

FOOD SECURITY AND ARMED CONFLICT



Food prices have kept going up these past few years, which makes things difficult for displaced people like me. Sometimes I can't pay the rent because all my income has gone to providing food for my family.

— Man receiving ICRC support in Benghazi, Libya



Millions of people living in areas affected by armed conflict face severe and acute food insecurity – they go days without eating and it is endangering their lives. Many of them have faced seasonal food shortages before; now, however, their situation is aggravated by a constellation of dangerous factors: more intense and more frequent climate shocks (such as droughts and floods), COVID 19's long-term effects on the economy, and, above all, armed conflict and other threats to safety, which disrupt local and global food systems. In this brief, ICRC makes three recommendations to guide efforts to address the issue of food insecurity in conflict.

ACTIONS TO ADDRESS FOOD SECURITY IN ARMED CONFLICT

Based on its experience in conflict settings, the ICRC recommends three main actions for states, donors, humanitarian and development organizations, and others who have a role to play in addressing this urgent issue. They require a multidisciplinary approach that addresses both systemic issues and individual needs in the short-, medium- and long-term.

1. Respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) – beyond the issue of humanitarian access – to reduce the risk of food insecurity and famine

The way a conflict is fought can both directly and indirectly impact food security. When crops, agricultural land, or critical infrastructure are damaged or destroyed by fighting, for example, it can have an immediate impact on people's access to food. But broader impacts, such as the closure of trade routes and collapse of local markets due to insecurity, even far from where the fighting takes place, can be further damaging. IHL prohibits starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and gives protection to objects necessary to produce food and drinking water. Respect for these and other rules of IHL can help mitigate the impacts of armed conflict on food security.

2. Address points of disruption and other drivers of food insecurity at all levels of the food system to reduce risks and strengthen resilience

This means building a strong understanding of what food systems the country or community relies on, where the weak points are, who is in an influential position, how the systems are connected to the wider region and the rest of the world, and how armed conflict (there or elsewhere) is likely to disrupt them. This analysis can be used to prepare rapid response plans and/or coordinate anticipatory action to reinforce weak points in the systems and compensate for structural deficiencies.

3. Prioritize tailored support to individuals or groups who are more vulnerable to food insecurity and malnutrition owing to societal and situational barriers

This requires in-depth knowledge of the evolving threats and challenges that diverse groups in the population face and their coping strategies. It also requires the ability to reach these segments of the population, provide them with individualized and well-timed support in response to their needs, and strengthen their positive coping mechanisms. This is best done through partnerships and collaboration that reinforce existing support structures and leverage the comparative advantages of the many organizations and entities present in any humanitarian crisis.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Report on Food Crises, armed conflict and other threats to security pushed 139 million people into acute food insecurity in 2021 – an increase of almost 40 million people compared to the year before.¹ Other major drivers of food insecurity included economic shocks (pushing 30 million into crisis) and weather extremes (an additional 23 million).² In 2022, the situation has worsened further as the impacts of the armed conflict in Ukraine are felt across the globe.

These drivers – armed conflict, and economic, political and environmental factors – should not be seen as isolated; rather they are mutually reinforcing and often cyclical in nature: over time they erode people's resilience and coping strategies, with severe humanitarian consequences. The data are nevertheless clear that armed conflict and other threats to security are the most significant drivers, directly and indirectly affecting food security not only where the fighting takes place but often also in neighbouring countries and beyond. And indeed, more can be done to mitigate the impacts of conflict on food security.

1. RESPECT AND ENSURE RESPECT FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL) – BEYOND THE ISSUE OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS – TO REDUCE THE RISK OF FOOD INSECURITY AND FAMINE

Parties to armed conflict have the primary responsibility for ensuring that civilians' basic needs are met. How they conduct hostilities can directly and indirectly hinder the availability of and access to food, for instance when fighting damages or destroys foodstuffs, crops, livestock or essential infrastructure (e.g. wells, irrigation systems, dams, market infrastructure), or when the warring parties carry out sieges or blockades, or delay or deliberately block humanitarian assistance.

