

A PATH TO PEACE AND STABILITY

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus is being implemented in different regions from different actors. Our author describes his view and the United Nations World Food Programme's approach on how to address the most vulnerable in ongoing conflictive and crises situations.

By David Beasley

The march towards a well-fed world seemed to be going so well over the past three decades, with annual declines in the number of hungry people. But the past two years has seen progress make a U-turn because of a terrible, toxic mix of conflict, regional instability and the impact of climate change. We need a better path to peace and stability, or we will continue going in the wrong direction. In all these places, I have met many people who worry about food. But nearly every time I have talked to them, what they have asked for first is help creating peace, the kind of peace that will let them live stable lives right in the communities they have always called "home". These people know instinctively that food security means fewer community tensions, less violent extremism and more mutual co-operation. While hungry people are not necessarily violent, it is clear that persistent hunger also creates the kind of instability that leads to more conflict.

The number of chronically hungry people hit 821 million in 2017, up from 777 million just two years before. The hunger picture gets even more dramatic when we look at severe hunger – people who need emergency assistance because they have no other

way to get the food they need to stay alive. Those numbers rose 55 per cent in just two years, from 80 million in 2015 to 124 million last year. Ten out of the 13 largest hunger crises in the world are conflict-driven, and 60 per cent of the people in the world who are food insecure live in conflict zones – 90 per cent, if you do not count the number of food insecure in China and India. Hunger fuels longstanding grievances and disputes over land, livestock and other assets.

HUNGER AND INSTABILITY

The consequences of conflict and hunger are most severe on children. Hunger, malnutrition, and poor health often lead to stunting – a phrase used to describe severely impaired growth in these young bodies. This kind of malnutrition has a long-term impact on the growing brain, making it even harder on these children to grow into the kind of productive adults their countries need. Unsurprisingly, three out of every four stunted children in the world live in a conflict area. The vast links between food insecurity and conflict contribute to other serious issues within these nations. My friend U.S. Senator Pat Roberts of Kansas

puts it clearly, saying: "Show me a nation that cannot feed itself, and I'll show you a nation in chaos." Analysis from WFP's affiliate WFP USA backs this up, showing that food insecurity produces instability, and that instability produces food insecurity.

FRAGILE STATES AND FOOD INSECURITY

About 80 per cent of the countries that have severe food insecurity are also considered fragile – countries with governance and economic issues that make resolving the problems of conflict and hunger even more difficult. By 2030, it is predicted that as many as two-thirds of the world's poor will live in nations that can be classified as fragile. Nearly every country near the bottom of the World Bank's Political Instability Index has a high degree of food insecurity and near-constant conflict within its borders. Recent research shows that just 18 per cent of fragile, conflict-affected states are on track to meet their Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger.

Even when conflicts end, the danger is not over. World Bank research concludes that countries coming out of conflict have a 40 per cent risk of returning to conflict within



Rehabilitation of the daily run-off pond in Goumacherom village, Chad to protect fields from flooding and regulate adequate water supply to the crop fields.

Photo: WFP/Giulio d'Adamo

ten years. The research suggests, and common sense would dictate, that economic development reduces the risk that the conflict reignites. Countries with the highest level of food insecurity coupled with armed conflict also have the highest outward migration of refugees. Our own research shows that for one per cent increase in hunger, there is a two per cent increase in migration. Refugees and asylum seekers are on the move because they feel they have no choice, even though none of them really wants to move. Nearly every Syrian, we talked to for our 2017 study, called, “At the Root of Exodus,” said they wanted to go back to Syria, if, and when it was secure and stable at home. This is not surprising. People want to stay with their families, in familiar surroundings, and they will do so sometimes at great risk to their own personal safety. But there may be a tipping point, too. In mid-2015, asylum applications to Europe from Syria spiked from 10,000 a month to 60,000 a month when humanitarian assistance was slashed. That, plus the conflict, prompted people to decide to take the risk and move.

MIGRATION AND ARMED CONFLICTS

From Africa, even the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean do not appear to be deterring those who flee conflict, hunger and poor economic conditions. Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that in 2016, 730,000 people from Africa were in Europe as refugees or asylum seekers. That is nearly double the 360,000 from Africa who were in Europe in 2010. The conditions that lead to this migration-forcing instability are a wonderful breeding ground for violent extremism. It makes extremists’ recruiting efforts far too easy. As the United Nations Development Programme said in a report in 2017, “where there is injustice, deprivation and desperation, violent extremist ideologies present themselves as a challenge to the status quo and a form of escape”.

Sometimes, it is even simpler than that. These extremist groups sometimes present themselves as the only way to survive. One woman in Syria told our researchers: “The men had to join extremist groups to be able to feed us. It was the only option.”

Perhaps the most prominent example of how a hunger crisis played into the hands of extremists came in 2011. In Somalia, where drought,

a food price spike and civil war converged in a famine that led to a quarter-million people dying. Researchers have documented that, during this time, al-Shabaab kept humanitarians from reaching hungry people with aid and the militant group even offered the hungry money to join its ranks. One UNHCR official called the famine “a boon” for al-Shabaab’s recruitment efforts. The WFP will always be committed to humanitarian law and its principles. We do not take sides; we feed the hungry and vulnerable wherever they are. But now food is being used as a weapon of war, so we must make food a weapon of peace.

Food and other forms of assistance are what have helped people remain in their countries despite difficult circumstances and refugees to return home, to earn a living and provide hope for the children. Effective humanitarian assistance helps alleviate suffering and protect civilians affected by war and conflict, and it also promotes efforts that address the root causes of conflicts and the re-engagement of people in productive economic activities.



