CONFLICT AND FOOD INSECURITY

How Do We Break the Links?

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SUMMARY  Food and nutrition insecurity are becoming increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected countries, affecting millions of people. Policies and interventions that build resilience to these shocks have the power to not only limit the breadth and depth of conflict and violence around the world, but also strengthen national-level governance systems and institutions.

The year 2014 was a stark reminder that conflicts often worsen food and nutrition insecurity. Millions of lives were affected, even lost. Reports of destroyed houses, roads, schools, and hospitals in Gaza, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen, and other conflict-affected places permeated the news throughout 2014. In addition to the humanitarian tragedies associated with these conflicts, the destruction of infrastructure, together with disruptions in access to markets, often renders goods and services prohibitively expensive or makes them unavailable altogether. Both investors and tourists often abandon conflict-affected areas, and clashes between conflicting parties force millions of refugees to flee either to safer places within the affected countries or across the border to neighboring countries. As a result, economies often contract, instability and insecurity spill over national borders, and food and nutrition insecurity rises. For example, almost the entire population of Gaza is in need of assistance, and about half of the people in Syria and Yemen are suffering from severe food insecurity.¹

It is clear then why conflicts are likely to seriously threaten our ability to achieve the ambitious development goals that the international community has been discussing in the context of the post-2015 agenda, including the goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition by 2025. While some countries—like Bangladesh, Brazil, China, and Vietnam—have demonstrated that rapid reduction in hunger and chronic child undernutrition is possible, there is a general perception that reaching these goals may be particularly difficult in countries affected by civil conflict and political instability. As of 2013, an estimated 46 percent of the developing world’s population lived in countries affected by civil conflict—compared with 38 percent two decades ago. With this as background, what then

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CONFLICT AND CHILD STUNTING

Because food and nutrition insecurity can be both a cause and a consequence of civil conflict, global chronic undernutrition becomes increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected countries. Over the past two decades, the number of stunted children in conflict-affected countries in the developing world increased from an estimated 97.5 million (equivalent to 46 percent of all stunted children in developing countries) to 112.1 million (equivalent to 65 percent). In relative terms, the child stunting rates in conflict-affected countries declined at a much slower rate compared with more stable countries (Figure 1). Moreover, countries that experienced major civil conflict at the beginning of the past two decades and then managed to establish civil peace achieved faster...
reduction in child malnutrition than did countries affected by major civil conflict at the beginning and the end of the observation period or countries that slipped into major civil conflict.

For example, child stunting declined at an annual average rate of more than 1 percentage point in Angola, Cambodia, and Tajikistan, all countries that suffered from major civil conflict at the beginning of the past two decades and that have also been relatively stable in recent years. In contrast, countries with an increase in conflict fatalities—such as the Central African Republic, Pakistan, and Syria—also experienced an increase in the prevalence of child stunting. Child stunting rates also increased in Mali and Somalia, which have been continuously affected by civil conflict throughout the past two decades. Although this simple analysis suggests that changes in the prevalence rate of child stunting are associated with changes in the intensity of civil conflict across countries, it does not allow for drawing conclusions about the impact of civil conflict on nutrition outcomes because factors not related to conflict may have caused the observed changes in the prevalence of child stunting.

**BUILDING RESILIENCE TO SHOCKS IS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES THAN IN MORE STABLE COUNTRIES**

The root causes of conflict vary greatly with each case and are often the consequence of a combination of political, institutional, economic, and social stresses. The literature across academic disciplines points to a broad set of potential factors. These include ethnic tension, religious competition, real or perceived discrimination, poor governance and state capacity, competition for land and natural resources, population pressure and rapid urbanization, and economic factors such as poverty, youth unemployment, and food insecurity.

But conflicts are also often related to shocks, including natural disasters, epidemics, and food price crises. While such shocks may sometimes aggravate or even trigger civil conflict, others—such as food price hikes—are often a result of civil conflict and can themselves spark conflicts. Examples of drought-fuelled civil wars include Somalia as well as Sudan and South Sudan, and the ongoing Syrian civil war, which broke out in the wake of a major drought. The current Ebola epidemic is spreading in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—all countries that have experienced civil war in recent years. In Nigeria and other countries, the escalation of violence has increased food prices and food insecurity.