IHL prohibits starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and grants special protection to objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including the means for producing food and drinking water. Other IHL rules also play a key role in preventing food insecurity, for instance rules relating to sieges and blockades and the protection of the natural environment, and the prohibitions and restrictions governing the use and removal of landmines and explosive remnants of war (see the box to the right). Whether these rules are respected, however, hinges on the preparation, behaviour and decisions of parties to conflict.

Those with influence over the parties to conflict therefore have a role to play in ensuring respect for IHL and in reducing many of the other pressures that armed conflict puts on food security. For example, humanitarian exemptions need to be systematically included in sanctions and counterterrorism measures, which states often use to achieve political and security objectives, or to prevent aid diversion. The exemptions must cover food and agricultural inputs and water sanitation infrastructure, or the financial means to provide and protect them, which are essential to the survival of the civilian population. Otherwise, humanitarians have to overcome complex legal, financial and logistical roadblocks to ensure that those in need get appropriate assistance.

Even where parties to conflict comply with IHL, food systems can be disrupted by the secondary impacts of conflict. And in a deeply interconnected global market, conflict in one part of the world can have a significant ripple effect across continents. We therefore need to be aware of the bottlenecks and challenges in global food systems resulting from armed conflict and think how these can be addressed.

¹ Food Security Information Network, *Global Report on Food Crises*, World Food Programme, 2022, p. 3, 7.

² *Idem*, p. 7.

WHAT DOES INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW SAY ABOUT FOOD SECURITY AND FAMINE?

International humanitarian law (IHL) contains various prohibitions and obligations relevant to preventing and responding to food insecurity and famine. They are applicable under treaties and customary IHL in both international and non-international armed conflicts, and include the following:

- **Starvation** of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.
- Attacking or destroying **objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population**, including crops, livestock, and drinking water installations, is prohibited.
- More generally, **civilian objects** – including marketplaces, civilian transport and financial infrastructure, and land – are protected.
- There are restrictions on the use of **sieges and blockades** and certain **weapons** that can affect the use of agricultural land (e.g. landmines, booby traps)
- There are rules **protecting the natural environment**.
- Persons deprived of their freedom must be **treated humanely**, and the basic needs of the population under a party's control must be met.

IHL's rules on **humanitarian relief efforts and humanitarian access** also play an important role in preventing and responding to food insecurity and famine during armed conflict.

- Under IHL, humanitarian access is subject to the consent of the parties to the conflict; however, denial of access can be unlawful, for example if the party is not fulfilling its own obligation to meet the needs of the civilian population.

See the ICRC's legal briefing note [Starvation, Hunger and Famine in Armed Conflict](https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4642-starvation-hunger-and-famine-armed-conflict) for more detail for more detail.³

2. ADDRESS POINTS OF DISRUPTION AND OTHER DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY AT ALL LEVELS OF THE FOOD SYSTEM TO REDUCE RISKS AND STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE

Food insecurity results from the intersection of many drivers, the combination and impact of which are unique to each setting. For example, the global trends of inflation and currency depreciation, which are important lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, can rapidly increase food prices, decrease people's purchasing power, drain their savings, and disrupt food supply chains. People are less able to cope with these shocks if they are already poor, if governance is poor or there is corruption, or if the economic safety nets, like social protection schemes, are inaccessible or weak. In addition, as is becoming ever more apparent, climate change and environmental degradation have devastating effects on food security: changing weather patterns result in lower agricultural yields, or make traditional crops impossible to cultivate, while extreme weather events and threats from pests can destroy entire harvests.

The direct and secondary impacts of armed conflict further complicate matters at the local, national and transnational levels. Armed conflict creates immediate risks, the most well-known of which include: **forced displacement**, which can result in the erosion of community ties and disrupt livelihoods, trade, and agricultural practices and livestock herding; and a **loss of access or damage to the basic services and infrastructure** on which people rely. Fighting can, for example, prevent farmers from reaching their land, keep people from safely reaching markets to buy and sell food, and cause damage to water and sanitation infrastructure, leading to an increase in waterborne disease that, in turn, can increase rates of malnutrition.

3 ICRC, *Starvation, Hunger and Famine in Armed Conflict: An Overview of Relevant Provisions of International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC, Geneva, June 2022: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4642-starvation-hunger-and-famine-armed-conflict>.

