

Winning the Peace in Humanitarian Emergencies



Malnutrition Around the World

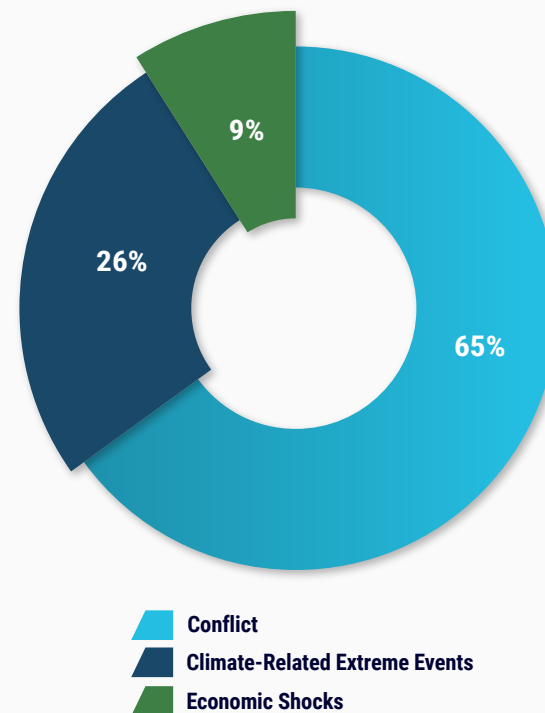
The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, works to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war, delivering food to vulnerable families and using food to build peace.



While COVID-19 has exacerbated humanitarian emergencies, conflict is the single largest driver of food emergencies today. Conflict displaces people, topples markets and destroys critical infrastructure. People living in conflict-affected countries are more than 2.5 times more likely to be undernourished than people living in other settings. “War is development in reverse,” as famously stated by economist Paul Collier.

About two-thirds of the U.N. World Food Programme’s assistance goes to countries facing conflict-related food crises. Conflict drives crisis-level hunger for approximately 77 million people in at least 22 countries around the world (Figure 1)ⁱ. Of the 690 million people suffering from chronic hunger, approximately 60 percent live in countries affected by violence and conflictⁱⁱ.

Figure 1. Main Drivers of Food Emergencies (Acute Hunger) in 2019



Source: Global Report on Food Crises 2019

Conflict on the Rise

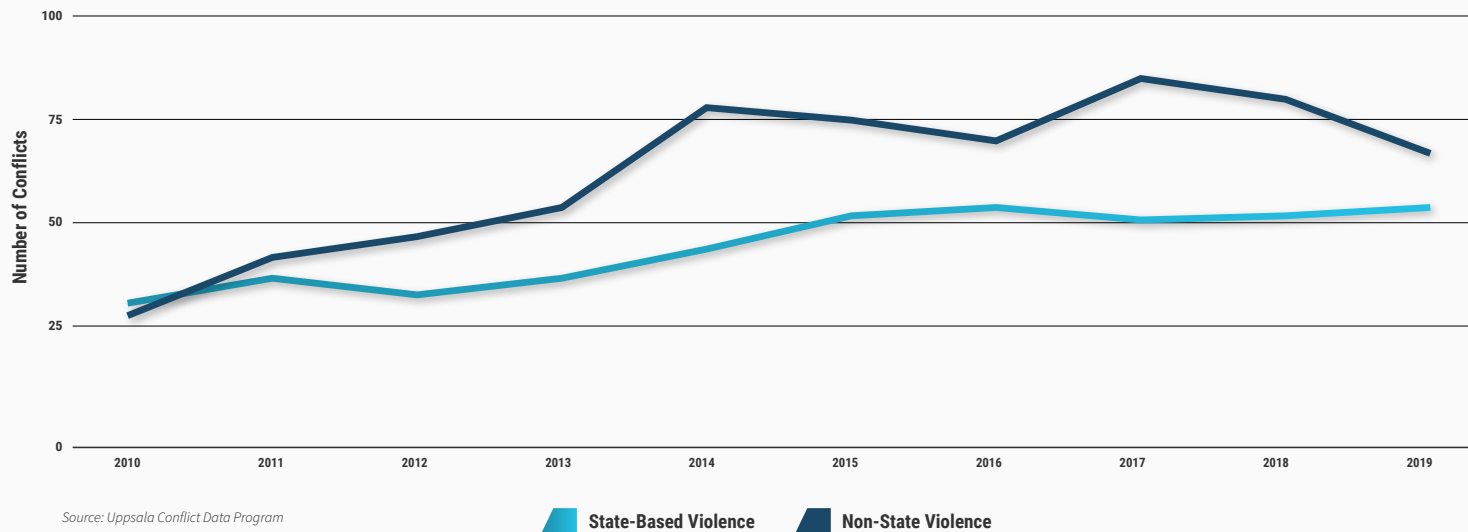
Instability and conflict are rising sharply, displacing more people and increasing migration. Major violent conflicts have tripled since 2010. Non-state conflicts—where the government is not involved as a combatant—have increased by 125 percent since 2010, representing the largest category of conflict (Figure 2). The Council on Foreign Relations is monitoring almost 30 global conflicts affecting U.S. strategic interests. By 2030, between half and two-thirds of the world's poor are expected to live in states classified as “fragile.”ⁱⁱⁱ

