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Conflict, migration and food security

The role of agriculture and rural development

Protracted conflicts around the world have been a main cause of a rise in global hunger in recent years. Conflicts are also driving the dramatic increase in the number of forcibly displaced people—from 40 million people in 2011 to almost 66 million in 2016 (Figure 1a/b) (UNHCR, 2017;¹ World Bank, 2017). Rural areas are bearing the brunt of these conflicts, and rural populations are most severely affected (FAO *et al.*, 2017). Conflict is often compounded by drought and other climate shocks, exacerbating the impacts on rural food security and livelihoods. Migration is one way people try to

cope. But forced movements of people and food insecurity may also fuel conflicts. While the impacts of this vicious circle are obvious, the causes can be complex. How conflict creates food insecurity, and when conflict and food insecurity drive people to abandon their livelihoods and migrate, differ from place to place. Where do we begin to prevent and mitigate these complex problems? Responses should start from a clear understanding of the root causes underlying conflicts, movements of people, and persistent food insecurity. While humanitarian aid is essential in the short-term to prevent food crises and famines,

FIGURE 1a Rising number of undernourished people in conflict-affected countries, 2011–2016 (millions)

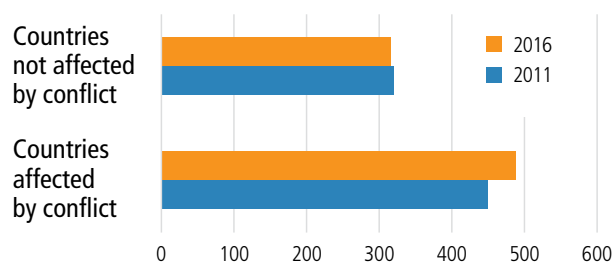
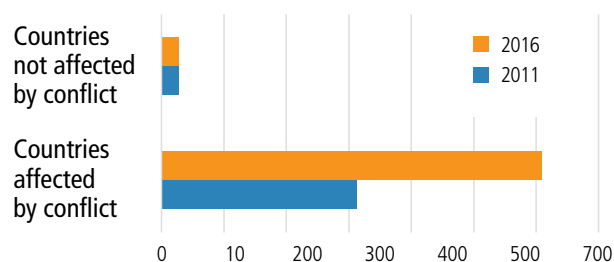


FIGURE 1b Conflict has driven up the number of forcibly displaced people, 2011–2016 (millions)



Sources: UCDP for classification of countries affected and not affected by conflict; FAO for data on the number of undernourished; UNHCR for data on forcibly displaced people. The data for forcibly displaced people refer to the country of origin and therefore exclude stateless people and populations for whom the country of origin was not specified.

¹ UNHCR estimate of the number of individuals that were forcibly displaced (as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violation) in 2016 includes 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million internally displaced people, and 2.8 million asylum-seekers.

lasting solutions will require programs and support measures that address these root causes by providing people with the means to rebuild their livelihoods. Restoring agriculture, food production, and rural livelihoods before, during, and after conflict will be key to building sustainable solutions.

Conflict, migration, and food insecurity

Conflict, forced migration, and food insecurity can feed into each other, creating a vicious circle for rural populations (Figure 2). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017* highlights that, because many conflicts are fought in rural areas and target productive agricultural assets such as infrastructure, land, and livestock, the economic impacts often hit agricultural sectors disproportionately hard. Many of the countries affected by conflict and civil strife are largely rural, with some 60 percent of the population living in rural areas (FAO *et al.*, 2017). Those living amid violence often face a difficult choice: risk becoming victims of the conflict or migrate and face a highly uncertain future.

Both staying and leaving carry high risks. Available evidence suggests that insecurity is a main reason why people abandon their livelihoods and migrate in search of safety. Food security, strong social networks, and better livelihood opportunities, in contrast, are key reasons people opt to stay where they are.

A recent World Food Programme (WFP) study found that the greatest refugee outflows are from countries not only experiencing armed conflict but also the highest level of food insecurity (WFP, 2017). This suggests that working before a crisis arises to establish resilient food systems could reduce food insecurity and the pressure to migrate in times of conflict. A survey conducted by FAO to assess the state of the agricultural sector in the Syrian Arab Republic found that—after six years of conflict—almost all (94 percent) of those interviewed in local communities said that increased support for agriculture would discourage people from leaving their livelihoods and would encourage many who had already migrated to return to their homes and farms, the safety situation permitting.

