



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

TECHNICAL NOTE



PEACE CONFLICT AND FOOD SECURITY

What do we know about the linkages?

KEY FINDINGS

ON CONFLICT AND FOOD SECURITY

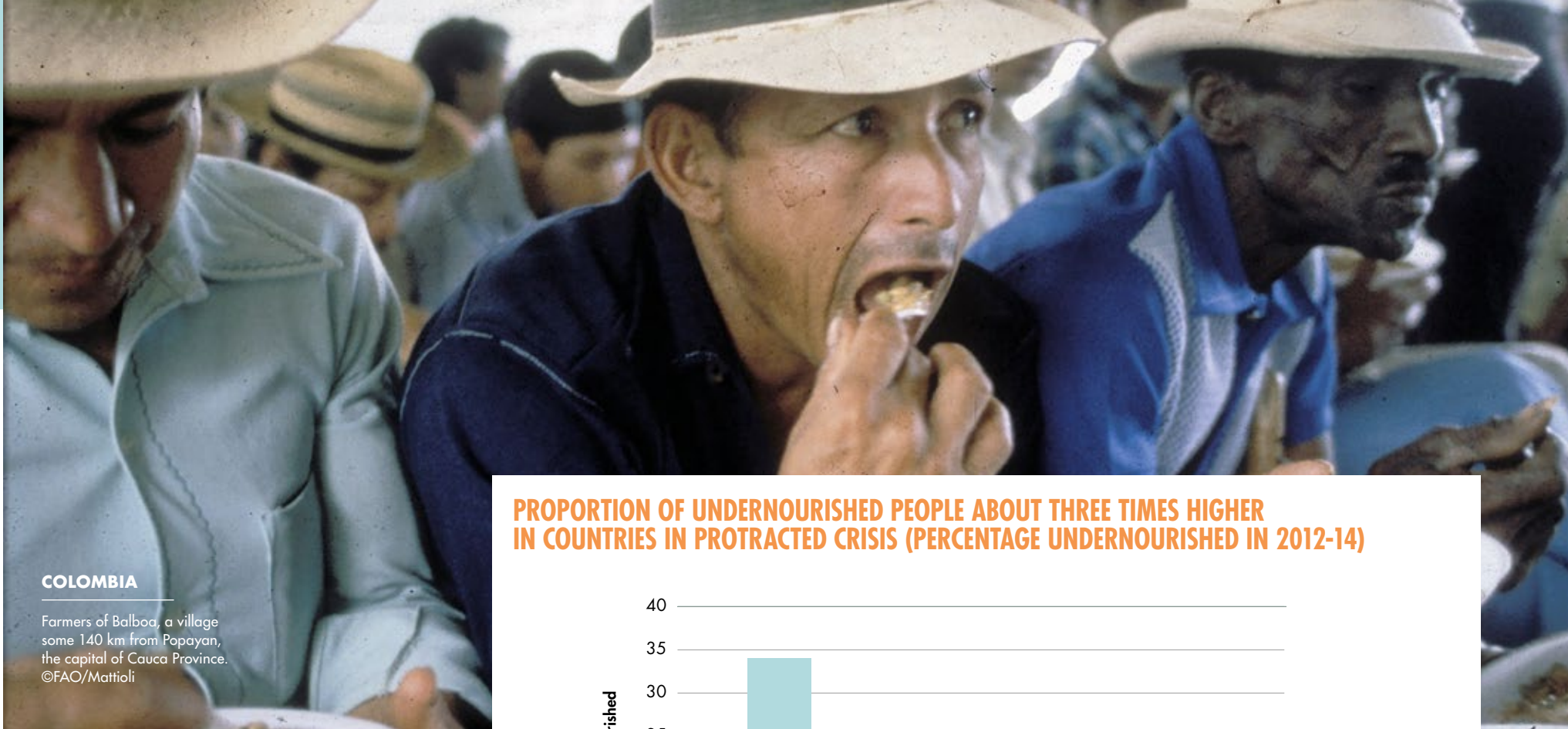
- > Most conflicts mainly affect rural areas and their populations. This is particularly true for civil conflicts, nowadays the most common form of armed conflict.
- > Conflict has strong and unambiguous adverse effects on food security and nutrition. It is the major driver of food insecurity and malnutrition, both acute and chronic.
- > Conflict has lasting impacts on human development as a result of increased malnutrition, which tends to affect children the most and leave lifelong physical and/or mental handicaps.
- > Causal effects of conflict-food security nexus vary across conflict zones, but common features are disruption of food production and food systems, plundering of crops and livestock, loss of assets and incomes, hence directly and indirectly affecting food access.