SNAPSHOT – GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY AND THE INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The international armed conflict in Ukraine is driving up global food and fuel prices, due to a combination of the loss of viable transport routes for the harvest, uncertainty about future harvests, the freezing effects of sanctions, and secondary impacts on financial markets, among others. The conflict broke out when the cost of living everywhere had already increased dramatically following the global pandemic.

Inside Ukraine, the commercial sector and humanitarian aid organizations are facing multiple, compounding challenges. There are acute shortages of goods in the areas directly affected by fighting, due to the disruption in production and supply, but also in areas relatively spared from active conflict, due to a sudden rise in demand. This has immediate implications for the ability to provide, and for determining the relevance of, both in-kind and in cash assistance. To ensure the humanitarian response is effective, regularly monitoring markets must therefore be a priority.

In addition to the supply chain disruptions, continued conflict is predicted to hinder the planting for next season and jeopardize the upcoming harvests. Globally, Ukraine and Russia are major suppliers of wheat, seed oils, corn and barley, and Russia is also one of the world's most important exporters of fertilizers. Access to these products has been severely curtailed: the security situation has disrupted the transport of goods from the Black Sea ports, and in March the world's largest container lines suspended cargo shipments to and from Russia in response to US and EU sanctions. A negotiated deal restored the export of grain to global markets, but we still need to ensure this stock reaches the populations most in need around the world – including countries highly reliant on food imports from these countries, and those that were already facing high rates of food insecurity for other reasons. The reduced access to Russian fertilizer creates a further knock-on effect, negatively impacting next season's harvest in multiple countries and leading to higher food prices in the long term. In April 2022, the FAO Food Price Index, which monitors the cost of an average food basket, was at an all-time high of 160 points; fortunately, by August it had come down to 138 points but was still 8% above the figure one year prior.

Volatility in food prices first and foremost affects the poorest households and communities in any country, decreasing their immediate access to food. Furthermore, increased prices globally often mean a decrease in remittances from abroad to those economies that rely on them. The response therefore needs to be tailored to those most at risk. Indeed, one of the key lessons learned from the 2008 and 2011 food price crises was the need to anticipate price spikes, assess their impact on the poorest strata of societies and provide targeted support to those who need it the most.

More indirectly, **crops that are damaged, unharvested or go unplanted** because of hostilities cannot be exported; security threats can make trade routes unsafe; and **sanctions regimes** can have a chilling effect on trade in agricultural inputs and outputs, or on the functioning of critical financial services, even where exemptions exist. When **connectivity is lost and communications services are shut down**, it can interfere with money transfers on which people rely, and limit information about where it is safe to travel to purchase or produce food. Importantly, conflict also limits individuals' and societies' ability to adapt to **climate change**, leaving them more vulnerable to its impacts over time.⁴

⁴ The particular interaction between climate and conflict risks merits close attention and is explored more fully in the ICRC's report *When Rain Turns to Dust*, ICRC, Geneva, July 2020: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4487-when-rain-turns-dust>.

We must have a detailed understanding of how – given the interconnectedness of global food markets – armed conflict in any part of the world may disrupt different components of food systems, and of how local food systems may have been fragile prior to the outbreak of conflict. This involves mapping the people, organizations and factors that play a mitigating or exacerbating role at the local, national, regional and global levels. The knowledge and expertise of local people and organizations – including authorities – and of development and humanitarian organizations working closely with affected populations, can enrich this analysis and help tailor the response to the context.

A strong understanding of local food systems helps humanitarian organizations determine the most relevant form of aid. In one place, there may not be enough food available in local markets if harvests are poor and trade disruptions prevent the import of additional stocks. The priorities would therefore be providing food, supporting livestock health and vaccination, and carrying out agricultural adaptation programmes. In other places, the markets may be full but, owing to inflation and other economic impacts of conflict, prices may be too high for families to manage. Cash and voucher assistance may therefore be most effective.

Bardhere, Somalia. Hunger and disease stemming from a prolonged drought killed many of the camels, goats and sheep here. Those that survived were visibly frail, producing little meat or milk and fetching paltry sums at market. The ICRC supported a campaign to treat and vaccinate livestock, which helped herders recover and protected the livelihoods of thousands of families that rely on livestock for survival.