A vicious circle

Conflicts increase food insecurity and limit the livelihood options of rural populations. Conversely, food insecurity—driven by sudden food price spikes, dispossession, or loss of agricultural assets—may compound existing grievances and trigger conflict. Food insecurity and outmigration may disrupt existing social cohesion in local communities. For example, increases in food prices and food insecurity may increase perceived marginalization and exclusion (Breisinger, Ecker and Trinh Tan, 2015). When grievances are formed along ethnic or religious lines (or other forms of social cleavage), discontent may lead to violence (FAO, 2017a). In Yemen, for example, the worsening economic situation and deterioration in people's living standards, in combination with government's inability to effectively address economic and social challenges, were identified by IFPRI research as important factors that sparked the civil unrest that led to civil conflict (Ecker, 2014).

FIGURE 2 The conflict-food insecurity-migration nexus



Sources: Authors.

Although the causal relationships among these factors are never straightforward (FAO *et al.*, 2017), together the impacts of conflict and food insecurity influence people's decisions to migrate or not. A vicious circle can emerge when conflict leads to a worsening of the food and nutrition security situation, which in turn increases the risk of deepening and prolonging the conflict. Recent empirical evidence shows that food insecurity, when coupled with poverty, increased the likelihood and intensity of armed conflicts. This has clear implications for refugee outflows and internal displacements. The WFP estimates that refugee outflows per 1,000 population increase by 0.4 percent for each additional year of conflict, and by 1.9 percent for each percentage increase of the prevalence of undernourishment (WFP, 2017). Currently, an estimated 122 million of 155 million stunted children live in countries affected by conflict (FAO *et al.*, 2017).

Conflict may be intensified by movements of people driven by food insecurity and poor access to natural resources. Insecurity, desertification, and loss of grazing land have driven nomadic herders from northern Nigeria to the country's central and southern zones, where they have clashed with sedentary agrarian communities. With an estimated death toll of 2,500 people in 2016, these clashes are potentially as destructive as the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast of the country.² Many communities in low- and middle-income countries accommodate disproportionately large influxes of displaced people over extended periods of time. This may have a negative impact on local markets, infrastructure, and services. The socioeconomic changes brought about by large inflows of migrants may adversely affect social cohesion in the receiving communities,³ and tensions between the host communities

² See, for example, International Crisis Group, 2017.

³ See, for instance, Mabiso, Maystadt, Vandecasteele and Hirvonen, 2014.

and the displaced people may be aggravated by perceived or actual inequality in the access to and use of natural resources, such as agricultural land, water, grazing areas, and fuelwood. Such tensions may culminate in new violence, often including gender-based and sexual violence. Competition for natural resources, in turn, may be detrimental to the food security of vulnerable rural households and can culminate in conflict, especially in contexts of severe natural resource scarcity, deep-seated inequalities, or both.

Post-conflict situations and changing drivers of migration

In the aftermath of a conflict or crisis, power balances tend to shift, which can create new socioeconomic opportunities. Seizing such opportunities will be critical for sustaining peace and avoiding relapses into conflict. If this succeeds, pressures to migrate are likely to lessen and people may be motivated to return to their livelihoods.

Outmigration may continue in post-conflict contexts, however, if people's expectations for better and more stable livelihoods remain unfulfilled. In times of conflict, the rural poor, especially smallholder farmers, women, and youth, tend to suffer the most from disruption of basic services (such as water and energy supply, healthcare, and education), destruction of infrastructure, and loss of market access. Conflict compounds existing vulnerabilities, such as low and unstable incomes, poor safety and health conditions, gender inequality in pay and opportunities, and limited social protection (FAO, 2016). If persistent poverty and inequities remain unaddressed, many rural people will continue to see outmigration as the best survival strategy. Environmental degradation and climate change are additional potential push factors that could drive continued rural outmigration (FAO and IOM, 2017). Finally, the shifts in socioeconomic conditions and power balances caused by a conflict, as well as the social exclusion experienced by returnees, may push marginalized groups to migrate and even fuel future conflicts.

