major step in this direction. The Resolution stresses the importance of compliance by belligerents with international humanitarian law and condemns the denial of humanitarian access to affected civilians (UNSC 2018). Most importantly, the Resolution stipulates that the obstruction of humanitarian access in conflict settings can result in targeted sanctions, as already used, for example, on Al-Shabaab in Somalia (Akande and Gillard 2019). Thus, the Resolution has the potential to be used by UN agencies to monitor and report robustly on human-induced food crises in conflicts and call on the Security Council and the international community to act (Zappalà 2019).

3.2 Build Bridges Linking Humanitarian Action, Development and Peacebuilding

The genuine role of international relief operations in food crises is to prevent or alleviate human suffering induced by disasters and conflicts. Short-term food assistance during conflict-driven food crises usually focuses on improving the food consumption of conflict-affected people and communities. It also aims to support the most vulnerable, such as displaced persons, children, and pregnant and nursing women. However, relief operations in conflict settings often face challenges in guaranteeing aid workers' safety and security, gaining necessary data on affected populations and reaching those people most in need in a timely and appropriate manner (see, for example, Tranchant et al. 2019). At the same time, food interventions risk becoming a source of conflict themselves, primarily because of an inadequate understanding of the conflict setting (Devereux 2000). The misappropriation of food aid in particular, such as the usurpation of food by violent actors, can fuel political grievances and perpetuate conflict. Moreover, food aid can undermine local food production and markets and affect the development of local capacity (Hendrix and Brinkman 2013). A clear and locally informed analysis of the conflict and its context, as well as increased equity and accountability, is needed to prevent negative impacts of food aid in conflict environments.

While short-term food aid focuses primarily on alleviating human suffering rather than resolving violent conflict, long-term humanitarian assistance, as particularly provided in protracted crises or post-conflict situations, can identify potential conflicts and address them, reducing the risk of conflict flare-ups. Usually, these

interventions have a stronger impact than the immediate supply of food (or cash/vouchers) and already include development assistance measures. Long-term food assistance can therefore play a crucial role in building local capacity, restoring agricultural production and, ultimately, consolidating peace. However, it is crucial to initiate its provision early enough, to consider the actual needs of the most vulnerable people, and to include conflict analysis (Hendrix and Brinkman 2013; Lander and Richards 2019). Nevertheless, aid agencies need to be aware of the (globalised) food system in which local agricultural production is embedded and that the longer food aid is provided, the more it has a direct impact on the local food market and price trends. Therefore, they must avoid aid dependency, especially by affecting smallholders' livelihoods (Delgado et al. 2021).

To effectively address these challenges, long-term food assistance needs to bridge humanitarian action, development intervention and peacebuilding. Thus, food assistance is a key instrument that should be addressed in current debates on the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus, which calls for greater cooperation and coordination among actors in humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding.

3.3 Integrate Local Capacities and Perceptions

Conflict-affected populations adopt very different strategies in order to secure food. These strategies depend on multiple factors, such as the conflict's context, intensity and duration, the individual situation, access to resources and support, and governance. For example, rather than aiming to maximise agricultural profits, farmers may change their crop production to a low-risk, low-return strategy by switching from cash crops to less profitable crops, as the latter provide food for subsistence or can be easily transferred in case of displacement. However, maintaining these low-risk-low-return strategies after conflicts end affects their recovery and can further affect their livelihoods in the long run (Arias et al. 2017; Martin-Shields and Stojetz 2019).

Similarly, pastoralists may adapt livestock production to the conflict, e.g., by selling livestock to have sufficient cash or hiding livestock from armed groups or local ruling groups (Brück et al. 2016). Furthermore, studies have shown that households increase their use of safety nets to minimise uncertainty. Support ranges from cash transfers to in-kind assistance received by the household (Brück et al. 2019). Remittances are also an important safety net in responding to food crises and conflict, but much still needs to be learned about its role for affected people (Haan et al. 2012). Therefore, local response mechanisms to food crises and conflicts need to be better understood and successful practices incorporated into relief efforts and national response strategies while, at the same time, striving to avoid potential harm. At the same time, local perceptions of terms such as "peace" need to be taken into account, since they can differ from one place to another and, most importantly, differ from (Western) academic concepts (Ejdus 2021). It is important to understand local perspectives and to strengthen existing potentials for peace in order to integrate a peacebuilding perspective into food assistance interventions.

3.4 *Improve the Links Between Early Warning and Early Action in Conflict-Driven Food Crises*

Early warning mechanisms for famine such as FEWS NET have advanced over the past decades towards a better model for predicting and managing food crises. They provide decision-makers and relief organisations with a rigorous, evidence- and consensus-based analysis of food insecurity and acute malnutrition situations. Recent developments in anticipatory action aim to close the gap between forecasting tools and delayed response, but still face multiple challenges in adjusting these to conflict settings (Wagner and Jaime 2020).

First, in violent conflicts, access to data needed for comprehensive analysis and timely warning is often unavailable or out-of-date. Second, the announcement of a food emergency is highly political and often challenged by claims of sovereignty (Lander and Richards 2019). Third, even if warnings are timely and allow for careful planning, adequate finance mechanisms need to be in place, capacities of organisations built, and access to conflict-affected regions guaranteed. Fourth, a knowledge gap still exists between data that is available to assess the food security situation and data on conflict early warning. Accurate conflict early warning seems to be more challenging, especially when it comes to predicting the impact of conflicts (Maxwell and Hailey 2020). Conflict early warning and forecasting systems such as UCDP ViEWS, ACLED Pulse might have the potential to close the "conflict assessment gap" of current food crisis warning systems (Wirkus and Piereder 2019).

While the use of conflict analysis is politically sensitive and needs to be considered carefully (Maxwell and Hailey 2020), an integrated platform developed to combine early warning data sets for famines and violent conflicts could provide a better basis for a more comprehensive assessment of famine, drought and conflict risk and advance anticipatory humanitarian action in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Accounting for these four key areas could help national governments and international humanitarian and development organisations to take effective preventive, anticipatory and emergency action against food crises during violent conflict, while, at the same time, integrating peacebuilding approaches into long-term food interventions to address hunger and conflict.

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