How can we break the links between food insecurity and conflict? We argue that building resilience to economic, environmental, and health shocks is even more important in conflict-affected countries than it is in more stable countries, although a resolution of an ongoing or latent civil conflict often requires tackling the underlying socioeconomic and political tensions.

**Climate and Weather-Related Events Increase the Risk of Civil Conflict**

There is ample evidence suggesting that natural disasters—particularly droughts—contribute to aggravating existing civil conflicts in several ways. Such disasters can intensify social grievances by increasing the scarcity of available resources or by deepening inequalities among groups. The mass disruption caused by a natural disaster can also become a source of economic opportunity for criminal activities, including looting. Governments can further exacerbate these grievances either by providing inadequate or insufficient responses to disasters or by adopting discriminatory practices in the allocation of ex ante protective measures and ex post humanitarian aid. In extreme cases, disasters can provide a convenient pretext for advancing political or military objectives.
In Mali, for example, arid and semi-arid conditions and changing desert boundaries have often led to deadly clashes between agricultural farmers and pastoralists. In addition, policies favoring agricultural expansion to the detriment of pastoralists, restrictions on the access to natural resources, the use of repressive force by the government, and the perception that the government misappropriated international humanitarian aid for drought have all been factors that have unmistakably deepened the grievances of pastoralists.17

A conflict in Mawai in 2012 also coincided with a regionwide drought that affected 3.5 million people. The combination of both the drought and the political turmoil eventually led to the displacement of nearly 300,000 people, including more than 160,000 who fled to neighboring Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania. With tens of thousands of cows and sheep wiped out by the drought

**FIGURE 2** Frequency of violent civil conflict events and severity of climate- and weather-related disasters in Africa, 2000–2014

Source: Authors’ estimation based on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project and the International Disaster Database (accessed October 4, 2014).

Note: Climate- and weather-related disasters include droughts, extreme temperatures, floods, storms, wildfires, and insect infestations.
and the absence of government relief for pastoralists, the livelihoods of many Tuaregs (a pastoralist ethnic group) were devastated, leaving masses of people living in extreme poverty and food insecurity, which in turn allowed the ranks of the armed rebel factions to swell and coerced others to steal and loot.

Figure 2 confirms that, on a broader scale, violent civil conflict events on the African continent were more frequent in countries that were also harder hit by climate- and weather-related disasters. The total number of people affected by such disasters in 2000–2013 is significantly correlated with the total number of violent civil conflict events (p = 0.33) as well as the number of fatalities in these events (p = 0.33). Of course, correlation does not imply causality. Countries that were particularly vulnerable both to climate- and weather-related disasters as well as to violent civil conflicts include most countries in the Greater Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and the Sudan), Mali, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.

There is also anecdotal evidence that climate- and weather-related disasters—and specifically the inability of governments to mitigate their impacts—have contributed to civil conflict in Middle Eastern countries. The Syrian civil war, for example, broke out after the country faced devastating droughts between 2006 and 2010. With such vast proportions of territory unsuitable for agriculture and herding, 80 percent of the cattle died by 2009, while water shortage and arid weather destroyed the livelihoods of more than 50 percent of the farmers and herders, sparking mass migration toward the cities. The reduced availability of wheat and barley also pushed up bread prices and increased food insecurity, especially among the drought-affected population. In total, 2–3 million people were affected by the drought, 800,000 of whom became vulnerable to extreme poverty, losing almost everything. Inadequate responses by the Syrian government to the crisis further antagonized the population. Although it is likely that the government’s failure to adequately respond to the 2006–2010 drought was one of the factors that triggered the protests in March 2011, it is important to consider this event alongside a list of longstanding political, social, and economic grievances.

Epidemics Spread More Easily in Countries Plagued by Political Instability and May Increase the Risk of Civil Conflict

Despite the global progress in medical research, coverage of vaccination against common infectious diseases, and the reduction in malnutrition rates, the recent Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone has underscored not only the lack of health system capacity to deal with highly infectious diseases in these countries, but also the threat that health shocks can pose to social and political stability.