Prevention and responses: the role of agriculture and rural development

Against this backdrop, strengthening of agriculture sectors is critical, both during and after protracted crises and conflicts. Rebuilding agriculture is an important strategy for post-conflict reconstruction. Reactivation of agricultural production can help reinsert demobilized combatants into economic activity, improve food security, and enhance livelihoods. A sustainable impact on conflict and migration dynamics is more likely when food and nutrition security and livelihood initiatives are implemented as part of a broad set of multisectoral humanitarian and developmental interventions designed to build resilience through agricultural and rural development.

Investments in agriculture may help to prevent and mitigate conflicts and potentially contribute to reducing forced migration.

Interventions to sustain agricultural livelihoods and improve food security could weaken some of the drivers of conflict, including motives that may lead individuals to support or join armed groups or engage in illegal activities. Sustainable and inclusive access to natural resources may also help to mitigate tensions between different groups. Improved livelihood options and food security for rural populations can help vulnerable individuals and households mitigate the impacts of conflict, be they displaced or not. For example, it has been shown in Nepal that targeted agricultural policies can improve resilience among the poor to shocks to child nutrition brought on by conflict (IFPRI, 2016).

In the aftermath of shocks, vulnerable rural populations—both men and women—should be rapidly re-engaged in productive activities, particularly in vulnerable settings. Interventions should not be limited to the provision of life-saving assistance, but should also reduce harmful livelihood strategies (such as distress selling of livestock) that can increase people's vulnerabilities, deplete their assets and resources, and fuel tensions between host and displaced populations. Maintaining food production and rebuilding the agriculture sector are fundamental to reducing the long-term consequences borne by people living in and moving from fragile contexts and to laying the groundwork for stabilization and recovery. When designing and implementing program and policy responses in these contexts, it is critical to assess new governance and power structures that may have emerged, as these are likely to affect the effectiveness of interventions for livelihoods and food and nutrition security (IFPRI, 2011).

Pathways toward durable and sustainable solutions

Conflicts are rarely, if ever, linear and sequential processes, or the result of a single causal factor. Similarly, migration patterns are multifaceted and change over time. While acknowledging these complexities, a number of actions can be identified that, by providing livelihood support and improving food security and nutrition, will also help prevent conflict and address some of the underlying causes of forced migration:

- ▲ **Support risk-informed and shock-responsive social protection and early warning, early action (EWEA) systems.** EWEA and risk-informed, shock-responsive social protection systems can mitigate some of the dynamics underlying crises and forced migration by enhancing risk-management capacities and early responsiveness to shocks and crises. Social protection systems are critical not only for providing short-term relief in the aftermath of crises; they can also be important instruments for preventing asset depletion at the household level and improving infrastructure, irrigation systems, storage space, and other shared assets at the community level.⁴

⁴ CASH+ approaches integrate two complementary modes of intervention, cash transfers and productive assistance, in order to restore resilient livelihoods over the longer-term (FAO, 2017b; Berhane, Gilligan, Hoddinott, Kumar and Taffesse, 2014).

▲ **Build resilience by helping countries and households prevent, anticipate, prepare for, cope with, and recover from conflicts.** These measures should reach those who flee, those who remain behind, and host communities. The recovery of local agricultural and food economies and markets can help vulnerable individuals and households overcome the adverse legacies of armed conflict by encouraging affected people to move beyond subsistence agriculture; re-join exchange markets; enhance their resilience to future economic, environmental, and political shocks, including through climate change adaptation; and remain on their land when it is safe to do so.

▲ **Invest in strengthening livelihoods and food security in neighboring countries hosting refugees.** Support provided to areas bordering countries of origin tends to be cost-effective for migrants to restore livelihoods and brings social benefits in the long-term for recipient countries, as well as for home countries when they return once the conflict has subsided. Creating economic opportunities and allowing migrants access to work can be a game changer: jobs and livelihoods will reduce the fiscal pressure and burden on host countries, and can help the conflict-affected countries recover and rebuild more quickly.

▲ **Work toward social inclusion and cohesion.** Stimulation of the local economy, particularly in situations of protracted displacement, will not only help integrate migrants into the economy, but also into the broader social fabric.

▲ **Foster inclusive and participatory processes on access to and use of natural resources.** Reducing competition or grievances related to resource use may increase social cohesion and alleviate tension between migrants and host communities.

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