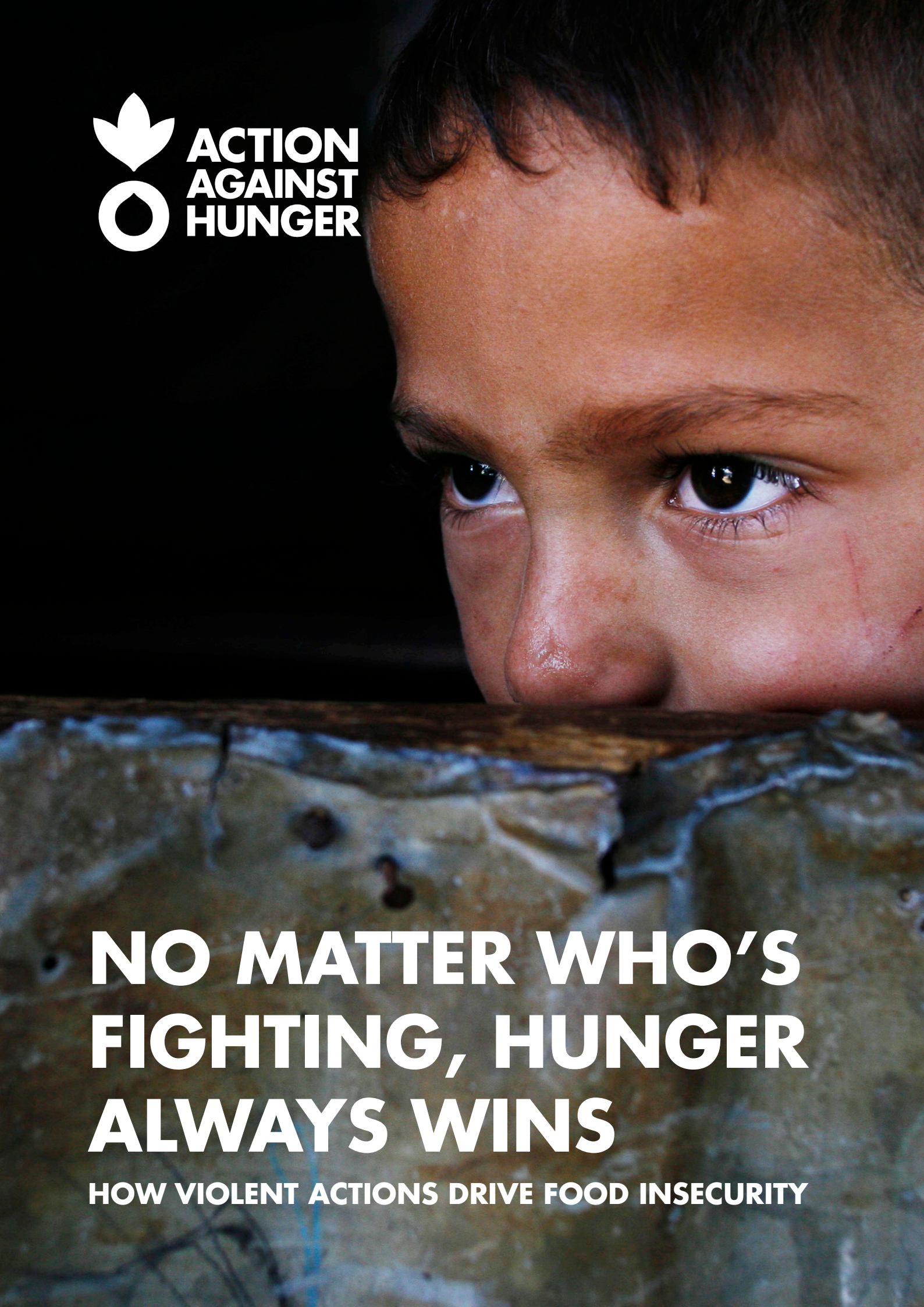


ACTION AGAINST HUNGER

# NO MATTER WHO'S FIGHTING, HUNGER ALWAYS WINS

## HOW VIOLENT ACTIONS DRIVE FOOD INSECURITY



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Globally, hunger and malnutrition have risen steadily since 2015, affecting around 800m people in 2021.[1] As a result, the estimated cost of meeting humanitarian needs globally has risen by 25 per cent in the last year alone.[2] The world is not on track to fulfil the global goal to end hunger by 2030.

Conflict and violence are the main drivers of hunger[3], while extreme weather events, economic shocks and soaring food prices all contribute to this severe food and malnutrition crisis.

Over 85 per cent of the 258m people facing crisis or worse level food insecurity in 58 countries in 2022 live in countries affected by conflict and insecurity.[4] This remains the number one driver of hunger for more than 117m people.[5] In 2022, populations experienced famine conditions across seven countries - Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Haiti, Nigeria and Burkina Faso – all of which face protracted conflict or insecurity. The alarming resurgence of hunger in the world goes hand-in-hand with the rising number and intensity of armed conflicts, and the flagrant disregard of international humanitarian law (IHL) by warring parties, of which civilians are the main victims.

Armed conflict and insecurity - including intercommunal violence, organised crime and other forms of violence - erode food security and nutrition in multiple ways. In some cases the impact of conflict is direct, with armed parties using administrative measures or violent actions with the intent of severely obstructing access to food and essential services, in effect using hunger as a weapon of war.

More widespread are the impacts of conflict on disrupting livelihoods and food production, displacing communities, and limiting access to food markets and health care. Such behaviours include destroying crops and pasture, looting productive assets, mine contamination and the destruction of basic services and infrastructure. All these behaviours may amount to violations of humanitarian law when they take place in times of armed conflict.



Under humanitarian law, parties to any armed conflict (whether international or not) must actively avoid targeting civilians and civilian objects that are indispensable to the survival of populations, such as foodstuffs, crops, livestock, agricultural assets, drinking-water installations and supplies, and irrigation works. Parties to conflicts must also guarantee humanitarian access to populations in need. In addition, international human rights law, which applies in times of both peace and conflict, guarantees fundamental rights such as the rights to food and water.

Food is a basic human right. We need it to survive, but in a world full of conflict, millions of people are going hungry, with children paying the highest price. Around one in five child deaths globally are attributable to wasting, where a child is severely underweight for their height. This condition, which affects around 150 children globally is easily treatable but the majority of children affected do not have access to treatment.[6]

Beyond the period of active conflict itself, armed conflict leaves a legacy that extends well into the post-conflict period, affecting the likelihood of return of displaced persons, the livelihoods of civilians and the success of reintegration and reconciliation.

Five years ago, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2417, which recognises the link between conflict and hunger and that the use of starvation as a weapon of war constitutes a war crime. However, conflict-induced hunger has been on the rise ever since. While it has been established that conflict drives hunger and malnutrition, evidence identifying the complex connections between conflict and hunger remains scarce and lacks specificity in terms of the patterns and violent actions that negatively impact food and nutrition security.

