Conflict-Induced Food Insecurity: Implications and Strategies to Achieve Protection Outcomes

A Summary Note in support of an Action-Based Research Study

Spring 2022

*The views expressed in this summary note do not necessarily reflect those of IRC or the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida)

I.   Overarching Objective

InterAction and its partners intend to undertake a multi-country action-based research study that includes helping organizations analyze the protection risks in each country context and develop context-specific theories of change. These will underpin outcome-oriented ways of working to address protection issues precipitated by conflict-induced food insecurity. Findings from the study will help humanitarians take immediate action at a country-level, while analysis of common trends across all research contexts will be used to influence US and global policy and practice in humanitarian action

The urgency of the issue requires that any research undertaken goes beyond theoretical discussions and global analysis. Therefore, the design of the research study uses an action-based methodology underpinned by a results-based protection approach so that findings can lead to immediate action by humanitarians that are operational in the country contexts studied.

II.   Justification

Conflict-induced hunger has been increasingly highlighted at a global level and prioritized as a key issue within crisis-affected contexts. Increased focus on the issue has grown through the development of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2417 in 2018, followed by the creation of the UK Special Envoy for Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs role, World Food Programme (WFP) being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food making access to food in situations of armed conflict a priority issue in 2020. In 2021, the G7 agreement on a [Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact](#) and the convening of the High-Level Task Force to Prevent Famine by the UN Secretary General (UNSG) further strengthened global focus on the issue. The use of starvation as a weapon of war is not new, however starvation crimes as a conflict strategy have become

increasingly apparent in recent conflicts including the Ethiopia[1], Nigeria[2], South Sudan, Syria and Yemen contexts[3].

A range of threats to civilians, including violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation play out on macro and micro levels in conflict situations. Deliberate deprivation of civilians (including restricting access to food, medical care, and other essential services) is driven by a range of motivations, including exerting control, territorial gain, extraction of goods, encouraging defections, retribution, exploitation and the killing of certain groups[4]. And while the topic of conflict-induced food insecurity has gained global prominence, the mechanisms of exactly how conflict drives food insecurity, and how food insecurity causes protection risks[5] are not sufficiently understood. The links between conflict-induced food insecurity and protection risks need to be established for aid agencies to develop context-specific strategies and the appropriate capacities and systems necessary to minimize those risks.

At a global level, legal analysis has deepened the understanding of the applicability of international humanitarian law (IHL) to situations of conflict-induced food insecurity, particularly as it pertains to the use of starvation as a weapon of war[6]. However, there are limited means to pursue accountability to IHL on this, and many other issues of concern. There has been limited ability to prompt action on the issue in the UN Security Council (UNSC) due to divisions among Council members and the lack of a clear institutional champion on the issue. Even when the issue does make it on the agenda, the means available to the UNSC are limited to tools such as reminding states of their obligations or through sanctions to prompt compliance[7]. More contextually tailored analysis and innovative responses at the local level are needed to better understand the specific linkages between conflict-induced food insecurity and protection risks, and to elaborate more concrete actions to be taken to respond to and prevent those risks.

There are multiple barriers preventing aid agencies from addressing food insecurity-related protection risks. Operational risks associated with naming and working on situations of harm to civilians can include

[1] Paravicini, G., & Houreld, K. (2021, June 14). Exclusive UN official accuses Eritrean forces of deliberately starving Tigray. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-un-official-accuses-eritrean-forces-deliberately-starving-tigray-2021-06-11/

[2] De Waal, A. (2020, December 9). *Food as a weapon of war and the Nobel Peace Prize for the World Food Program: Calling out the culprits*. World Peace Foundation. https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2020/12/09/food-as-a-weapon-of-war-and-the-nobel-peace-prize-for-the-world-food-program-calling-out-the-culprits/

[3] Global Rights Compliance (2019, June). *Mass starvation expert report*. https://starvationaccountability.org/resources/expert-report

[4] Conley, B. & de Waal, A. (2019, September). The purposes of starvation: Historical and contemporary uses. *Journal of International Criminal Justice 17*(4), 699-722. https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqz054

[5] Protection risks are defined as violence (killings, torture, maiming, beating, rape, etc.), coercion (restricted freedom of movement, forced or prevented displacement, forced or prevented return, forced participation in conflict, slavery, forced prostitution, etc.) and deprivation (prevention from accessing subsistence or humanitarian aid, destruction of critical infrastructure, property, assets, means of livelihood, etc.)