ON WHETHER FOOD INSECURITY TRIGGERS CONFLICT

- > Food insecurity can also be a source of conflict, but not necessarily so. Where it is, it is never the one single factor behind the strife.
- > Causal effects of the food security-conflict nexus include dispossession of assets (including land and livestock) and threats to food security (including sudden food price increases), but in conjunction with other forms of grievance and discontent.

ON PEACE DIVIDENDS AND FOOD SECURITY

- > Building resilience through peacebuilding efforts is critical for food security and nutrition.
- > Little is known about how, and to what extent, improved food security could prevent conflict, and build and sustain peace. Yet, depending on context-specific conditions, food aid and social protection, as well as helping communities complete harvests, tend to contribute significantly to peacebuilding.

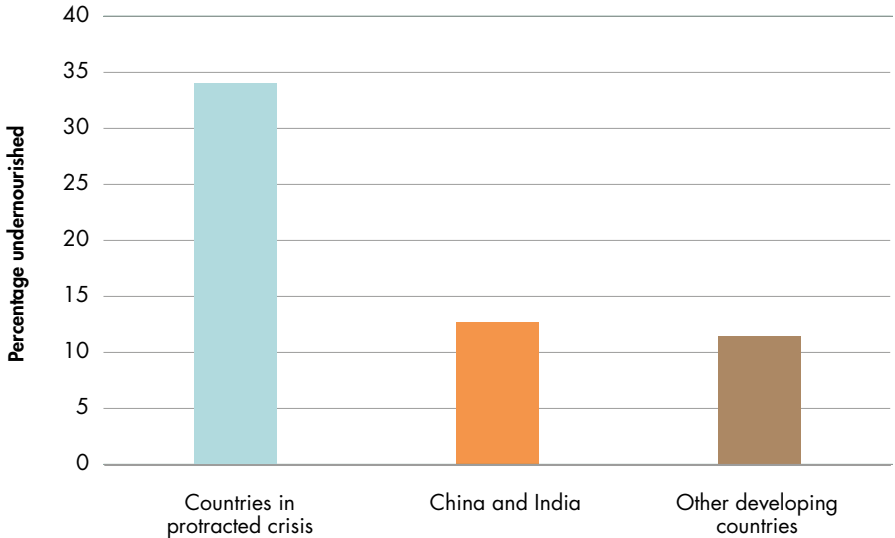


COLOMBIA

Farmers of Balboa, a village some 140 km from Popayan, the capital of Cauca Province.
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FAO data show that that, on average, the proportion of people who are undernourished is almost three times as high in countries in protracted crisis than in other developing countries (Figure 1). While protracted crises are typically caused by multiple factors, conflict is nearly always one of them. Not all countries in protracted crisis present very high levels of undernourishment because, in some of these countries, crises are localized to certain areas or regions. In 2013, there were approximately 167 million undernourished people in countries in protracted crisis – roughly 21 percent of the world’s undernourished people.

PROPORTION OF UNDERNOURISHED PEOPLE ABOUT THREE TIMES HIGHER IN COUNTRIES IN PROTRACTED CRISIS (PERCENTAGE UNDERNOURISHED IN 2012-14)



Source: FAO.

Several aspects of the relationship between food, hunger, peace and conflict have been well explored and documented. First, conflict tends to have a strong adverse impact on hunger and food security, and this finding is uncontested. Second, there is evidence that high food prices and lack of access to food have contributed to political instability and civil strife.

This relationship is nuanced and needs to be given more careful consideration. Third, there are indications that food security and improved rural livelihoods may contribute to the mitigation and prevention of conflicts and to securing sustainable peace. However, the nature and strength of this relationship has been underexplored.