SNAPSHOT – DROUGHT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA, 2022

The Horn of Africa is experiencing its most severe drought in 40 years, following four consecutive poor or failed rainy seasons. Kenya and Somalia have been in a state of emergency since late 2021. The ongoing drought is severely threatening livestock, which herders rely on for their livelihoods. The animals are dying at alarming rates and those left are emaciated and weakened. Herders are migrating farther and for longer periods, further stressing animal health and spreading disease. Additionally, rainfed agriculture has failed almost systematically in recent years, leaving many farmers with no choice but to abandon their fields and move to cities in search of alternative livelihoods. Agricultural production and livestock herding, which are both central to the local food system, are therefore both vulnerable.

The ICRC's response for livestock herders has focused on protecting their core breeding stock, which is crucial to support their economic recovery after a crisis. The activities have been tailored to their prevailing needs and existing resources. They range from emergency health activities like large-scale deworming and treatment campaigns in Somalia (where the ICRC has established an effective network of community animal-health workers near herding communities) to providing fodder in Kenya and Ethiopia to protect the core livestock of the most vulnerable herders. In Ethiopia, selected herders have received index-based livestock insurance, which distributes payouts to policy holders based on satellite indicators of the condition of the vegetation. The ICRC is also investing in adaptive activities, such as the development of drought-resistant seeds, seed multiplication programmes and more efficient irrigation systems. These efforts are an area where emergency relief and development organizations, governments and the private sector can work together to leverage new technologies and emerging best practices.

Humanitarian organizations play an important role in reducing risks and carrying out preventive action – not only by monitoring malnutrition levels and providing food or equivalent financial assistance, but importantly also by supporting people in safeguarding, recovering or rebuilding their livelihoods. Part of this work includes contributing to **anticipatory action**. However, people affected by armed conflict and other violence are largely excluded from the prerequisites of anticipatory action: early warning systems, pre-determined action plans, and dedicated funding pools. We therefore need to work together to strengthen anticipatory action systems for these communities and ensure that the action is embedded in broader efforts to increase individual and community resilience to systemic risks.

Of course, the food system analysis must be accompanied by the political will and financial investment to address challenges. **Humanitarian organizations do not have the capacity or expertise to address the complex systems-level issues driving food insecurity on their own.** Without active and sustained investment from national authorities, development organizations and the private sector, many people are likely to remain stuck in cycles of increasingly severe food insecurity.

IN FOCUS: ANTICIPATORY ACTION

Anticipatory action can help people quickly mobilize funds and prepare for pending shocks. It is part of a spectrum of responses to reduce and respond to risks. For instance, data on rainfall, drought, and other weather patterns can be used to forecast impacts on food systems, which can in turn be systematized into early warning systems and paired with quick-release financing mechanisms. Anticipatory action is a critical component in addressing multiple risks, including food insecurity. Humanitarian organizations have an important role to play in ensuring that early warning and early action systems do not exclude hard-to-reach areas and are designed not to put people further at risk. Anticipatory approaches should also be understood as complementary to and linked to comprehensive approaches that help people build resilience, reduce systemic risks, and respond to disasters.

This is why, in policy and operational discussions on food security and humanitarian access, the ICRC advocates focusing on people's **access to the food and basic services (health, water and sanitation, livelihood support, etc.) critical to their survival, agency and dignity**. This may well require granting humanitarian organizations access to such populations. However, these organizations cannot be left alone to address the scale of need if effective and sustainable solutions are to be found.

3. PRIORITIZE TAILORED SUPPORT TO INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS WHO ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY AND MALNUTRITION OWING TO SOCIETAL OR SITUATIONAL BARRIERS

Armed conflict affects men, women, boys and girls differently. It exacerbates the risks faced by those individuals who are traditionally marginalized based on aspects of their **identity**, such as age, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation. In this way, prevailing societal norms and power dynamics influence who is most at risk of malnutrition and other threats when food becomes scarce. For example, data show that during humanitarian crises, more girls are forced to marry early, and women have higher malnutrition rates than men.

SNAPSHOT – INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN NORTHERN MYANMAR

Hgnet Chaung Camp in Rakhine State's Pauktaw Township hosts about 1,700 families that were displaced following outbreaks of violence in 2012. Since then, those living in the camp have had limited access to basic necessities, including cooking items, in large part due to the restrictions imposed on their movement, which can prevent them from accessing markets and engaging in traditional livelihood activities like agriculture, fishing, and livestock trading. The lockdowns imposed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted their movement even further, and led to job loss, increased debt and lower purchasing power for families.