[6] Akande, D., & Gillard, E. (2019, December). Conflict-induced food insecurity and the war crime of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare: the underlying rules of international humanitarian law. *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 17, 753-759. https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mzq050

[7] Gillard, E. (2021, November). *Conflict-induced hunger and the Security Council: The state of play three years after the adoption of UNSCR 2417: Challenges and opportunities* [Background paper]. The Role of Law and Policy in Confronting Conflict-Induced Hunger, Oxford, UK.

restricted access to vulnerable populations and other predatory conduct by armed groups - both state and non-state armed forces. Aid agencies that engage with these sensitive issues risk retaliation in the form of program suspensions, personnel ordered to leave the context, additional bureaucratic hurdles, security risks for personnel and public accusations that undermine crucial relationships with communities. Notably these risks are most often understood in terms of the relative ability of aid agencies to sustain their programmes, not the perspective of communities experiencing protection risks. The prioritization of operational access over addressing protection risks has likely contributed to a cautious approach from humanitarian leadership on protection risks, a tendency that is recognized and manipulated by parties to conflict, with the effect of perpetuating impunity[8]. This is further complicated by agencies' concerns, and misunderstandings over how to adhere to humanitarian principles, specifically neutrality, while also speaking out on protection risks, especially those driven by host government actions.

There continue to be gaps in context-specific protection analysis, particularly that which relies on multi-sector analysis. The result can be a set of difficult issues that are not thoroughly understood, with no clear roadmap to addressing them. While there are multiple constraints within the humanitarian system that make it difficult to prioritize challenging protection risks, overlooking these risks can limit analysis and compromise the design of prevention and response strategies[9], and further exacerbate risks for civilians who face them.

III.   Key aspects of the issue

Gender dimensions

We know that gender constructs influence how individuals, households, and communities experience conflict-induced food insecurity and the protection threats contributing to food insecurity. It is widely observed that women and men experience famine and food insecurity differently, including along lines of age, ability, class, and available social networks. Layers of vulnerability intersect with gender to exacerbate food insecurity and protection risks, as seen in the 2011 famine in Somalia where long-term marginalization contributed to specific clans and ethnic groups experiencing low levels of urbanization, education, migration, diaspora movement and representation in the humanitarian community, contributing to lower levels of wealth and greater vulnerability to famine[10]. Access to finances, livelihoods, mobility and social power all influence the ability to survive food insecurity, and the resulting protection risks have been observed to be highly gendered[11]. Nevertheless, gender

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[8] Bowden, M. & Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2020, November). Humanitarian diplomacy and protection advocacy in an age of caution. *HPG briefing note*. London: ODI. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Humanitarian_diplomacy_and_protection_advocacy_in_an_age_of_caution.pdf

[9] Davies, G. (2021, December). Protection advocacy by international NGOs in armed conflict situations: breaking the barriers [Briefing note]. *Overseas Development Institute: Humanitarian Policy Group.* https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Advocacy_IP_INGOs_briefing_note_web.pdf.

[10] Maxwell, D. & Majid, N. (2014). *Another humanitarian crisis in Somalia? Learning from the 2011 famine*. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Another-HC-in-Somalia.pdf

[11] Spears, K., Conley, B., & Mazurana, D. (2021). *Gender, famine, and the female mortality advantage* [Occasional paper #36]. World Peace Foundation and Feinstein International Center. https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/12/Genderfamine-and-mortality-2021120634.pdf

disaggregated data on food insecurity is not readily available in Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)[12]and Cadre Harmonisé (CH) systems[13] making it difficult to draw gender-specific linkages between food insecurity and the resulting protection risks.