More people than ever are displaced because of violence, conflict and persecution. Today, 79.5 million people—a full one percent of humanity—are displaced from their homes, more than any other time in recorded history

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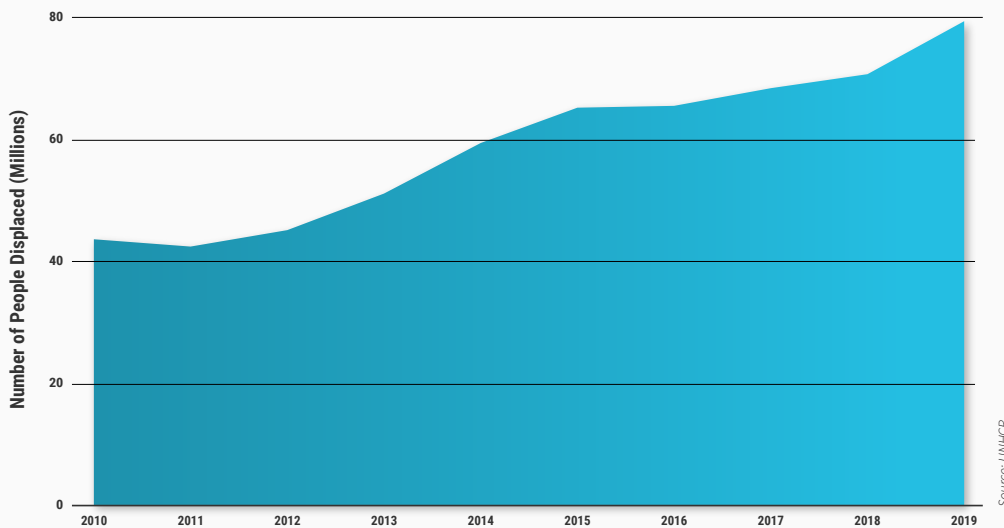
Figure 2. Number of Annual Conflict Events



(Figure 3). Almost 30 million of them have crossed their own borders seeking refuge, the vast majority sheltering in low-income countries already struggling to meet the needs of their own populations.^{iv}

Displacement places new stresses on economies, and resource competition can, in turn, lead to further migration. The U.N. World Food Programme estimates that a one percent rise in food insecurity, for example, is associated with a two percent increase in migration.^v

Figure 3. Global Forced Displacement from Violence, Conflict and Persecution, 2010-2018



In 2018, the United Nations Security Council recognized, for the first time, that conflict and violence are closely linked to hunger and famine. UNSC Resolution 2417 calls on all parties involved in armed conflict to comply with International Humanitarian Law that protects civilians and food security. This means not targeting sites that produce or distribute food, such as farms, markets, mills, water systems or storage facilities. The resolution also condemns the use of starvation as a weapon of war and calls for humanitarian personnel to be granted safe and unhindered access to civilians in armed conflicts.



WINNING THE PEACE: HUNGER AND INSTABILITY

Food insecurity resulting from conflict and war is well understood. Today, we're learning that the inverse is also true: hunger drives instability.