This report aims to contribute to filling this gap by detailing specific actions in a wide range of contexts. We know that not only does conflict drive hunger and malnutrition, hunger can also lead to violence and fuel conflict.[7] Reducing the impact of conflict on food security can also contribute to sustainable peace.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## PARTIES TO CONFLICT SHOULD:

**1. Uphold international law**

- Hold states to account for violations of humanitarian law related to UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2417 and other relevant resolutions condemning the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.
- Cease all actions that perpetuate conflict and contribute to life-threatening hunger including indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure in line with UNSC Resolution 2573.[8]
- Fulfil their obligations under humanitarian law, safeguard and facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access to all vulnerable populations without interference or discrimination, and ensure the protection of humanitarian and health workers.
- Comply with UNSC Resolution 2664 and include humanitarian exemptions in all sanction and counter-terrorism regimes to enable the delivery of lifesaving humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need.
- Uphold people's right to food using diplomatic influence to prevent and respond to conflict-driven hunger.
- States should ratify the amendment to the Rome Statute making the use of starvation as a method of war an international crime and recognise it as a crime in their own legal systems.

## UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

**2. Prevent emerging and escalating food and humanitarian crises**

- 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 UNSC Resolution 2417 and humanitarian law.
- Meet existing commitments, such as the G7 Elmau commitment to lift 500m people out of food insecurity and malnutrition by 2030 and the commitments under the G7 Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact. They should further commit to increase funding to address urgent humanitarian needs and life-threatening hunger.
- Further, invest 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.

**3. Invest in building resilient livelihoods and food security**

- 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, reducing reliance on emergency food provision.
- Ensure that humanitarian programmes go beyond conflict sensitivity, by building social cohesion among host communities, IDPs, refugees and returnees using a humanitarian-sensitive triple nexus (humanitarian-development-peace) approach, ensuring fair access to natural resources and services.
- Support farmers by strengthening good governance, in line with Security of Tenure Sphere Standards and promoting consensual land use and dispute resolution, ensuring equitable access to land for farmers and herders.
- Couple ODA with diplomatic action to uphold humanitarian law and protect food producers and food markets from attacks.




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# CONTEXT: GLOBAL FOOD INSECURITY AND ARMED CONFLICT

In the past five years the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has steadily risen, and now stands at around one in every 23 people globally.[9] Likewise, acute food insecurity continues to escalate and the world now faces the largest global food and malnutrition crisis of the 21st century because of a "perfect storm" of factors, including conflict, economic shocks, soaring food prices, and extreme weather events.

According to the World Food Programme's Global Report on Food Crises 2023, up to 258m people in 58 countries faced acute food insecurity and were in need of urgent assistance in 2022,[10] a rise from 193m in 53 countries in 2021.[11] This is the highest level of global food insecurity seen since 2017.

Amongst this number, 376,000 people are already living in famine conditions (IPC5) in seven countries – Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan – all of which are affected by protracted armed conflict or insecurity. Additionally, some middle-income countries with problems of violence and insecurity, such as **Colombia**,[12] are also facing severe food insecurity – situations that remain underreported due to a lack of available data. Overall, this alarming resurgence of hunger in the world, and in particular the risk of famine, aligns with the rise in conflicts.



## GLOBAL RISE IN ARMED CONFLICTS

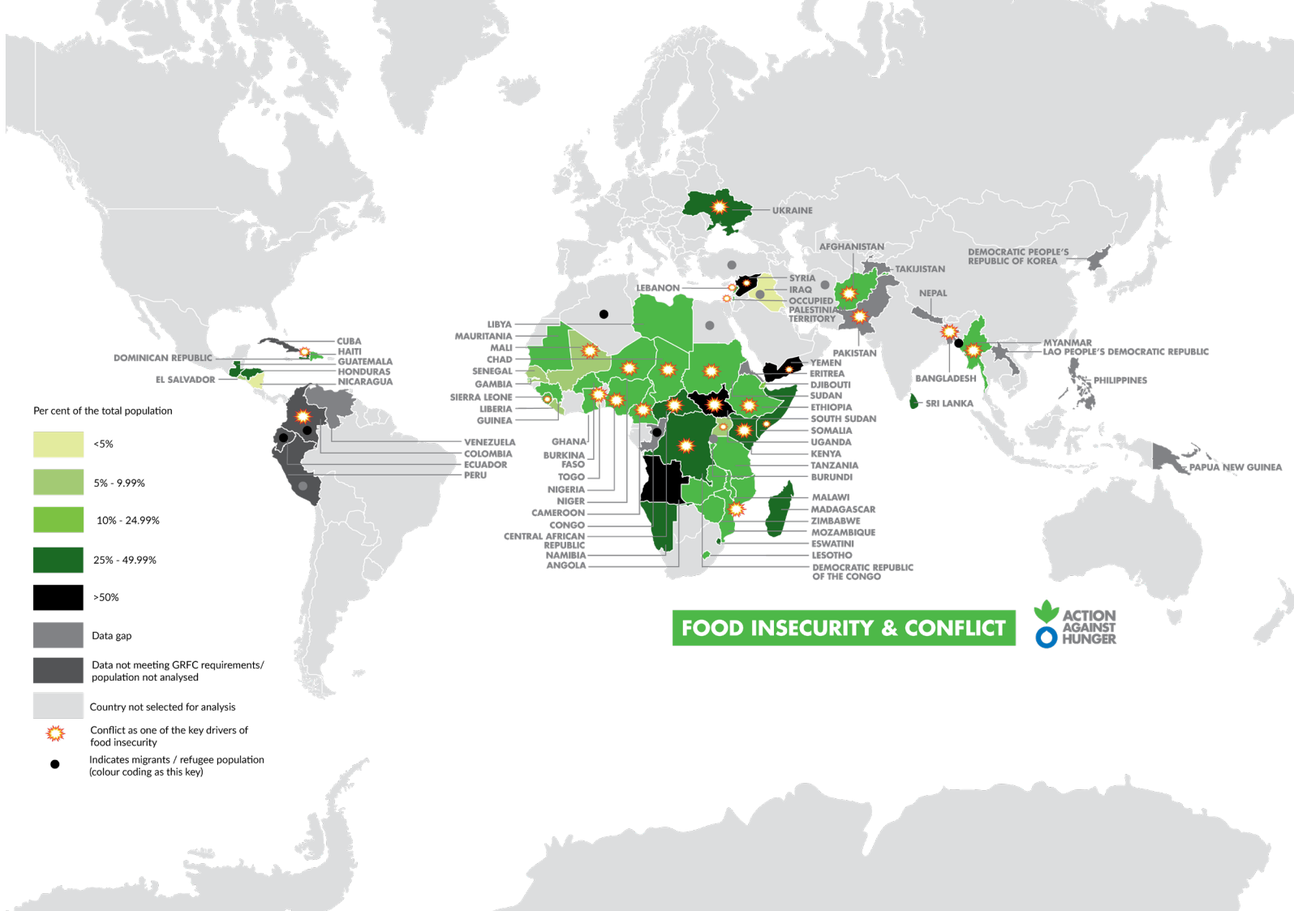
As of early 2023, globally there were at least 110 active armed conflicts involving national armed forces and/or non-state armed groups[13] – most were in the Middle East and Africa, followed by Asia, Latin America and Europe. For the first time in a decade, in 2021, high-intensity armed conflicts[14] accounted for more than half (53 per cent) of all cases of conflict worldwide.[15] In 2022, conflict levels and violence against civilians continued to steadily increase: the targeting of civilians in conflict grew by 12 per cent globally compared to 2021.[16] The civilian fatalities resulting from these acts also rose by at least 16 per cent in 2022 across the world, highlighting that civilians increasingly bear the brunt of conflict.[17]