Responsibility for protection risks

The risks aid agencies face as a result of raising sensitive protection issues - particularly when the risks stem from host governments policies and behaviours, and a failure to observe international norms impacting on the right to food[14] - have contributed to a lack of analysis about the actors responsible for such protection risks. It can be difficult to quantify degrees of responsibility, but a better understanding of direct and indirect responsibility for protection risks associated with food insecurity would help humanitarian actors and other stakeholders shape protection responses more strategically and assist in determining appropriate advocacy and programming goals across a range of actors.

Inclusion of local actors and knowledge

In many cases there is a gap in the representation of affected civilians in formal decision-making settings, including IPC and CH processes[15], humanitarian clusters, and government ministries concerned with responding to humanitarian crises. Affected civilians can also lack communication channels to liaise effectively with conflict actors such as government officials who pre-emptively close Internally Displaced Populations (IDP) camps to match a narrative of reduced needs, or with state and non-state armed actors regarding protection risks resulting from operations. Local organizations too often lack a meaningful voice in humanitarian coordination structures[16] and operating in partnership with international organizations does not always lead to influencing the design of protection programming and advocacy planning. This lack of strategic work with local organizations can additionally lead to gaps in analysis and implementation[17]. In turn, other responses to reduce risk – which often leverage local knowledge and expertise – may not be recognized as part of the formal humanitarian response.

Leveraging context-specific frameworks

IHL related to conflict-induced food insecurity is critically important to set standards and norms, though this body of laws can be viewed by some conflict actors as imposed and western in nature. As a result,

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[12] The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is an innovative multi-partner initiative for improving food security and nutrition analysis and decision-making https://www.ipcinfo.org/

[13] Cadre Harmonise (CH) is a unifying tool that helps to produce relevant, consensual, rigorous, and transparent analyses of current and projected food and nutrition situations. It classifies the severity of food and nutrition insecurity based on the international classification scale through an approach that refers to well-defined functions and protocols https://www.ipcinfo.org/ch/

[14] United Nations General Assembly. (2017). *Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food*, A/72/188. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1722473.pdf

[15] Maxwell, D. & Hailey, P. (2021, January). Analysing famine: The politics of information and analysis in food security crises. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs 3*(1), 16-27. https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.055

[16] International Council of Voluntary Agencies (2015, January). NGO perspectives on humanitarian response in level 3 crises. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/NGO%20Perspectives%20of%20Humanitarian%20Response%20in%20L3%20Crisis.pdf

[17] Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2019, November). Localising protection responses in conflicts: Challenges and opportunities. *Overseas Development Institute: Humanitarian Policy Group.* https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/12995.pdf

using IHL references to influence the behaviours of state and non-state actors is not always effective. Alternative approaches, such as the use of traditional and religious norms and frameworks, or other contextually appropriate concepts and language, have the potential to create entry points where explicit references to IHL is rejected, and to facilitate dialogue with a view to achieving IHL objectives through contextually rooted values and norms.

Intersecting climate and conflict dynamics

In contexts experiencing climate shocks, resource constraints - including food security - can be compounded by conflict. Crisis contexts influenced both by conflict and climate shocks may see specific protection risk patterns emerge or be exacerbated (i.e., decisions to move or keep populations on particular lands after severe environmental degradation for strategic reasons)[18]. Environmental degradation can also be used as a conflict strategy negatively impacting livelihoods and movement patterns in ways that exacerbate violence[19]. The intersection of these crises warrants further investigation in order to understand, respond, and reduce these protection risks comprehensively.