This note provides a succinct summary of the main literature and some evidence on the hunger-conflict-peace relationship. What is clear from the literature is that a deeper exploration of the relationships between conflict, food security and peace would provide a stronger basis for designing effective interventions.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON FOOD SECURITY

Conflict entails enormous and multifaceted costs, including direct human suffering and catastrophic socioeconomic disruptions, which can significantly impede economic and social progress. Most conflicts mainly affect rural areas and their populations, with heavy impacts on agricultural production and rural livelihoods. This is particularly true for civil conflicts, which in recent years have become the most common form of armed conflict.¹

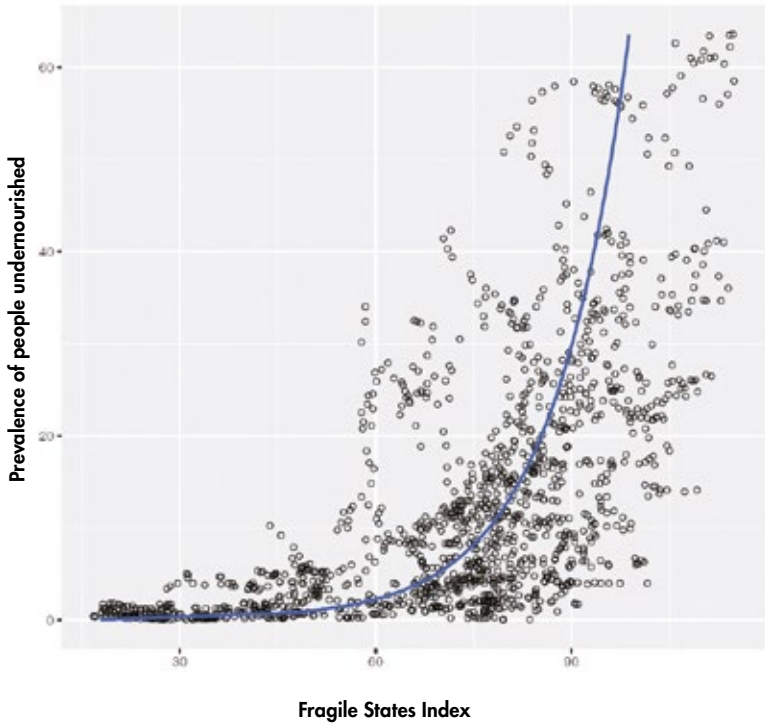
Conflict can reduce the amount of food available, disrupt people’s access to food, limit families’ access to food preparation facilities and health care, and increase uncertainty about satisfying future needs for food and nutrition (Simmons, 2013). Poverty rates are 20 percentage points higher in countries affected by repeated cycles of violence over the last three decades. Every year of violence in a country is associated with lagging poverty reduction of nearly one percentage point (World Bank, 2011).

Countries with the highest levels of undernourishment tend to be those engaged in violent conflict, or that have recently emerged from it. High risk of conflicts is a key characteristic of fragile states and the probability of a high burden of hunger rises exponentially with the degree of fragility (Figure 2). The Central African Republic and Chad are among the worst-scoring countries and both have experienced violent conflict and political instability in recent years. In contrast, in Angola, Ethiopia and Rwanda, hunger levels have fallen substantially since their large scale civil wars of the 1990s and 2000s ended. Ethiopia was still considered in protracted crisis in 2010, but yet managed to reach the MDG 1c target of halving the proportion of undernourished population, thanks to sustained political commitment and efforts to target interventions to improve food production and nutrition (FAO, IFAD, and WFP, 2015). This commitment probably became possible as the conflict subsided, and helped to sustain more peaceful conditions.

Although the causal effects may differ across conflict zones, commonly observed features are that conflicts disrupt food production through physical destruction and plundering of crops and livestock, harvests and food reserves; they prevent and discourage farming; they disrupt food transportation systems; they destroy farm assets and capital; they conscript or entice young men to fight, taking them away from their work at the farm; and they suppress income earning livelihoods and occupations. Conflict also makes it difficult for governments and humanitarian actors to reach those in need.