- *Hunger and instability are mutually reinforcing. Roughly 80 percent of countries that are severely food-insecure are also considered “fragile” or “extremely fragile.”*
- *Food can be a weapon of war. Groups fuel rebellion and war by controlling food production, denying food to the opposition, and exploiting hunger and poverty.*
- *Non-state actors can use food insecurity to undermine governments and attack their legitimacy.*
- *Sometimes the response to food insecurity can do more harm than good. Governments trying to alleviate their own domestic food insecurity with reduced import tariffs and export restrictions can inadvertently undermine stability in other countries.*
- *Food-related instability is not limited to conflicts that are violent. Food price protests often occur among more affluent populations suffering from transitory food insecurity, but not chronic hunger.*
- *Modern conflicts are almost never driven by a single cause. The strongest indicator of likely violence is a history of violence. It's a warning against the dramatic oversimplification that “all hungry people are violent, and all violent people are hungry.”*

Drivers of Food-Related Instability

Increasing competition for permanent natural resources, market failures affecting high food prices and extreme weather due to climate change are all factors that drive food-related instability today.

In the last half century, some 40 percent of civil wars have been linked to natural resource competition.^{vi} Across much of the developing world, and especially sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture constitutes a large percentage of total GDP and employs up to 80 percent of the rural population.

The risk of instability rises markedly when there are not enough natural resources like land and water (e.g. lakes, rivers and aquifers) to sustain agricultural livelihoods.

These shortages can cause distress in the form of land grabs, inadequate land tenure laws and government land redistribution measures.

Scarce resources can also create conflicts between agricultural communities. For example, nomadic herders traditionally work in rough, remote territory unsuitable for traditional farming. Their mobility helps them cope with short-term variations in the weather and the market. But, as lands become further degraded and water sources dry up—especially in the African Sahel—these nomadic “pastoralists” are encroaching on traditional agricultural areas, often leading to conflict.

DARFUR

In the decades leading up to the 2003 outbreak of the war in Darfur, the Sahel region experienced tremendous environmental degradation from drought and desertification. Agriculturalists in Sudan are predominantly ethno-African, while pastoralists are disproportionately of Arab ethnicity. These factors led then U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to comment in 2007, “Almost invariably, we discuss Darfur in a convenient military and political shorthand — an ethnic conflict pitting Arab militias against black rebels and farmers. Look to its roots, though, and you discover a more complex dynamic. Amid the diverse social and political causes, the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis.”



Market Failure and High Food Prices

Social unrest can occur when food is hard to get.

There is no substitute for food, after all, even when prices are high. In a vicious feedback loop, conflict tremendously increases the price of food. The U.N. World Food Programme estimates that in 2020, the cost of a simple meal in South Sudan exceeds 186 percent of daily income.^{vii}

The 2007 to 2008 global food price crisis led to a “silent tsunami” of social unrest in at least 40 developing and middle-income countries. Food price spikes are widely recognized as leading to regime change in Haiti and Madagascar during this period, and high food prices were a factor in the rise of the 2011 Arab Spring in the Middle East.^{viii}

Food price riots are more likely to occur in urban areas of countries that rely on food imports. In the direct aftermath of the 2007-2008 food price crisis, 31 percent of 105 surveyed countries had restricted exports and reduced food import taxes by half.^{ix} Food price riots are enabled by the “contagion effect,” a mass organization cascading from high density centers with accessible communication channels.

Foods with cultural significance, consumed by the rich and the poor alike, are also more likely to incite widespread unrest. This is why staple products of national significance — e.g. the “pasta riots” in Italy or “tortilla riots” in Mexico — often lend their names to social unrest.



WFP / Khudr Alissa

Climate Change and Extreme Weather

Climate change — in the form of temperature spikes and rainfall variability — is linked to violent conflict. Agriculture is an obvious translation point between extreme climate events and conflict. An estimated 80 percent of agricultural production in developing countries does not employ any form of irrigation.* The impacts of climate change will be most severe in tropical, equatorial environments, disproportionately affecting the Global South.

