Conflict of Securing Food
KICKER: 'Food Insecurity is in Effect Creating an Existential Threat to Human Existence'

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On 14 October, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres marked World Food Day by observing that it "comes at a challenging moment for global food security" and that the "number of people affected by hunger has more than doubled in the past three years."

It should not be surprising then that food security, and the closely linked issue of water security, are pressing concerns for the international community. Further, as the impacts of climate change, particularly desertification around the Sahara, begin to become more prevalent, the impact of food security as a key driver of conflict is likely to be significant.

In order to explore the relationship between food security and conflict, it is important to clarify the understanding of food security.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations stated in a 2006 report that food security exists when everyone has unfettered physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life. In relation, the four key areas are availability, access, utilisation, and stability. If one of these four areas is challenged, then food insecurity exists.

It should be immediately clear that a significant proportion of countries in the world are experiencing challenges to food security, even in G7 countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Though, the purpose of this article is to focus on food security as a driver of conflict rather than its economic affects.

The Global Food Security Index 2022 highlights the prevalence of the issue in Africa, and with the exception of Syria and Yemen – countries in conflict – the lowest ranked thirty countries are all African. The problem is not confined to Africa, however, an analysis of stability and the sustainability of food has several countries scoring lowly in the rankings. Further, the gap between the countries with the most food security and the bottom is widening. The gap in inequality in the global food system is, thereby, likely to see grievance as a significant driver for conflict in the future.

Link Between Food Security and Conflict

In analysing the drivers of conflict, an entwined relationship exists between conflict and food security. They can both cause each other, thereby, creating a spiral of greed and grievance. Greed as control of the resources creates an effective market from which power is derived and includes the delivery and management of international aid by local actors. This is then followed by grievances from the recipients of unfair, or the perception of unfairness, allocation and access to contested resources.

There is clear evidence of the cyclical relationship between conflict and food security in the cases of intrastate conflict and violent civil unrest. Yemen and Syria provide large-scale examples today, though there are many more.

The 2004 clashes between Fulani herders and Tarok farmers in Nigeria's Plateau region killed 843 people, for example. The farmers protest in India, 2020-2021, left around 700 dead after the Indian Government passed three laws seen as detrimental to the farmers. As a basic human need, food insecurity is in effect creating an existential threat to human existence, thereby, the retort to violence is understandable and understood.

UN Chief Guterres recognised the link on 18 May when discussing the impact of the war in Ukraine, "as we will discuss in the Security Council tomorrow, these frightening figures [the rise in global hunger] are inextricably linked with conflict, as both cause and effect."

Food insecurity creates conflict which worsens food insecurity; so the spiral continues and is problematic to break. Approaches have the traditional focussed on food assistance and peacebuilding initiatives alongside institution capacity building. The success of this approach has been limited, primarily as many of the areas affected by violent conflict have been away from the centres of power, such as the cattle raiding in the Karamoja Cluster – the border of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda – in 2004 that saw around 600 deaths and the loss of 40,000 livestock.

The diffusion away from centres of power increases the political marginalisation and the grievance motivation of the sufferers of food insecurity. Effectively, this limits the potential of peacebuilding initiatives and institution building to have an impact over the long-term.

Further, the provision of food assistance can worsen the problem as it creates an effective market during the aid distribution process. Local actors are empowered to deliver food assistance, which can be used to further their own objectives or strengthen their position at the expense of other actors. The result is that grievances are maintained and often increased, regardless of the level of assistance offered.

The above presents a bleak picture, and one in which international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Food Program are challenged daily. However, that is only one aspect of the drivers of food insecurity. Essentially, they are situational issues. Conflict, like extreme weather, changing export restrictions, or energy prices, are variables and can be mitigated to an extent. The more significant issues in terms of developing solutions emanate from structural factors.

The rising global population is the key structural issue impacting food security. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations emphasises the issue by observing that around 800 million people faced hunger in 2020, despite the pledge to end all forms of food insecurity by 2030.

Interestingly, the breakdown of the figure reveals that about 280 million people affected live in Africa and around 420 million live in Asia, which given the previous observation that it is Africa with the most food insecurity is surprising. The explanations that the high number

represents the Asian continent is simply a product of high population numbers, which reinforces the link between population and food insecurity.

Alternatively, food insecurity is the product of a conscious design by governing elites, as the indicators demonstrate that Asia has higher food security. The implication is that food security is used as a mechanism for control and expressing power in some Asian countries.

For the international community, this drives home that an overall global approach to tackle food insecurity will not be successful, as the circumstances in different regions and countries are not the same. The issues that generate food insecurity are different; therefore, they benefit from the same approach to tackling the issue.

Rising to the Challenge

The United Nations has established a clear position on food security and conflict. First, via S/RES/2417 (2018), the Protection of Civilians in armed conflict recognises "the need to break the vicious cycle between armed conflict and food insecurity."

Second, S/RES/2573 (2021) reiterates "the threat of conflict-induced food insecurity and the threat of famine."

Both resolutions emphasise the seriousness of the issue, but what has been lacking is action to enforce these positions. The recurring question with food security is, how?

First, it needs to be recognised that the United Nations and other international organisations are not engaged with tackling the causation of food insecurity by providing aid; instead, they are only reactively "firefighting." This may be necessary in some cases, but it is only ever going to be a short-term solution.

Societal Resilience has been promoting a potential solution by focussing on "community-based" approaches that rely on "natural" processes of intervention. The concept of resilience, however, does not adequately account for the power imbalances created by empowering actors to be responsible for food, creating an effective market, and thus the mechanism for exploitation.

Second, despite the best intentions, it needs to be understood that no organisation, state, or other actor can control conflict or the challenges of nature.

The essential question for the United Nations is whether it is seeking to protect individuals or maintain nation-states. As the ultimate guarantor of state sovereignty, this is a difficult question. Though, if the decision is to maintain and support nation-states, then the only response is reactive "firefighting," which has been continually proven ineffective at tackling the causal drivers – not that I think the causal factors can be addressed.

The optimal approach to food security and conflict is, therefore, not to try and mitigate the impacts of insecurity at the source, but rather to direct resources to support resettlement.

Spending exponentially more money each year as the climate emergency exacerbates food insecurity, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is only going to have a limited impact and will not reach a level where it is sufficient to mitigate the grievance drivers behind conflicts.

Altering the spending of resources towards assisting resettlement offers a means of breaking the spiral to conflict.

The evidence suggests that this is the choice that the people have already been making, given the migratory increases that have been seen over recent years.