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), at the start of 2023, 19 countries had high or extreme levels of armed conflict.[18] Of those, 11 had been identified as hunger hotspots by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme throughout 2022.[19] In addition to the 11 hunger hotspots, Myanmar's food security situation was also considered to be of very high concern because of the escalation of conflict in the country.[20]

## THE INTERFACE BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY AND ARMED CONFLICT

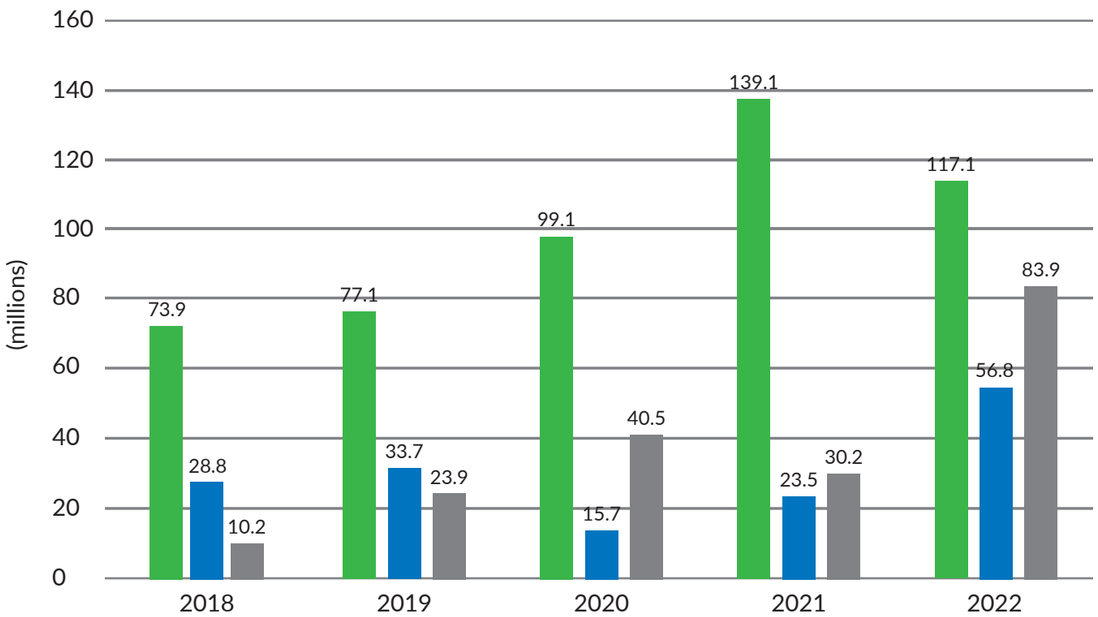
Armed conflict and violence are at the heart of acute food and nutrition insecurity and remain its primary driver. In 2022, more than 85 per cent of people facing crisis levels of acute food insecurity (or worse) (IPC/CH Phase 3 and above) were living in conflict-affected countries.[21]

source: GRFC 2023



Indeed, there was an 80 per cent rise in the number of people facing food insecurity and malnutrition in conflict-affected countries between 2018 and 2021.[22] This number fell slightly in 2022, whilst the number of people facing hunger driven by economic shocks, such as food price inflation and currency depreciation, rose. However, while economic shocks became the main driver in terms of the number of countries affected, conflict still remained the main driver when it came to the numbers of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity in 2022.[23]

**Number of people (millions) living at crisis level (or worse) by cause of crisis, 2018 - 2022**




Source: Global Reports on Food Crises (GRFC) from 2018 to 2023

- Conflict / Insecurity
- Climate extremes
- Economic shocks

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN HUNGER AND CONFLICT

Detailed data on how and to what extent different situations of armed conflict and related violence impact food security remain scarce, and more evidence is needed to understand how conflict and hunger intersect.

This report therefore examines how particular violent actions affect food and nutrition security and aims to contribute to the overall understanding of the connections between hunger and conflict. While the specific ways conflict and violence impact hunger and malnutrition vary depending on context, particular practices that drive acute food insecurity and malnutrition are commonly observed in hostilities. Using data collected from primary and secondary sources, this report details violent actions that are tantamount to attacks on food security, including those against land and productive assets such as crops, livestock and agriculture tools; infrastructure and basic social services; as well as mine contamination, forced displacement, and humanitarian access restrictions.

### FOOD PRICE INFLATION, CURRENCY DEPRECIATION AND CONFLICT

Conflict also exacerbates economic problems. In 2022, food prices increased by over 10 per cent in 38 countries that were already experiencing food crises, including for example Sudan, South Sudan and Haiti.[24] A significant number of countries in 2022 also faced abnormally fast currency depreciation,[25] which has eroded food security for millions.

One such country, Yemen, has experienced exceptionally high inflation and currency depreciation over eight years of conflict. In 2022, the prices of wheat, flour, cooking oil, eggs and sugar all rose by 33 per cent in just a four-month period.[26] Yemen's reliance on imports for 90 per cent of its food, and several rounds of currency devaluation, made the country extremely vulnerable to the rise of global food and commodity prices, putting millions of people on the brink of starvation.

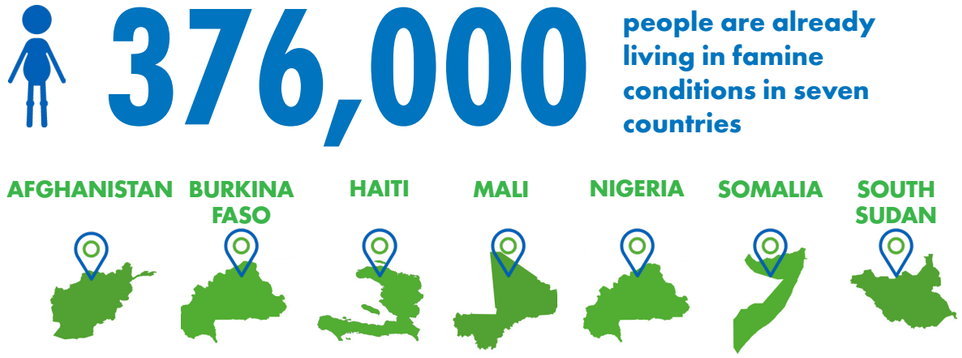
In Haiti, a combination of global food and fuel price inflation, 33 per cent currency depreciation, and a reliance on imports for over half of its food, all contributed to a spike in the prices of staple goods,[27] forcing many families to choose between skipping meals to pay for school fees or not sending their children to school.[28] And in Sudan, conflict, combined with the exceedingly high cost of living, has affected households' ability to access food.