In most cases, the risk of social unrest is not related to the occurrence of a health shock per se, but is rather associated with the perception of inadequate responses and policies by governments and international actors. For example, the Liberian government’s August 2014 decision to impose a quarantine in Ebola hot spots of the capital, which was made against the recommendations of international health experts and local health officials, has resulted in violent clashes between the army and residents of these communities. Although isolating Ebola-affected areas was a successful strategy used in some rural areas in past outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the implementation of a quarantine in densely populated urban areas presents a whole new set of challenges and may even help spread the disease as people in these areas are forced to crowd together for humanitarian aid. With quarantined residents already living in precarious conditions, the failure of public authorities to effectively deliver basic human services to these communities,
as reported by the press, has antagonized the population, leading to sporadic outbreaks of violence in these areas.\(^{24}\)

Misinformation and the reliance of the population on unverified community information could also be singled out as a potential trigger of civil unrest. In Guinea, for example, there were media reports that health workers were targeted on several occasions by mobs and rioters who believed they were spreading the disease.\(^{25}\) Moreover, the food supply for some regions in all three countries has been critically disrupted because of restrictions on movement and travel to and from quarantined areas; schools have been closed, shutting down critical feeding programs for children; some farmers have abandoned their fields, partly because they wrongly fear being infected by water in irrigation channels; and some people in cities have been panic-buying. At the same time, imported food has not been making its way to rural areas because of restrictions on movement and rising transportation costs. As a result, accounts from multiple media outlets have reported that the prices of food and other essentials, as well as food insecurity more generally, are rising, especially in the quarantined zones.\(^{26}\)

The mishandling of the Ebola epidemic by these governments may provoke social unrest and threaten to destabilize these countries that are still recovering from years of intense civil conflict.

Civil Conflict Often Increases Food Prices and Food and Nutrition Insecurity

Although the example of violent riots during the 2007–2008 global food price crisis shows that (external) food price shocks can fuel civil conflict, the effects of the recent escalation of violence in the northeast of Nigeria is an example of the flip side: civil conflict aggravating food and nutrition insecurity. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced as result of clashes between Boko Haram fighters and Nigerian government forces, leaving many in the states of Borno and Yobe precariously short of food.\(^{27}\) The conflict activities and the resulting mass displacement of people have led to reduced food supply from food-producing areas and increased food demand in relatively safe (urban) areas; this in turn has led to sharp food price rises in local markets.\(^{28}\)

The looming threat of attack from insurgents in the rural northeast has tangibly disrupted agricultural activities because some farmers are afraid of planting their crops while others have completely abandoned their land in the course of fleeing the violence. Those who remain must cope with a decreasing supply of farm labor and reduced access to fertilizer, seeds, and fuel. Food prices in the affected conflict areas increased as a result of both limited market activity and reduced trade flows that have resulted from more road checkpoints (and perhaps more bribes), curfews and vehicle restrictions in certain areas, high transportation costs because of high fuel prices, and fear by traders to even show up at markets.\(^{29}\)

In fact there has historically also been a close co-movement of food price hikes and the intensity of civil conflict in Nigeria (Figure 3). The number of consecutive months with abnormally high food prices from 2000 to 2013 highly correlates with both the number of violent civil conflict events \((p = 0.53)\) and the number of fatalities in these events \((p = 0.52)\).

Policies and Programs for Conflict-Affected Countries

Findings noted above and elsewhere in the literature highlight the importance of governments
responding adequately to crises. However, as reforming institutions can be more challenging in conflict-affected countries, the *World Development Report 2011* describes the following possible steps for successful reform: "First is the need to restore confidence in collective action before embarking on wider institutional transformation. Second is the priority of transforming institutions that provide citizen security, justice, and jobs. Third is the role of regional and international action to contain external stresses."30

Focusing on the last point—the containment of “external stresses” and shocks more generally—we present below lessons from successful interventions and elsewhere in the literature to inform resilience-related policy- and decisionmaking. While the examples from these experiences do not necessarily show a direct impact of resilience-building or impact-mitigating interventions in avoiding or reducing civil conflict, they are likely to be helpful to the affected (or potentially affected) communities, thereby contributing to a more stable society.

**Policies and Programs**

Inclusive policies and interventions that build resilience to shocks, as well as well-targeted and effective ex post responses following shocks, have the potential to defuse grievances by limiting the breadth and depth of their consequences.