1 Center for Systemic Peace. 2012. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/>. Civil conflicts are those between a state and an opposition group that aims to take power over the central government, or in a region, or to change government policies.
2 The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development. 2011. Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011: lethal encounters. GDAVD: Geneva. (<http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/global-burden-of-armed-violence-2011.html>).
3 <http://www.fao.org/somalia/news/detail-events/en/c/247642/>.

THE BURDEN OF HUNGER RAPIDLY RISES WITH THE DEGREE OF FRAGILITY (ALL COUNTRIES, 2006-2014)



Source: FAO (for PoU data) and Fund for Peace (for fragile states index).
Note: The fragile states index is based on twelve indicators of state vulnerability: social (4), economic (2), and political (6). The higher the index the greater the risk of violence and conflict. The threshold between situations of “stability” and “fragility” is 70, right at the point in the graph where the probability of high prevalence of undernourishment rises exponentially. Each point in the graph refers to country estimates for each year during 2006-2014.

The lasting effect of conflicts is manifested through its impact on nutrition, especially undernutrition during early childhood with many of those affected suffering from lifelong physical and/or mental handicaps.

Mortality caused by conflict through food insecurity and famine can far exceed deaths caused directly by violence. Between 2004 and 2009 approximately 55,000 people a year lost their lives as a direct result of conflict or terrorism.² In contrast, as a result of famine caused by drought and conflict, more than 250,000 died in Somalia alone between 2010 and 2012.³

An ‘unheralded achievement’ of the past 50 years has been the end of the age of ‘calamitous famines’ – those that kill more than one million people – and a significant reduction in ‘great famines’ – those that kill

100,000 people or more (de Waal, 2015). It is posited that this may be due to the interrelated effects of factors such as the end of the Cold War, the adoption of international human rights norms and the rise of globalisation. This is not to infer that famines are over – but today’s are mostly caused by violent conflict, exacerbated by natural disasters and are more often local (Keen, 2008).

Nonetheless, acute and chronic hunger remains a global problem, and severe hunger can exist even without conflict. A number of South Asian and African countries face serious or alarming levels of hunger despite their relatively stable and peaceful recent history.

CAN FOOD INSECURITY LEAD TO CONFLICT?

As clearly indicated in the literature, violent conflict is the major driver of food insecurity and malnutrition, both acute and chronic. However, the causes of armed conflict have been the subject of lengthy and controversial debate. The conclusion of a synthesis of this literature (World Bank, 2011) is that there is no simple causal explanation for conflict. Conflict comes in many forms, and its causes are complex, nonlinear, and mediated by a host of factors.

People resort to violence due to a broad spectrum of threats to their human security. This may include threats to their food security or – of equal importance – because they have been dispossessed. Other factors include loss of assets and other threats to their livelihoods, together with economic and/or political marginalisation. The precise contribution of hunger and food insecurity to conflict is difficult to assess (GHI, 2015). Some of the causes, such as dispossession and lack of access to resources, are directly associated with reduced access to food.

Greater attention has been given to the links between food security

and political instability after the first significant global rise in food prices in 2008, which coincided with civil unrest in over 40 countries (Brinkman and Hendrix, 2011). The Arab Spring, which toppled governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, had a consistent motivating factor – the price of food. The protests in Tunisia, which signalled the start of the Arab Spring domino effect, were initially demonstrations against high bread prices. While public outrage over high food prices was not the only cause, it is generally perceived as an important one.

A recent study which explored whether food prices cause social unrest (Bellemare, 2015) concluded that the answer is a qualified ‘yes’. It argued that although rising food prices appear to cause food riots, food price volatility is negatively associated with or unrelated to social unrest.

While food insecurity may trigger, fuel or sustain conflicts, the literature stresses that this is not the only cause. Sudden and unexpected food price rises, or the reduction or removal of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and cooking fuel can

be a catalyst for civil and political unrest. In other words, they may become the channel through which other, wider grievances such as poverty, unemployment (particularly of youth), low incomes, unpaid salaries, political marginalisation and access to basic services are expressed (Brinkman and Hendrix, 2011). The corollary is that food price stabilization measures and safety nets are critical instruments for preventing violent conflict.