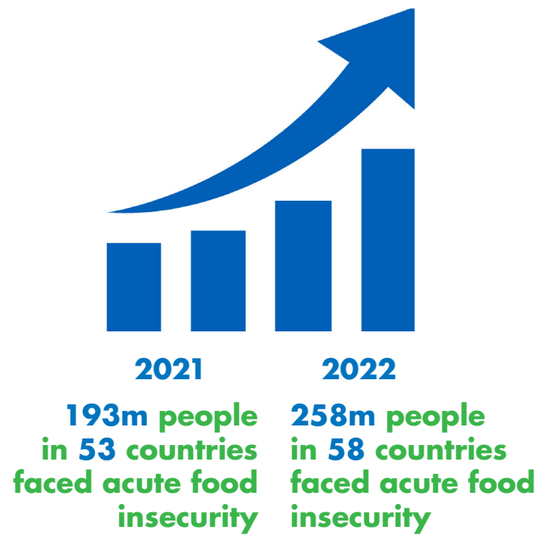

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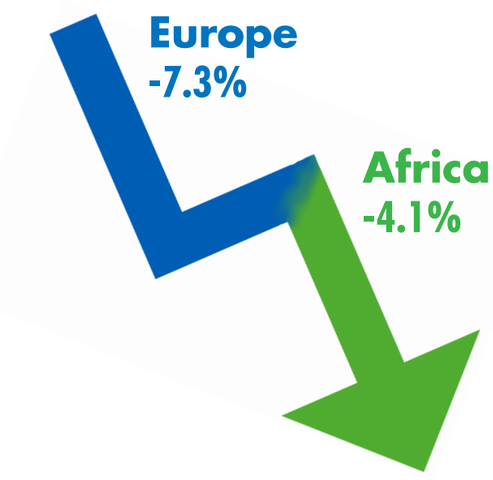
**1 IN 23**

need humanitarian assistance globally




**Conflict and insecurity have contributed to localised production shortfalls in 2022 compared to 2021**







**of 258 million people facing crisis levels of acute food insecurity were living in conflict-affected countries in 2022**




**In 2022, food prices surged by 10% in 38 countries that were already experiencing food crises, like Haiti, South Sudan and Sudan**

**There has been a 25% increase in the cost of meeting humanitarian needs globally**



# HOW CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE AFFECT FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

The impact of armed conflict and insecurity on food security and nutrition can be direct or indirect. Most often it is indirect, with armed conflict and violence leading to hunger and malnutrition as a consequence of violence and destruction – for example, as a result of the disruption or collapse of economic activity, agricultural production, transport systems or water supplies – all of which increase poverty. However, in some cases the impact of conflict is direct, with armed parties strategically using political or war actions to cause food insecurity and malnutrition among the population. In such cases, hunger is used to subjugate communities and make them dependent and politically subservient, as well as to prevent them from providing economic and political support to their enemies.[30]

Violent attacks on food security include the large-scale and systematic burning and razing of homes and property; looting and destruction of food crops and livestock; and targeted attacks on humanitarian aid workers. Such attacks on food security affect entire communities and often disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations, such as women and children.

## OBSTRUCTING ACCESS TO CROPS AND PASTURE

An estimated 80 per cent of the world's extremely poor people live in rural areas and therefore rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods.[31] People's access to land and land ownership is therefore essential to ensure food supplies and to guarantee sustainable food security. At the same time, the majority of countries experiencing armed conflicts and violence are also rural countries that are highly dependent on agriculture.

In times of conflict, many people leave their homes and land, in search of safety. When attempting to return, they often face difficulties in getting their land back. Indeed, land dispossession is a common tactic widely used by parties to conflicts to control territory and as a way to accumulate wealth to bolster the war economy and exercise social and political control. Sometimes it is used to punish local and displaced communities.

Land dispossession can take different forms. In some contexts, returning populations have reported being forced to pay large fees to armed groups who seized their land in their absence in order to regain access, even when they could provide proof of ownership. In other contexts, such as in **Cote d'Ivoire** for example, appropriated lands were illegally sold or auctioned, allowing those who seized them to generate income from sales or rental of newly confiscated property.[32] It is likely that this tactic also influences the demographics of a region to shift power dynamics.

**"When we came back, we were shocked by the damage in our village. All the properties were looted, but the hardest thing we saw was that our land is now confiscated and taken over by strangers. Before we left, we had planted beets, but others stole the crop. We have nothing to do but wait for God's mercy."**

**- Quote from Syrian participant, 2022.**



Land dispossession can also result from government policies, such as laws requiring land owners to demonstrate the use and ownership of their land, or policies subjecting them to confiscation or expropriation. Auctions are sometimes based on administrative and unlawful processes and arbitrary decisions taken by administrative bodies, which fail to fulfil the obligations of fair and due process.

In fragile contexts, populations often face restrictions and obstructions to access their land as well, such as in the Sahel region. Over the past few years, attacks, threats of attacks and blockades by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) surrounding certain towns and villages have dramatically affected access to pastures, crop fields and harvests. In **Burkina Faso** for example, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as people who remained in conflict-affected areas, no longer have access to agricultural or pastoral land. As most rural people rely on farming, they have consequently lost their main source of income, while many local markets no longer function. In some areas it was reported that NSAG members whipped internally displaced women that were trying to cultivate land.[33]

In other cases, such as in **Niger** and **Mali**, NSAGs' control of territories to make agricultural fields and pasture inaccessible can be linked to illegal economies and activities (for instance human trafficking and drug trafficking). The presence of herders or farmers is forbidden in those territories to prevent them from witnessing, and potentially reporting, illegal activities.

In **Somalia**, communities indicated that armed groups imposed taxes on farm produce and livestock. While travelling to IDP camps, civilians had to pay taxes to NSAGs who did not want people moving to other areas, thereby losing control and revenue. In some areas, armed groups banned people from collecting natural resources such as firewood, negatively impacting livelihoods. A similar practice of collecting a form of tax from farmers was also reported in **Mali**.

In **Haiti**, violence by armed groups has spread in rural areas, forcing farmers to reduce the areas they cultivate. Haiti is now facing one of the highest levels of food insecurity in the world, with a record 4.9m people – close to half the country – projected to be in acute hunger.[34] This is also impacting the health and nutrition of children.

And in **Colombia**, NSAGs have used confinement as a strategy to control and subdue populations,[35] restricting freedom of movement, the hours during which people could travel, and who could enter particular areas. Populations could not leave confined territories without a permit, resulting in farmers and indigenous populations being unable to access their lands and crops.



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## IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

Secure and equitable access to land for vulnerable groups is one of the main ways to end hunger, achieve food security and promote sustainable agriculture.[36] In December 2022, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights[37] recognised that conflicts may lead to land grabbing and land dispossession and that depriving people using land for productive purposes in this way endangers their right to adequate food.[38]

Loss of land and incapacity to access it can result in reduced access to pasture, water resources, and loss of crops. In communities where agriculture is the primary source of income, and with the vast majority of the population owning land before being forcibly displaced due to conflict, this often results in a severe reduction in household income. This forces already vulnerable families to adopt dangerous coping mechanisms such as selling off remaining production assets or using savings to make ends meet and cover basic access necessities.

