



Cornhusker Economics

Violent Conflict Drives World Hunger and Food Insecurity

The Food and Agriculture Organization defines hunger as “an uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy.” Persistent hunger is also known as food insecurity defined as a “lack of regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life” (FAO 2024). Acute and persistent hunger or food insecurity can eventually lead to death from starvation but even in their milder forms, these deficiencies result in serious health problems. According to the World Food Program (2024a), more than 300 million people—only a little less than the entire population of the United States—currently face severe food insecurity, 42 million at “emergency” levels of hunger, with armed conflict being the main reason for insufficient access to food.

It might be thought that food insecurity is caused primarily by insufficient food availability as a result of weather-related declines in agricultural output. It is obviously true that food-insecure individuals lack access to adequate amounts of food, but this situation can arise even when food availability has not fallen. The classic example of such a state of affairs is the Irish potato famine of the late 1840s during which substantial quantities of wheat, barley, and other foodstuffs were exported to England while Irish peasant farmers starved. As explained by Amartya Sen (1984), Ireland was an English colony at that time and the exported food belonged to English landlords managing their Irish

estates. The Irish were “entitled” to the potatoes they harvested from their plots of land but not to the grain and other foodstuffs from the English estates. When their potatoes rotted they either starved or were forced to emigrate despite the fact that there was plenty of other food available in the country. Famines and persistent food insecurity have frequently occurred in places where food availability has not declined (Sen 1984).

The world food system currently generates almost 3,000 kilocalories per person per day (FAOSTAT 2024) so enough food is produced to feed everyone on the planet adequately. The fact that so many people are food insecure despite this abundance stems primarily from a mixture of armed conflict, climate change, poverty, and political instability. The World Food Program (WFP) argues that “[c]onflict is the main driver in most of the world’s food crises,” noting that “60% of the world’s hungry people live in zones of conflict which is the main driver in 8 out of 10 of the worst hunger crises” (World Food Program 2024, 2024a). Conflict is both a cause and an effect of hunger as it can disrupt food supplies and lead to food shortages and higher prices while people who are hungry may attack others to gain access to their food (Sova and Zembilci 2023). The impacts of conflict often extend well beyond the localities in which the conflict is occurring as illustrated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine which led to higher world cereal grain prices with severe adverse effects for consumers in Africa and Asia dependent on food supplies from that region.

Currently, the world appears to be awash in armed conflicts (Archie 2022). Organizations that track global conflicts generally identify three types (see Obermeier and Rustad 2023; Our World in Data 2024; Uppsala University 2024). “State-based conflicts” are those in which at least one party is a state with a distinction made between conflicts within a state (intrastate) and those between states (interstate). “Non-state conflicts” involve clashes between organized non-state groups such as militias or terrorist organizations. “One-sided violence” occurs when armed force is used against civilians by either the government of a state or an organized group. Only conflicts resulting in at least 25 deaths per year are counted by these organizations and for a conflict to be recorded as a “war” there have to be at least 1,000 deaths per year. In 2022, there were 52 intrastate and 3 interstate conflicts (two wars), 82 non-state conflicts, and 45 one-sided conflicts for a total of 182 armed conflicts in a world of about 200 countries. Between 1989 and 2013, the number of conflicts per year never exceeded 127 while the average number of conflicts over the period 2014 to 2022 was 168 per year (Our World in Data 2024). Armed conflicts appear to be on the rise.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have been extensively covered by news organizations. Less attention has been paid to many other conflicts that are every bit as horrifying as those in the news. For example, Sudan, the site of a genocide in the Darfur region some twenty years ago, is today experiencing a civil war between the country’s army and an Arab militia (Kristof 2024). The WFP has reported that 18 million people in Sudan, a country with a total population of 48.6 million, face acute food insecurity with 7.7 million people displaced both internally and externally. South Sudan, which seceded from Sudan in 2011, is also suffering from armed internal violence that has threatened the food security of 7.7 million people (World Food Program 2024b). Other conflict-ridden countries in which hunger and food insecurity are on the rise include Ethiopia, Haiti, Syria, and Yemen among others.

The WFP with support from the United States and other countries works to provide food to those in need as a result of conflict, adverse climate effects, poverty, and government mismanagement. It is limited in what it can do, however, by budget constraints and rising food prices

(UN News 2023). On top of the financial issues, the delivery of food assistance is particularly complicated in areas of conflict where warring adversaries often hijack food supplies intended for the other side. While it is illegal under International Humanitarian Law to use starvation as a weapon of war, Dzerowicz (2023) has identified extensive violations of international agreements on the delivery of humanitarian food aid by both governments and non-state actors. The appalling conditions in conflict zones are a primary factor in increased international migration itself a cause of geopolitical instability and further human suffering. Support for the WFP and other humanitarian agencies is critical for alleviating the hunger and food insecurity driven by the global scourges of war and armed conflict.

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E. Wesley F. Peterson

Professor

Department of Agricultural Economics

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

epeterson1@unl.edu

402-472-7871