IV.   *Research objectives*

1) To understand why and how conflict dynamics directly and indirectly lead to food insecurity and subsequently drive associated protection risks, particularly from the perspective of affected civilians.
2) To map out the protection risks, including context-specific situations of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation, resulting from conflict-induced food insecurity in detail and food security risks resulting from protection risks in the selected contexts.
3) To elaborate context-specific theories of change, which, in turn, will catalyze as a multi-disciplinary approach (both in terms of policy and programming) as a starting point to address protection risks resulting from conflict-induced food insecurity.

V.   *Approach*

The urgency of the issue and the underlying humanitarian imperative, requires that the research undertaken goes beyond theoretical discussions and global analysis. Therefore, the methodology chosen for this study will embrace an action-based approach that prioritizes a collaboration between the researchers and those directly involved or affected by the issue and the research findings in order to bring about change within each individual context studied. This includes actors engaged in both programming and policy making, but also communities directly affected by the issues.

As an entry point for the action-based research, the approach intends to start from a systems-thinking point of view to effectively generate actionable processes that can be studied and built upon.

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[18] Grayson, C. & Devidal, P. (2020, July). When rain turns to dust: Understanding and responding to the combined impact of armed conflicts and the climate and environment crisis on people's lives. *Division of Policy and Humanitarian Diplomacy: International Committee of the Red Cross*.
https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/rain_turns_to_dust_climate_change_conflict.pdf

[19] Peters, K., Davies, G. & Holloway, K. (2021, October). Addressing protection risks in a climate changed world: Challenges and opportunities. *HPG briefing note*. London: ODI.
https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/DRC_Climate_change_and_protection_web_LN5UggI.pdf

Conflict, social exclusion, and climate change are complex issues underlying protection risks. Each of these issues is made up of a complex system of dynamic parts that include natural and human processes (i.e. travelling to farms for livelihood purposes, accessing markets, and desertification, etc.), formal and informal institutions (i.e. markets, traditional governance and military bodies, etc.) and relationships (i.e. between civilians and armed actors, humanitarians and authorities, and markets and armed actors, etc.)[20] which all influence how specific protection risks play out. Finding solutions for protection risks tangled up in these complex systems requires organizations to understand and account for different parts of each dynamic system in their efforts to effect change, rather than focusing exclusively on isolated component part. It requires skillsets that embrace an adaptive mindset that can respond to changing conditions. In other words, it requires that a humanitarian response uses iterative thinking and works across organizational boundaries, including the development of collective strategies and working with multiple stakeholders in the context. This contrasts with 'technical problems' that often have quick and straightforward solutions that can be done by edict, are solvable by an expert and require one or few changes, such as a minor medical issue[21].

Humanitarian organizations tend to rely on technical tools such as checklists and standardized indicators and work through technical sectors which have come to inform thinking. While there is a need for technical components in both protection and food security responses, a technical approach alone can result in a focus on pre-defined protection activities rather than a continuous context-specific analysis of the evolving and variable nature of protection issues playing out, thereby limiting the options available to responders and minimizing the effectiveness of interventions to achieve protection outcomes.

Results-Based Protection (RBP)

The research takes RBP as its overarching framing, to support the achievement of protection outcomes. It centers on the conception of protection as an outcome, which is manifested as a measurable reduction in protection risk faced by affected populations. Using an RBP framework enables humanitarian actors to develop context-specific protection strategies that aim to reduce threat, reduce vulnerability, and increase capacity, which when combined, reduce risks[22].

While the RBP framework can be applied to all protection risks, a focus on conflict-induced food insecurity will produce valuable lessons on how to develop focused protection strategies and use outcome-oriented methods. Equally, an RBP approach can help to add to our collective understanding of approaches to conflict-induced food insecurity, particularly in the development of context-specific theories of change aimed at distinct protection risks. This research will look at specific risks that emerge in selected contexts to identify the ways in which conflict relates to food insecurity and – in turn – how that food insecurity manifests in additional, related protection risks. The research will also draw on those contexts for cross-contextual documentation and learning.