In addition to other support, the ICRC has been providing these families with fuel sticks made of rice husks for cooking. Rice husks are a widely available local material that would otherwise be wasted. The fuel sticks help to both reduce deforestation and minimize exposure to any security risks people may encounter collecting firewood outside the area where they are permitted to travel. The ICRC also engages in dialogue with local authorities on the humanitarian impacts of the restriction on the community's freedom of movement.

People can also be more at risk of food insecurity if their **situation** or status restricts their ability to reliably access quality food in sufficient quantities. For example, people who are **internally displaced**, or living where there are heightened communal tensions and stigma, or where movement is constrained (notably people **deprived of their liberty**) may face particular obstacles to reliably access nutritious food in the required amounts. Similarly, conflict, climate and economic shocks may be especially hard on low-income **rural households**, many of which rely on their own food production for survival – both to eat and to earn a living. These shocks deprive them of both food and the financial means to buy it or pay for other essential goods and services. Moreover, people living in areas outside government control may have reduced access to social protection mechanisms and basic services.

By gaining a detailed understanding of what puts particular groups in the population at risk or makes them vulnerable, we can design targeted programmes that address their needs while at the same time improving overall community nutrition and food security.

Teknaf, Bangladesh. This woman is receiving financial assistance from the ICRC under an economic security programme to boost local food production.



THE ICRC'S MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY

Already in the first half of 2022, the ICRC has helped millions of people to strengthen their resilience to food shocks, part of its larger efforts to enhance the sustainability of humanitarian action. The ICRC works in over 100 countries, often in close collaboration with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, helping people affected by armed conflict and other violence. Its Economic Security Unit (EcoSec), in the Department of Protection and Essential Services, aims to help individuals, households and communities to cover their essential needs sustainably and with dignity and reduce their exposure to the risks created by armed conflict and other violence (including in combination with climate hazards). These activities are an integral part of the ICRC's multidisciplinary and collective approach to ensuring that people are granted the protection to which they are entitled.

The ICRC's response is centred around three core objectives – emergency response, resilience-strengthening and pathways to self-sufficiency. In other words, when people's lives are in danger because their essential needs are not being met, EcoSec steps in, but it also strengthens people's resilience to socio-economic risks, and helps people get access to durable solutions. EcoSec's programmes include:

- ensuring access to food, including by distributing food, vouchers or cash, as well as therapeutic food for malnourished children and pregnant or breastfeeding mothers
- distribution of seed, farming equipment or fishing nets, livestock and/or fodder to households to support people's work to produce food and sustain themselves
- livestock health and vaccination programmes to ensure the survival of the core breeding stock on which herders rely
- microeconomic programmes to enable people to create or sustain other income-generating activities, all of which helps to protect the viability of local markets.

The ICRC works to address food insecurity by leveraging:

- (i) its **access** to underserved populations in hard-to-reach areas;
- (ii) its capacity to offer a **multidisciplinary response** to the interconnected needs and drivers of food insecurity; and
- (iii) its **proximity** to affected people, which allows it to grasp the challenges, capacities and coping strategies of communities.

In taking a wider public health approach, the ICRC's response also involves strengthening health and water infrastructure, and supporting the local skilled personnel who sustain it, as these are intimately linked to tackling malnutrition and the spread of disease. Finally, the ICRC monitors the emergence of risks and negative coping mechanisms and strengthens its response to protect against those risks. For example, where people are forced into displacement and may become separated, it works to reunite families, with the support of local National Societies. The ICRC also has a unique role as a neutral body that can maintain dialogue with all parties on their responsibilities under IHL, including those pertaining to food security. This includes advocacy to mitigate the potential negative consequences of political-level mechanisms, such as restrictive measures and sanctions regimes, or export bans.



J.A. Serrano Redondo/ICRC

Hebron, West Bank. 48-year-old Marwan Jaber and his two brothers took part in an ICRC microeconomic initiative, which allowed them to improve their farm and build a greenhouse. Today, they plant different types of vegetables year round and are able to provide for their 20-member family.

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.