Land dispossession is particularly problematic in customary systems and contexts where most agricultural land ownership is based on traditional oral agreements with limited official documentation or formal records, in which case landowners cannot prove ownership.[39] Additionally, obstructing and restricting access to land can have a prejudicial effect on pastoralists, whose livelihoods depend on access to territories for livestock pasture.[40] As a result, pastoralist and nomadic communities and indigenous groups are at a higher risk of land dispossession. Moreover, beyond creating food insecurity, the loss of land can also have a social and cultural impact for the communities who have traditions attached to the land, such as indigenous communities.

Overall, attacks on lands tend to affect the most vulnerable groups. Their limited capacity to defend their rights creates a feeling of impunity, which encourages further land rights violations by individuals or by the state, granting concessions on the land used by vulnerable groups.[41]



## LOOTING OR THEFT OF PRODUCTIVE ASSETS AND CROPS

Agricultural production in rural areas is often targeted to weaken the region's political and economic position or impose control upon a population, particularly when the majority of the population is dependent on agriculture for their food needs and livelihoods.

Direct attacks on the agricultural sector include access restrictions to (and occupation of) fields, preventing access to crops and opportunities to harvest; the theft or destruction of tools or livestock; and even the burning or pillaging of crops and harvests by armed groups. Such practices are not new and have been observed in a wide range of conflict contexts across the globe, including **in the Sahel, the Central African Republic, Syria** and **Ukraine**. In some local contexts it was reported to Action Against Hunger that all crops had been stolen by armed groups on several occasions. In **Niger**, since at least late 2020, NSAGs have burned granaries and looted livestock during many attacks, depriving people of their food reserves and their livelihoods and forcing them to flee.[43] Similar violent actions were observed in **Mali**, where attacks by armed groups against civilians and their livelihoods have significantly increased since 2021.[44] Some farmers were also prohibited from planting on their lands.[45]

**"Our granaries have been pillaged, we still produce a few crops like peanuts and sesame, but we grow manioc in much greater volumes. It is an easy crop that isn't hard to hide."**

- Interview conducted in Central African Republic, 2017.

In addition, some of the most fertile areas of land can be targets for occupation by armed forces, reducing the yield and labour opportunities. In **Colombia**, for example, communities report finding themselves trapped between opponent armed forces fighting for land and crop ownership, and armed forces trying to eradicate crops declared to be illicit. For communities to maintain food production would be perceived as taking sides with one party or the other, placing them at risk. As a result, communities find themselves unable to work, unable to generate an income and struggling to access food. When a population flees its villages as a result of conflict and ongoing fighting, crops and harvests are largely abandoned. However, communities in some areas of operation indicated to Action Against Hunger that while they had left before the harvest, they had found the crops to have been harvested upon their return. When returnee families asked about the crops, they were informed the income would be allocated to combatant's families and the general consensus was that crops had been looted by local armed groups. Sometimes, looting is combined with forces being deployed at checkpoints and demanding import fees on all goods and commodities in transit.

Such practices are not limited to crops. In a wide range of contexts in Africa, the Middle East and South America, theft and looting of livestock by armed groups is common practice and is often reported by communities. In **Niger, Mali** and **Somalia**, some communities reported a system of illegitimate taxation imposed by armed groups on populations for possessing or herding livestock or grain stocks.[46] Those unable to pay were forced to surrender some livestock as a form of payment. Sometimes this tax took the form of collections of crops or livestock from the farmers by armed groups, alleging that this was to pay for protection.

Murders or kidnappings of civilians, including farmers or food producers killed for their crops, have been reported in many countries affected by conflict, such as in **Somalia,**[47] **Niger,**[48] **Nigeria**[49] and **Kenya**. Food producers may constitute a target for armed groups who use them as a source of revenue by exchanging them for a ransom from their families. Theft of agricultural equipment has also been observed in multiple conflict settings to prevent communities from harvesting their crops and feeding themselves.

**"We suffer from all armed people in this country, all of them don't respect the civilians. We planted our lands this year with wheat and barley, the harvesting season is very soon. The rainfall was little this winter, and we can't water the lands from our wells since all the equipment was stolen."**

- Quote from Syrian participant, 2022.

## IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

Attacks on crops, harvests and productive assets have a devastating effect on populations. Destruction or theft of productive assets reduces affected populations' overall ability to generate food and income. Likewise, the looting and destruction of crops and harvests can degrade not only agricultural assets, but the inputs required to cultivate lands. In fact, along with weather extremes, conflict is one of the main factors affecting cereal production.[50] Conflict and insecurity have also contributed to localised production shortfalls in 2022 compared to 2021, such as in Africa (-4.1 per cent), and Europe (-7.3 per cent).[51]

As these tactics limit food production, they affect farmers directly by reducing household income, and also by reducing the long-term access of larger populations to food. The resulting impact on already meagre income levels means further reduced ability to access food, healthcare, nutrition, as well as limited ability to rehabilitate properties, wells or agricultural tools and lands.

Communities and families are left with no livelihood opportunities and struggle to access adequate food. As a result of the looting and destruction of food stocks, many conflict-affected communities face prolonged food shortages. In some regions, extreme food insecurity has led to farming communities reportedly resorting to eating the seeds needed to plant for the next season. Combined with the disappearance or disruption of seed markets as a result of ongoing conflict, this impacts communities' ability to resume crop production for multiple seasons.

## OBSTRUCTING ACCESS TO HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND BASIC MEANS OF SURVIVAL

In many conflict-affected countries, the active blockade of ports and roads has led to the disruption of commercial trade as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance. This can drive severe hunger and malnutrition.

In Yemen, for example, a blockade by the Saudi-led coalition of the country's seaports, airports and land crossings that started in November 2017 cut off crucial imports of food, fuel, medicines, and humanitarian relief supplies at a time where 90 per cent of the population depended on imports for survival.[52] The ports' blockade also led to an increase in prices by almost 600 per cent for basic daily necessities such as food, fuel and water.[53] In 2019, the UN recognised that these actions, which played a role in depriving the population of objects indispensable to its survival, exacerbated the disastrous humanitarian situation in the country and that starvation may have been used as a method of warfare in **Yemen**.[54]

The use of road blocks, fighting, and clashes between members of armed groups and/or government forces can also hinder the movement and trade of goods on key roads connecting villages and towns.

Additionally, direct attacks on aid have risen: several organisations providing humanitarian assistance have reported being targeted by armed groups, who on numerous occasions have looted their warehouses or ambushed their convoys.[55] Humanitarian workers also continue to be the targets of attacks, with 268 incidents recorded in 2021.[56] According to Humanitarian Outcomes' Aid Worker Security Database, while the number of major incidents against humanitarian workers was lower than in the two previous years, attacks them were more lethal in 2021. The 268 reported attacks resulted in 203 aid workers seriously injured, 117 kidnapped, and 141 killed – the most fatalities recorded by the database since 2013.[57] This is not a new phenomenon. In 2006, 17 Action Against Hunger aid workers were killed in Muttur, **Sri Lanka**,[58] highlighting the risk humanitarian workers face in conflict areas.

The 10 most violent countries according to Humanitarian Ouctomes, with the highest number of attacks against humanitarian workers, also correspond to some of the countries with the highest levels of food





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insecurity, including Afghanistan, Central African Republic, DRC, Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan[59] and Syria.[60] In several contexts, humanitarian organisations have also been the object of disinformation campaigns designed to shrink the humanitarian space to respond to food insecurity.[61] This has been done by spreading disinformation – in the media and social media – that aims to associate humanitarian agencies with one or other parties to the conflict in order to undermine their neutrality and independence.