Droughts, floods and extreme weather events have become more frequent and intense because of climate change. In fact, they have more than doubled in frequency over the last 25 years. In the early 1990s, approximately 100 of these climate-related extreme events were recorded each year; today, that number is 213.^{xi}

The Sahel, in particular, is a climate change hotspot, projected to warm at a rate 1.5 times faster than the global average^{xii} as environmental degradation causes the Sahara Desert to expand. In one of the most striking impacts, Lake Chad, a critical water resource for fishers, herders and farmers in the region, has lost 90 percent of its volume since the 1960s.^{xiii}

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The Sahel is also home to a growing number of extremist organizations, including Boko Haram, al-Qaeda and Al Shabab. Population growth, pervasive poverty and environmental degradation have fueled these groups'

ability to recruit for their causes by exploiting desperation and benefiting from limited state security in this expansive, sparsely populated region.



SYRIA In the lead-up to the 2011 civil war, Syria experienced, in the words of one scholar, “the worst long-term drought and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began in the Fertile Crescent many millennia ago.” In the three-year period from 2006 to 2009, more than one million farmers were affected by crop loss. A long-term drought — combined with government policies on well-water pumping — placed unsustainable pressure on groundwater aquifers farmers relied upon. As a consequence, the southwestern city of Dara’a, situated in one of the traditionally fertile areas of Syria, saw a large influx of migrants and was one of the first sites of social unrest in the country in 2011¹. To be sure, the Syria conflict is the result of many converging political, social and economic forces, climate-related food insecurity among them.

Individual Motivators of Food-Related Conflict

Food insecurity is almost never the sole driver of instability or conflict. There are also individual motivations. When food insecurity “breaks the camel’s back,” magnifying longstanding tensions, the grievance motivation is at play. When there is a clear economic advantage to resorting to violence — most often when food or money is an incentive — **the greed motivation is at play.** Finally, when the state’s ability to enforce rule-of-law is diminished or non-existent, or when it fails to prevent food insecurity, a loss of trust occurs. This is the governance motivation (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Select Drivers and Motivators of Food-Related Instability



Source: WFP USA 2017

Peace Dividends

The U.N. World Food Programme uses food to foster peace before, during and after conflict.

For more than 50 years, the U.N. World Food Programme has worked on the frontlines of conflicts, saving lives in emergencies and bringing hope to millions caught in the crossfires of war. Many of the people the organization supports have abandoned their homes, land and jobs because of violence and conflict.

Food is a building block of life and a cornerstone of peace. Even in conflict-affected areas, when the U.N. World Food Programme has the access it needs to vulnerable populations, the worst forms of hunger — even famine — can be prevented. While we're still learning more about how food assistance specifically contributes to peace, we already know that the lifesaving support that the U.N. World Food Programme provides yields important peace dividends.^{xiv}

For example, in exchange for food rations or cash transfers, food-insecure people in communities the U.N. World Food Programme serves can participate in projects like building roads and ponds, planting trees and restoring land. These Food Assistance for Assets programs can reduce competition over natural resources like land and water, build social cohesion and provide economic opportunities for young people.





Conclusion

Hunger and global conflict are on the rise, increasing in magnitude and duration. Conflict is the single largest driver of food emergencies today.

The number of hungry people on the planet has been on the rise since 2014. Today, at least 690 million people around the world suffer from chronic hunger, not receiving enough food to eat day in and day out. At the same time, 149 million people are facing acute (crisis) levels of hunger brought on by sudden shocks in their lives like conflict and displacement or natural disasters. The U.N. World Food Programme estimates that this number could nearly double to 270 million because of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

As hunger and conflict increases, children will continue to be disproportionately affected. Children living in a conflict zone are more than twice as likely to suffer from malnourishment than children living in a peaceful setting, and four out of every five stunted children today live in countries affected by conflict. An estimated 40 percent of all displaced people are children below the age of 18.^{xv} As a result, the world will face potential intergenerational losses from hunger and malnourishment that will linger long after disasters cease.

If current trends continue, the number of chronically hungry people around the world will reach 840 million by 2030, the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals and the eradication of hunger.^{xvi} The goal of zero hunger will not be achieved if we are unable to put an end to war and armed conflict.

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