**Natural disasters:** In both Mali and Syria, it appears that the government could have played a key role in mitigating the impacts of droughts either through more inclusive policies aimed at building resilience or by better-targeted sustained humanitarian interventions.31 In other countries, however, there have

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**Figure 3** Food price hikes and intensity of civil conflict in Nigeria, 2000–2013

*Source:* Authors’ estimation based on food consumer price index (CPI) and conflict data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation’s Statistical Division (FAOSTAT) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (accessed September 27, 2014).

*Note:* High food price months are months that have food price inflation rates higher than normal. The food price inflation anomaly is calculated over the period 2000–2013 as: $A = \frac{\text{dCPI}}{\sigma_{\text{dCPI}}} - \mu_{\text{dCPI}}$.
been instances where governments have actively taken measures that specifically aim to enhance resilience to natural disasters.

For example, the government of Kenya recently established a National Drought Management Authority to manage its country plan, and in Ethiopia the government is implementing policies that prioritize early livestock interventions ahead of drought, including commercial destocking and fodder interventions. Furthermore, food aid programs such as the Employment Generation Schemes and a program of free food distribution in Ethiopia have had a positive impact on welfare and food security for many households following the drought in 2002. Other policies and programs that improve households’ adaptive capacity include measures for establishing price information and disaster early-warning systems, expansion of credit and insurance markets, and promotion of effective (government) institutions.

Health shocks: Lessons from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa suggest that early reaction and the implementation of comprehensive strategies to contain infectious diseases (health shocks) play a key role in abating the risk of civil unrest. Nigeria, for example, seems to have successfully contained the spread of the disease through an effective and timely response in spite of its weak health infrastructure and limited public resources. One factor leading to this success was the establishment, only within days of the first confirmed case of Ebola in the country, of a national coordination system to guide the government’s public health response and consolidate decisionmaking. A second factor was the ability of Nigerian public health officials to quickly track and monitor people who had been in contact with infected patients.

Food price shocks: Governments may take several measures in the face of food price shocks. In the short run, public reserves and diversified sources of food can help safeguard against global food price volatility, especially for countries that are heavily dependent on food imports. Evidence from India, Kenya, and Zambia indicate that national reserves can be effective for stabilizing prices over time. Effective social safety nets that can be scaled up in times of crises, such as the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia or the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Kenya, can help to protect the poor against food price shocks. Such measures can take the form of (conditional) cash transfer and (flexible) food voucher systems, assistance for livelihood asset accumulation, and nutrition and health interventions. Policies that improve households’ and communities’ transformative capacity include structural (economic and social) policies and infrastructural investments. Governments should also foster agricultural growth by increasing the productivity and income of smallholder farmers. This can be achieved, for instance, by facilitating their access to inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, extension services, and weather-based crop insurance.

GOING FORWARD

In 2015, much effort will be devoted to negotiations and finalizing the post-2015 agenda. As food and nutrition insecurity become increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected countries, discussions on the post-2015 agenda need to focus on the questions of how realistic achieving those goals may be for conflict-affected countries and how approaches for achieving those goals may need to differ for those countries.
of how realistic achieving those goals may be for conflict-affected countries and how approaches for achieving those goals may need to differ for those countries. And although there is a general consensus on the need to draw special attention to conflict-affected countries,\textsuperscript{49} it is still uncertain how conflict itself will be integrated. Nonetheless, in addition to measures that improve security, build confidence and institutions, and foster economic growth, building resilience to shocks should become a top priority within international and national development strategies. And while the negative impacts of such shocks are often extremely painful, such events also have the potential to unite the people and thus provide an opportunity to tackle long-neglected reforms and build necessary infrastructure and institutions.
NOTES

CHAPTER 7


13 K. Harris, D. Keen, and M. Mitchell, When Disasters and Conflict Collide: Improving the Links between Disaster Resilience and Conflict Prevention (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 R. Watts, Managing Climate Change and Conflict in Mali, Case Study 13 (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2012).

18 The relationship between proneness to natural disaster and civil strife is complex and has other factors that may work in the opposite direction. For example, Japan is subject to frequent natural disasters. Over time, however, the society has developed a coping mechanism to deal with natural disaster. Thus, disasters may also induce people to form collective actions, which may support long-term growth.


24 Ibid.
29 FEWS NET, Conflict-related Food Insecurity Continues in the Northeast (2014).
31 F. De Châtel, “The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising.
32 R. Watts, Managing Climate Change and Conflict in Mali, Case Study 13 (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2012).