In addition, while insecurity and conflict remain the primary barriers to accessing and delivering humanitarian assistance, humanitarian actors also face a series of bureaucratic restraints and frequent interference from authorities in the delivery of their programmes. Despite clear caveats within NGO laws in some specific contexts to allow actors to deliver humanitarian assistance without pre-signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), many organisations continue to face issues in agreeing MoUs with relevant government line-ministries, which can cause challenges at field level with provincial authorities. Lack of registration can mean problems accessing visas and work permits; opening bank accounts; and importing goods and medicines such as Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), etc. These hurdles make operations more expensive and generate protection risks for humanitarian staff.

The countries with the highest humanitarian constraints are **Eritrea, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Yemen, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, DRC, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria,** and **Ukraine.**[62]

## IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

In conflict-affected contexts that are dependent on imported goods, basic needs can never be met by humanitarian assistance alone, and commercial access both between and within countries is essential to the survival of the majority of people. Provision of humanitarian assistance, including food aid, is however a key emergency measure. Restrictions of both commercial and humanitarian access, through blockades, violence or administrative measures, leave people unable to meet their most basic needs, pushing them towards starvation and famine in some extreme cases.

In **Haiti**, for example, food insecurity reached new highs in 2022 when NSAGs blockaded the main port and fuel terminal to protest a plan to cut fuel subsidies, preventing the distribution of diesel and gasoline for over a month.[63] The road leading to the southern peninsula was also blocked for a year, cutting off at least 3.5m people from the capital and restricting access to markets, basic services and critical humanitarian assistance.[64]

In the **DRC**, Action Against Hunger suspended the distribution of seeds and agricultural tools when it was unable to access towns. The communities were also de facto confined to these areas and unable to access distribution points because of the risk of violence by armed groups.[65] In April 2022, armed men targeted Action Against Hunger in the Central African Republic while travelling by road. As a result, the organisation had to suspend some of its activities in the region where the incident took place.[66]

The likelihood of humanitarian workers or aid in general falling victim to attacks can be difficult to predict and the consequences can be so severe that the risk is hard to mitigate. As a result of such attacks, and when the risks escalate, aid workers may be forced to leave, pushing the organisations to suspend their operations and in some extreme cases to withdraw immediately from the country.[67]

## MINE CONTAMINATION

Landmines are victim-activated and indiscriminate: whoever triggers the mine, whether a child or a soldier, becomes its victim. Likewise, the impact of cluster munitions is not limited to one precise target and scatters a whole area with explosives. Unexploded ordinances turn an area into a minefield.[68]

Landmines and cluster munitions have a devastating impact on civilians and as such they fail to comply with the principle of distinction under humanitarian law and are mostly prohibited under international law.[69] Despite this, there has been a rising trend of casualties from such munitions over the past seven years – and after more than 10 years of decline.[70]

Currently, at least 60 states and other areas are contaminated by anti-personnel mines.[70] Most countries experiencing the highest level of food insecurity and identified as hunger hotspots are among those who have reported mine contamination. There are at least nine countries, including **Afghanistan, Ethiopia** and **Yemen**, where the estimated anti-personnel mine contamination is extensive, covering more than 100km$^2$.[72]

**Antipersonnel mines and anti-vehicle mines are munitions designed to explode from the presence, proximity, or contact of respectively a person or a vehicle. These include improvised landmines, also known as improvised explosive devices (IEDs).**

**Cluster munitions, or cluster bombs, are weapons made up of a hollow shell which contains smaller bombs called submunitions. They open in mid-air and disperse submunitions over a wide area. (Convention on Cluster Munitions)**







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## IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

Hostilities may cease, but landmines and other explosive remnants of war are an enduring legacy of conflict and can continue to kill or injure civilians decades later. For example, more than 20 years after the end of the country's civil conflict, **Cambodia** remains one of the countries worst affected by mines, cluster munition remnants and other explosive remnants of war.[73]

While landmines are often used as a way to prevent warring parties from advancing, they can also be used to hinder access to agricultural lands, punish communities, and – in the case of those who have long been displaced – prevent their return. In **Colombia**, for example, non state armed groups (NSAGs) used antipersonnel mines to implement their strategy of confinement.[74] This had a huge impact on the productive and cultural practices of those confined, who were forced to endure hunger and abandon some economic activities.

Mines left behind render lands unusable, with farmers severed from working their lands until full decontamination has been conducted. This means that even crops that had been planted might not be harvested until the land has been decontaminated. Pastoralists are particularly at risk of suffering from this type of device, as their livelihood keeps them on the move.

Those who cannot leave face the risk of living and working on contaminated land areas, such as in **Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen,**[75] and **Ukraine**. This has led to injuries and casualties among civilian populations, including nomadic shepherds and children.[76] In **Somalia**, for example, people have presented to Action Against Hunger with injuries from landmines planted along roads.[77]

**"When the battles intensified and opposition groups took control of the village, I fled like most people, and went to a nearby city where we stayed in a shelter for the duration of our displacement until we returned nearly a year ago. Upon returning, I entered the village for the first time to check my land but a mine exploded and my leg had to be amputated."**

- Quote from Syrian participant, 2022.

Several studies have provided evidence of the links between landmine clearance and improved food and nutrition security. They established that landmine clearance allowed for agricultural production to resume and expand and provided safer access to roads, public spaces and common properties, making food more available and markets and social services more accessible.[78]



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# DESTRUCTION OF BASIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The destruction of basic services and infrastructure during violent hostilities, as observed in many conflict contexts, is a common tactic used in conflict to undermine communities' already decimated socio-economic conditions. The destruction of such facilities often results in civilians bearing the brunt of the conflict.

Urban warfare has a disastrous impact on civilians and basic services. Today, 56 per cent of the world's population reside in cities,[79] putting them at a heightened risk of harm during and after conflict. The conduct of hostilities in urban and other populated areas damages the critical infrastructure that civilian populations rely on, disrupting the provision of essential services and exacting devastating costs on civilians' health, safety, and well-being. Civilian harm resulting from conflict is exacerbated by the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects, designed for warfare in open areas but now all too frequently used in urban settings. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) can cause significant physical harm to civilians: on average, 90 per cent of victims of attacks using EWIPA are civilians.[79] EWIPA can also destroy water and sanitation infrastructure, power supplies, food sources and supply routes, hospitals and other medical facilities, and schools.

In **DRC**, for instance, the Ituri region has been particularly hit by the conflict. Health centres have suffered damage as a result of armed attacks. In 2020, about 79 health centres were destroyed in the region and 160 schools also suffered damage.[81]

**"We are a population of farmers and when safety returns in our field, we will be able to resume our activities. We hope it's going to be okay. In addition to agriculture, we also need education because our kids have not gone to school for a long time."**

- Interview conducted in DRC, 2021.