In fragile states, a vicious cycle of instability can exist whereby food insecurity both results from and contributes to repeated rounds of armed conflict.

When national governance fails, as in the case of Somalia, conflict can lead to large-scale food insecurity or even famine. But the relationship can also go the other way. Over 60 percent of Somalia’s population are pastoralists and semi-pastoralists who earn a living from livestock

husbandry. More frequent and intense droughts often lead to collapses in livestock prices, and thus contribute to the conditions that can cause food insecurity. A collapse in livestock prices reduces the incentives for being involved in “normal” animal husbandry activities. Therefore, they also reduce the opportunity cost of engaging in violent conflicts which are expected to bring higher income – and this makes the risks worth taking (IFPRI, 2014). In this way, food insecurity can result in more people entering a conflict and the vicious cycle continues. In order to reduce the risk of civil conflict in this context, it is necessary to increase the costs of participating in

conflicts for pastoralists and semi-pastoralists by fostering growth in the livestock sector, providing alternative income earning opportunities, and establishing social safety nets (Maystadt and Ecker, 2014).

Another possible catalyst of wider inter-group conflict is competition to control natural resources such as land and water, required for food production. However, the causal relationship between natural resources, weak governance, conflict and poor development remains unclear, and point to the need for a deeper analysis of the particular elements and circumstances in which they are relevant.

Finally, there is growing evidence of a causal relationship between extreme weather events and the incidence of civil conflicts. This has proved to be valid for droughts and local violent conflicts in Somalia, and one study estimated that one standard deviation increase in the length and intensity of drought increases the likelihood of conflict by 62 percent (Maystadt and Ecker, 2014). The same study also found that drought affects conflict by causing changes in livestock prices, and suggests that drought-caused livestock price shocks are a main driver of local conflict. This has important implications for policies and investments in drought mitigation and resilience building for both climate change adaptation and conflict prevention.

However, Brinkman and Hendrix (2011) highlight contradictory evidence regarding causality. In some cases, weather conditions that reduce agricultural productivity – drought, floods and warmer temperatures – seem to lead to food insecurity and contribute to civil conflict. Young men find fighting a more attractive option than farm work if the latter produces low returns. Or poor households may voice their grievances against inadequate government responses to their poverty and hunger. In other cases, good agricultural weather conditions and high levels of agricultural productivity provide both incentives and opportunities to fuel, and engage in, conflict incited by other grievances (Simmons, 2013). In such contexts, improved agricultural conditions increase the availability of valuable assets worth plundering (grains, land, livestock, etc.).



SYRIA

A pistachio vendor.
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FOOD SECURITY AND PEACE DIVIDENDS

It has been argued that, when implemented appropriately, well-timed interventions aimed at improving food security build resilience to conflict because they help countries and peoples to cope with and recover from conflict; they also contribute to preventing conflicts, while supporting economic development more broadly (IFPRI, 2014). Conversely, building resilience through peacebuilding efforts has been seen to play a critical role in supporting food security outcomes in areas with recurrent crises (Kurtz and McMahon, 2015).

However, there is limited knowledge about the role of food security in preventing or mitigating conflicts and, potentially, in supporting peacebuilding processes. Based on a number of disparate findings in the literature, some potential mechanisms whereby food security may affect conflict (or peace) outcomes are posited. First, interventions to improve food security may help weaken some - but not all - of the welfare-related motives that

may lead individuals to become fighters or support armed groups. Second, greater food price stability and the recovery of local agricultural and food markets could help vulnerable individuals and households to overcome the adverse legacies of armed conflict by encouraging affected people to move beyond subsistence agriculture and rejoin exchange markets. They may also reduce the appeal of illegal activities. These effects depend largely on how the local institutional formation during wartime affected (either negatively or positively) the lives and livelihoods of populations living in these areas. More work is required to better understand these pathways, and acquire more systematic evidence.

Nonetheless, agriculture is the dominant form of livelihood for the majority of households in conflict-affected countries, and efforts to revive the agricultural sector, foster economic growth and increase food security may have positive effects on the sustainability of peace. In the aftermath of

a social shock, particularly in fragile settings, it is important to rapidly re-engage small-holder farmers - both men and women - in productive activities.