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VEGETATION AGAINST CONFLICTS – AN EXAMPLE FROM NIGER

A place these types of policies are showing progress is Niger. There, WFP works with several partner organisations to help more than 250,000 people in about 35 communes, or towns, with a multi-sector approach that builds resilience and stability. In this region, we put together integrated resilience packages of four to five activities, chosen by the local community and implemented with partners, and we commit a minimum five-year investment. Examples include land regeneration and water harvesting, working with women’s groups to plant tree nurseries and create community gardens, school meals programmes and leveraging WFP’s own local purchasing to help boost the local markets. Research from WFP and external parties shows this is working: land vegetation increased from zero to 50



Women beneficiaries from Korama, Zinder, Niger explained how their lives improved with the pond clearing and the new gardening opportunities. Now the village is doing better, they can feed their kids properly.

Photo: WFP/Tiphaine Walton

per cent, and as much as 80 per cent in some areas. Agricultural productivity doubled and in some cases tripled, from 500 kg to 1,000/1,500 kg per hectare. After the first year, we saw a 35 per cent increase in land planted by very poor households.

We are also seeing greater social cohesion and a more hopeful future for the youth in the region. Inter-communal conflict is down because animals are not invading agricultural lands thanks to the increased vegetation or fodder that has been planted. And 60 per cent of very poor household members have reduced stress migration down to three months a year, while ten per cent have stopped migrating altogether. Furthermore, women are no longer leaving their children behind to search for fodder and firewood. Instead, they are participating in the economy themselves and helping to ensure their children go to school.

These kinds of concerted, focused efforts create stability, and the kind of conditions that help a family, a community or a region take care of itself. Communities are investing in programmes like cereal banks, and women are starting savings groups and activities that can help regions cope if a drought strikes. The work begins with food, because nothing else can happen when everyone is hungry. But it also means schools and water and roads and



The author discussing interventions with José Graziano da Silva (FAO) – left, and Gilbert Houngbo (IFAD) – right, in the village of Dargué in the Maradi region of Niger.

Photo: FAO/IFAD/WFP/Luis Tato

governance and many other ways to support a community taking care of itself. Our work in Niger combines what we call Food Assistance for Assets programmes with technical trainings, local purchases, nutrition interventions, support to the government-led school meals programme, as well as lean season assistance for dry periods. Through this approach, WFP has helped rehabilitate 90,000 hectares of degraded land since 2014, plant three million trees and rehabilitate 86 major water ponds. WFP is now working with the Government of Niger to dramatically scale up its resilience building efforts, notably thanks to a 25 million US dollar grant from Germany.

CO-OPERATION RATHER THAN COMPETITION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

And we are not just doing it alone. Key to the success in Niger and across the greater Sahel is collaboration between the three Rome-based United Nations agencies with a mandate to alleviate hunger and develop agriculture-based economies: WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). As a leader for one of these three agencies, I can categorically say that co-operation rather than competition is now the name of the game. I tell my team all the time: no-one should care who gets the credit, as long as we can be effective. All three agency heads have twice been



School Meals Programme throughout schools in Niger helps children stay in school, pursue an education and break the cycle of malnutrition.

Photo: WFP/Simon Pierre Diouf

to Africa, including a trip in the summer of 2018 to Niger to evaluate our projects and programmes. Our teams know that we expect the agencies to work together, along with the local governments. And I believe this is paying off. For example, in agricultural development in Niger, WFP helps to recover degraded land and FAO and IFAD complement this by providing enhanced seeds along with advice and training to help farmers boost production.

SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME – MORE THAN FOOD

For WFP's school meals programmes, we buy products from the smallholder farmers who have been trained by FAO through a value chain support programme from IFAD. These collaborations help develop and diversify the agricultural economy in Niger, as well as improve nutrition and food security. That school meals programme is certainly a key component of this pro-development, pro-peace strategy. It is enormously cost-effective – on average, the WFP spends 50 US dollars to feed a child in school for an entire year. And for some parents, that food is the reason they send their child to school, because they are assured their child will get at least one meal that day.

But I believe the programme does more than that. Children sit down, and talk, and laugh together while eating, and I think that time helps these children see each other as people.

That meal binds them together. And when they are older, those bonds are harder to break.

Hatem Ben Salem, the Minister of Education in Tunisia, last year wrote to me about his “warm memory” of his experiences with school meals as a child. “Lunchtime at school offered an opportunity for children from diverse backgrounds, rich and poor, to sit around a table and share a hot meal,” he wrote. Military spending around the world is now at two trillion US dollars a year. But the programmes highlighted here could save us some of that money.

So working towards the global goal of zero hunger through this “triple nexus” approach of humanitarian aid, development co-operation and peace-building is truly the best defence for every nation. We need to double-down on this kind of work, because research clearly shows that 60 per cent of conflicts recur, and since the mid-1990s, most conflicts have actually been just recurrences of previous fighting.



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I want to put how this works in real person terms. In the spring of 2018, I met Fazle in Pakistan. Eight years before, constant war had driven him, his wife and their four children away from their home and farm. They loved their home, but with all the shooting and armed extremist groups, Fazle and his family had to leave or endure the death, destruction, and instability that comes with war. But seven years later, Fazle and his family returned home, and are doing well. They received six months of food aid from the WFP and the Pakistan Government, giving them a cushion that allowed them, in turn, to get into a programme with FAO that helped Fazle set up a nursery. Now he is earning about 130 US dollars a month, which is four times his previous income. Fazle and his family want to live, work, and pursue their dreams. Food security was the cornerstone upon which the rest of their new start was built – not just saving lives, but changing them.

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