As many countries affected by conflict and civil strife are largely rural, conflict hits agricultural sectors disproportionately hard. In some instances, armed groups have targeted infrastructure necessary to ensure food security, such as water wells and communication towers, as retaliation for violence against their members. Water systems have also been used by parties to the conflict to control access to water and deprive civilians of adequate supplies, with the objective of controlling people.[82]

## IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

Intensive shelling, bombardment and other hostilities can destroy essential infrastructure to survival, and public facilities relied on by most, including health centres, schools, bakeries, markets, and water systems and irrigation channels, severing access to life-saving health, hygiene and food. The widespread destruction of factories can leave families without access to jobs or sources of income and the destruction of electricity grids leaves farmers unable to operate wells or pumps to irrigate lands for food production. Such attacks have particularly devastating effects on rural areas reliant on agriculture. Within these areas, farmers and farm workers lose their source of livelihood and access to food after airstrikes. Where farms sold food, including to local markets, these attacks also impact the supply and price of food.

When, and if, displaced families are able to return, they often lack the necessary support to restart agricultural activity in time for planting seasons, which results in a negative impact on both livelihoods at a household level and food production more generally beyond the initial displacement.

Direct attacks on farmers and pastoralists also instil fear and insecurity among the communities and discourage other farmers from continuing to farm. It can also lead to a de facto confinement of populations who avoid certain areas. This therefore causes suffering to rural populations engaged in food production and contributes to increasing conflict-induced hunger.

## FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Households are forced to leave their homes in times of conflict, and to abandon their property as a survival strategy due to harsh security, economic and social conditions and seek a safe place away from violence. However, forced displacement can also be a strategy used by parties to the conflict who actively force people to leave their land and properties. Populations either cross borders and become asylum-seekers and refugees or are internally displaced.

Over the past 10 years, forced displacement has consistently increased. This worrying decade-long trend is the direct result of the rise in conflict, with the number of conflict-affected countries growing from 2012 to 2022. In fact, at the end of June 2022, the number of people forcibly displaced from their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order globally surged to 103m people, including refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs and other people in need of international protection.[83] This is an increase of 15 per cent compared to the end of 2021, and amounts to more than 1 per cent of the world's population, or one in 77 people globally, being forcibly displaced.[83] At the end of 2021, there were 59.1m IDPs in the world, out of which 53.2m – or 90 per cent – were displaced due to conflict and violence.[85]

The main countries of origin of the global population of forcibly displaced include Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, DRC, Sudan, Somalia and Central African Republic. These also correspond to the countries where conflict has been the most intense over the past few months or years, as well as where food insecurity is the highest. In **Somalia** and **South Sudan** for example, communities have reported the overall climate of insecurity, including clan-based and armed group violence and the fear of robbery and kidnapping, as one of the primary reasons for fleeing to IDP camps to avoid starvation.[86] Further, according to the UN, the conflict in Ukraine has sparked one of the world's fastest, largest displacement crisis witnessed in decades, driving an estimated 14m people away from their homes.  In April 2023, as conflict and violence escalated in **Sudan**, a host country for many fleeing violence in neighbouring countries, heavy fighting has driven tens of thousands to leave their homes,[86] threatening to push them into further food insecurity. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that more than 800,000 people may leave Sudan to seek refuge in other countries of the region.[88]

### IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY

Forced displacement has played a major role in driving hunger among conflict-affected people, diminishing their access to land, water resources, cooking fuel and other non-food items, and cutting them off from functioning markets.

The vast majority of forcibly displaced persons often flee at short notice, leaving their land, livestock and livelihoods behind. As a result, many of those displaced can no longer access their lands and villages and therefore can no longer farm and produce their own food. As a coping mechanism, many resort to dipping into savings or going into debt just to ensure basic needs are met. The inability of displaced farmers to prepare their land for the next season and to harvest and sell their yields also has consequences for the long-term food security of affected communities at large.

Displacement also has a negative impact on families' ability to afford food. This is because of the reduction in household income alongside price increases driven by the scarcity of food. Host areas or IDP camps often present displaced populations with complex and highly precarious conditions. In some contexts, IDPs are restricted from leaving camps or are transferred to remote areas. They have to rely on humanitarian assistance for food, and face increasing health and protection risks due to the limited access to basic social services, which affects their health and nutrition. Women and children are particularly vulnerable in these conditions.

Action Against Hunger has provided psychosocial support to IDPs experiencing emotional distress as a result of these difficult conditions, such as in **Burkina Faso**, where close to 3.5m people face food insecurity and one in every 10 people is displaced due to conflict. Overall, in the first therapy consultation, adults showed multiple signs of mental health issues: more than 87 per cent had sleep disorders, 67 per cent indicated having anxiety, and 30 per cent said they experienced emotional distress.[89]

**"I was in my father's village when armed men arrived and drove the people out of it. I was in total desperation, the least noise is enough to make me panic."**

- Interview conducted with an IDP in Burkina Faso, 2022.



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# THE PROTECTION OF FOOD SECURITY UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

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## GENERAL RULES OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL)

IHL, which governs the conduct of hostilities in times of armed conflict, can play an important role in preventing food crises. IHL rules provide protection to civilians and civilian assets such as infrastructure, land and other objects that contribute to civilian food supply. The principle of distinction requires parties to a conflict to engage military targets only (either objects or individuals) and actively avoid targeting civilians and civilian objects.[90]

The principle of proportionality requires that even when military targets are engaged, the expected collateral damage (i.e. adverse impacts on civilian bystanders and infrastructure, as well as on wounded combatants who can no longer participate in hostilities) does not exceed the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the attack.[91]

The parties are also obliged, insofar as is feasible, to take a range of practical precautionary measures in attacks to ensure that the principles of distinction and proportionality are met and incidental civilian harm is minimised. This includes the duty to verify that the targets of planned and dynamic attacks are not civilian objects or civilians. The prohibition of indiscriminate attacks further requires conceiving attacks that are not directed at civilian objectives.

## IHL AND FOOD SECURITY

The starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is unlawful.[91] It is also specifically prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or otherwise render useless "objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population,"[93] such as foodstuffs, agricultural fields, crops, livestock and drinking water installations.

IHL also prohibits or restricts the use of weapons that can have a widespread and long-lasting adverse impact on civilians and food and nutrition security, such as poison and biological and chemical weapons, including herbicides.[94] Anti-personnel mines,[95] cluster munitions[96] and nuclear weapons are also subject to prohibitions and restrictions under IHL.[97]

Likewise, naval blockades are prohibited if their purpose or the outcome is to starve the civilian population or deny civilians other objects essential to survival. Furthermore, IHL requires states to permit free passage of food and other essential supplies where necessary to the civilian population of the blockaded territory.

## HUMANITARIAN ACCESS UNDER IHL

Humanitarian assistance is key to prevent humanitarian crises and famine and address hunger in conflict-affected areas. Under IHL it is assumed that parties to the conflict have primary responsibility to ensure that adequate supplies of food, water and other necessities are available to populations under their control. But it also recognises that parties cannot always meet these needs, in which case it recognises the need for humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian assistance activities and operations are generally subject to the consent of the conflict party concerned.[98] However, under IHL consent must not be denied based on arbitrary or unlawful grounds.[99] If a party to conflict cannot guarantee the availability of food supplies or their adequate quality, therefore resulting in food insecurity for the population under its control, then their refusal to consent would constitute an unlawful denial of access under IHL.[100]

## RULES UNDER INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

In addition to IHL, which only applies in times of armed conflict, international human rights law (IHRL) applies at all times, whether there is an armed conflict or not. In times of conflict, IHL and IHRL are complementary and mutually reinforce each other as human dignity and protection is at their heart. IHRL guarantees fundamental rights such as the rights to life, food, water and the right to adequate health in several international instruments.[101]

The right to adequate food is recognised in several instruments under international law, in particular the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESC).[102] Under article 11, the ICESC recognises "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food…" and the "fundamental right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition".