Food assistance can offer valuable peace dividends, as well as contributing to restoring trust in governments and rebuilding social capital (Brinkman and Hendrix, 2011). Findings from a review of case studies and literature (Frankenberger, 2012) indicate that food-based livelihood assistance has the potential to directly address some of the underlying causes of

conflict in affected communities. It can do so by creating productive infrastructure, providing social protection, and improving the technical capacity of governments and other local counterparts. However, there are obviously substantial challenges to providing assistance strategically and effectively in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Broadly speaking, there are a number of food security related interventions and measures that governments and international stakeholders can put in place

to mitigate the risk of conflicts recurring, and the related impacts on food security. As noted above, preventative interventions that can break the link between food insecurity and conflict include mechanisms that shield consumers and producers from food price shocks, including food price stabilization measures and safety nets.

A different perspective, drawing on social anthropological approaches, is that in addition to restarting the economic engine to drive recovery, agriculture brings

new life to shattered homes and communities, and motivates people to come together when conflict has destroyed social networks. Limited research has demonstrated that it is possible to evaluate psycho-social impacts using, for example, a Sense of Coherence scale. One application of this approach to a FAO programme in the North Caucasus showed the multiple contributions of different types of agriculture programmes to the recovery process, including for social regeneration (Akhilgova, J., et al. 2013).



ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND PEACEBUILDING

The role and position of women is relevant to how conflicts affect food security and how food security can support peacebuilding. In most rural and agricultural settings, women are mainly responsible for food security and nutrition within the household. In many developing countries, they also supply the bulk of agricultural labour, although they usually finding it harder than men to earn a living as farmers or agricultural workers because they often do not have the same rights as men to

own or control land, buy inputs, obtain credits, or receive an education (see, for example, FAO, 2011; Lastarria-Cornheil, 2005). During civil strife and conflict, these constraints tend to be even stronger because more men who normally take responsibilities are absent as they engage in conflict or flee in search for alternative livelihoods.

Experience and evidence show that women are more likely to spend their incomes on food, health care and education. Hence, they are

critical for survival during conflict, as well as the drivers in post-conflict recovery (UN Women, 2012). Targeting women as the first beneficiaries of food aid and social protection, as well as helping them and their communities complete harvests, can therefore contribute significantly to improving household resilience and to peacebuilding. It is important to promote women’s economic empowerment, their right to access and use resources as well as their participation in decision-making on natural resource

management. Closing the gender gap in agriculture would generate significant gains for the agriculture sector and help build peaceful and inclusive societies.

The United National Security Council’s Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) is a landmark framework that addresses not only the inordinate impact of conflict on women, but also the pivotal role women should, and do, play in conflict management, conflict resolution and sustainable peace. It aims to reinforce women’s capacities to act as agents in relief and recovery processes, in both conflict and post-conflict situations. Subsequent resolutions have highlighted the role of women as key actors in economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy. Notably, the UNSCR 2122 (2013) recognizes “...that the economic empowerment of women greatly contributes to the stabilization of societies emerging from armed conflict”.

It is also clear from the literature that a more in-depth study of the conflict, food security and peace nexus would provide a stronger basis for designing effective interventions. A more explicit integration of food security variables into theories of conflict could help inform external interventions aimed at mitigating food insecurity and preventing conflict.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

An analysis of the complex relationship between ‘peace and stability’ and the achievement of development goals (Hong, 2015) shows that peace and stability are both the enablers for - and outcome of - development.

Reducing armed conflict and extreme poverty - and addressing their consequences - are key to ending hunger. Fostering economic

development and greater equity within and between countries while strengthening good governance can help address the root causes of conflict (GHI, 2015). Policies and strategies that reduce development stresses and mitigate the risks of conflict simultaneously can be effective in restoring peace and stability and create a virtuous cycle between peace and sustainable development.

With improved data and data analyses on agricultural and non-agricultural incomes, conflict models might better predict how food insecurity related to crop failure or persistent low productivity could affect the incentives of rural households to be involved in conflicts. Micro-level analyses and case studies will be crucial to better understand these relationships.

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