In 2000, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also recognised that the right to water is inextricably related to the right to the highest attainable standard of health and the right to adequate food.[103] It also noted the importance of ensuring sustainable and equitable access to water resources for agriculture, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised farmers, including women farmers, to ensure there is adequate access to water for subsistence farming and for securing the livelihoods of indigenous peoples.[104]

Access to safe, affordable and reliable drinking water and sanitation services are basic human rights, and are indispensable to sustaining healthy livelihoods and maintaining people's dignity.

## THE RECOGNITION OF STARVATION AS A WEAPON OF WAR: UNSC RESOLUTION 2417 AND ROME STATUTE AMENDMENT

On 24 May 2018, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2417, which formally established the link between conflict and hunger, acknowledging that peace is directly threatened when food insecurity emerges from armed conflict. Resolution 2417 also recognised that using starvation as a method of warfare can constitute a war crime. This was subsequently integrated into the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 2019. As of early May 2023, 12 states have ratified the amendment, with Uruguay being the most recent country to do so.[105]

Resolution 2417 constitutes an important milestone towards building global consensus on the links between conflict and hunger – including by formally adding the issue of food security to the Protection of Civilians Agenda and establishing it as a matter of importance for the UNSC, shifting the debate on food security to the field of peace and security.

In line with Resolution 2417, in 2021 the UNSC also unanimously adopted Resolution 2573, its first resolution recalling that indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks that result in depriving the civilian population of objects indispensable to their survival are flagrant violations of IHL.[106] In a recent positive development, the UNSC also adopted Resolution 2664 which provides a standing humanitarian exemption to the asset freeze measures imposed by UN sanctions regimes, in order to ensure the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs.[107]

However, although Resolution 2417 constituted in an important step forward in putting the issue of conflict-induced hunger on the agenda, its effective implementation remains limited. Indeed, the reporting mechanisms designed to detect and prevent a deterioration in food security remain weak. To date, the absence of a systematic data collection mechanism for tracking evidence supporting breaches of Resolution 2417 has made it difficult – if not impossible – for it to be invoked. Preventing worst-case scenarios as well as holding the international community and perpetrators accountable will remain an ambition without consequences as long as the UNSC is incapable of addressing the root causes of conflict. Additionally, those responsible for the use of starvation as a weapon of war have yet to be held accountable under the Rome Statute.

As May 2023 marks the fifth anniversary of Resolution 2417, it is high time to take further steps to ensure its implementation and guarantee the protection of civilians in conflict, including by ensuring that starvation and food insecurity are not used as a weapon in conflict at the expense of vulnerable populations.



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# FOOD SECURITY AS A DRIVER OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Conflict and food insecurity are closely intertwined. There is a general consensus that hunger and conflict mutually reinforce each other: not only does conflict often lead to food insecurity by disrupting food systems and affecting food availability and people's access to food, food insecurity can also lead to instability, violence and conflict, as demonstrated in 2008 when food protests and riots broke out in 48 countries as a result of record world prices, or again in 2011 with the Arab Spring. Another example is that land dispossessions in conflict have the potential to generate tensions and inter-communal violence if restitution is not guaranteed.

Armed conflicts can also have a major impact on existing land tenure systems. Widespread chaos and disruption to administrative and customary local institutions can result in insecurity and contexts ripe for land grabs.[108] In large parts of Africa, for example, competition over land has increased in frequency and severity in the past decade, particularly around scarce strategic natural resources, such as water points in regions frequently impacted by drought or irrigated lands in dry climates. This competition and subsequent frustration can contribute to instability and violence.[109] Food insecurity, especially when caused by higher food prices, heightens the risk of democratic breakdown, civil conflict, protest, rioting, and communal conflict.[110]

It is essential to break the links between conflict and food insecurity in order to end global hunger, but also eventually to achieve sustainable peace and development. It is therefore key to address issues of peace and conflict prevention to tackle the root causes of food and nutrition insecurity. While on the one hand conflict contributes to food insecurity and vice-versa, on the other hand equitable and sustainable food systems have the power to foster social cohesion and peace. Strong and effective anticipatory action aimed at improving food security and preventing famine can help build resilience to conflict in the same way that it helps countries to prevent and mitigate it.

There is an urgent need for a coherent response to the global food crisis that addresses and breaks the links between conflict and hunger while strengthening and transforming food systems to generate conditions conducive to peace. An approach built on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus can ensure a more sustainable approach to poverty, conflict and violence, and the root causes of crises. It has been highlighted that the peace component is often neglected or missing in crisis responses that focus on humanitarian and development work.[111] For food system transformation and food security activities in conflict and peacebuilding settings to create conditions conducive to peace, it is important to apply a peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity lens to food security interventions and a food security lens to peacebuilding efforts.[112]

This coherent response should also incorporate the perspectives of those most vulnerable and affected by conflict-induced hunger, including rural and indigenous communities, farmers, those who have lost their lands, and forcibly displaced populations.

# CONCLUSION

This report aims to contribute to understanding of how conflict and hunger intersect and exactly why conflict typically fuels heightened, sometimes catastrophic, food insecurity. While the specific ways conflict and violence impact hunger and malnutrition vary depending on context, the practices described here – from blockades to attacks on aid workers, attacks on land and infrastructure, mine contamination and displacement of people – are commonly observed in conflict and are increasingly fuelling hunger. In relation to the lack of specific data on the connections between conflict and hunger, this report aims to help fill that gap by providing pointers for analysis. Such violent actions, which appear to constitute breaches of humanitarian law when occurring in times of armed conflict, and breaches of international human rights law at all times, should be taken into consideration and monitored to evaluate the impact of conflict on food and nutrition security.

The interactions between conflict and hunger are not easy to tackle, but international law sets out a clear framework for how conflict parties must behave to ensure that civilians are not disproportionately affected. With developments like UNSC Resolution 2417, the international community recognises its responsibility to protect civilians from hunger in conflict. Now is the time to translate commitments into more effective action with targeted, context specific responses through the more strategic use of diplomatic influence, accountability for suspected violations of international law, and humanitarian and development assistance.





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## ABOUT ACTION AGAINST HUNGER

**We believe that everyone has the right to a life free from hunger, so we lead the right against it by predicting, treating, and preventing its causes and consequences. Action Against Hunger is a global network with head offices in Canada, France, Germany, India, Spain, the UK and the USA. It also has a fundraising office in Italy. Each Action Against Hunger member is legally independent but all members share a common mandate, values, operating principles, quality standards and strategy.**

**Together, we work in over 50 countries around the world, assisting over 28m people per year.**


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