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[20] Bowman, K., Chettleborough, J., Jeans, H., Rowlands, J., & Whitehead, J. (2015, October). Systems thinking: An introduction for Oxfam programme staff. Oxfam policy and practice. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/systems-thinking-an-introduction-for-oxfam-programme-staff-579896/

[21] Heifetz, R. & Laurie, D. (2001, December). The work of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2001/12/the-work-of-leadership.

[22] InterAction (2017, September). *Key elements of results-based protection.* Results-based protection. https://live-interaction-rbp-wp.pantheonsite.io/what-is-rbp/key-elements/

The links between protection risks and food insecurity are complex. By applying an RBP framework these links can be understood in two ways 1) protection risks that lead to food insecurity, (such as destruction of property and farmland, explosive ordinances, killing and violence, forced displacement, forced returns, control over civilian movement, control of access to livelihoods, markets, resources and services and deliberate deprivation such as starvation crimes), and 2) protection risks that result from, or are exacerbated by, food insecurity (including exposure to exploitation such as forced labour or sexual exploitation, exposure to risks due to extensive or unfamiliar travel for food and risk-taking behaviour such as early marriage and food-sharing strategies). Each of these risks requires analysis to understand the specific links to food insecurity, through breaking these down into components of threat, vulnerability, and capacity. Analyzing each component is important in order to understand the protection risks and develop a holistic protection strategy to reduce risks.

Analyzing the linkages between protection risks and conflict-induced food insecurity will be beneficial for addressing both protection and food security issues. Where food insecurity is rooted in protection risks, solutions must address those protection risks in addition to a response focusing on provision of food, livelihoods, and cash (i.e., an influence and negotiation strategy to change the behavior of a particular conflict party that is destroying food sources). In addition, technical approaches to food insecurity must be included in strategies that address protection risks where food insecurity is a factor (i.e., understanding the kinds of livelihoods support that could reduce resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour) to comprehensively support protection outcomes.

Furthermore, moving from analysis to design is critical in order for strategies are to be agreed, funded, and implemented. Exploring how relevant stakeholders from different sectors and disciplines come together to articulate pathways for change will help pinpoint entry points for action both in terms of policy and programmatic interventions that can reduce risk. Identifying local and global advocacy opportunities that can complement operations will help to galvanize support and influence decision-makers that may have a bearing on conflict-induced food insecurity.

Gender-Based Violence Prevention Evaluation Framework (GBV PEF)

Additionally, the research will draw on key concepts, tools, and materials from the newly launched GBV PEF —an interagency endorsed set of guiding approaches aimed at helping practitioners make better decisions in their analysis, program design, and measurement such that GBV prevention outcomes can ultimately be evaluated. Incorporating the use of these outcome-oriented methods into the action-based research methodology will help test the effectiveness of these approaches with multiple stakeholders with the hopes of creating action plans that have measurable outcomes. Furthermore, by incorporating the GBV PEF, the research will embrace an intersectional gender lens to be able to provide insights on how protection risks affect women, men, girls, and boys differently based on age, ability and other relevant identity and status-based indicators. The research will also draw from the GBV PEF's ethical considerations that cite and complement the World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on

ethical standards when researching GBV[23] including standards on data collection and the do no harm approach for research processes.[24]

Participation

To develop a robust understanding of the issues at play and potential pathways to address them, the research will take a multi-disciplinary approach and seek out diverse perspectives. This will include the perspectives of affected communities, as well as that of local and international aid organizations, local authorities including government, customary and religious leaders, and armed actors where possible. In line with this, research activities will use a participatory approach to engage affected populations and aid agencies in analytic processes, ensuring research and action planning is done *with* stakeholders, and not just *about* stakeholders. This includes collective reflection, analysis, and validation to ensure insights are grounded in contextual realities.

In keeping with a participatory approach, the research process will also specifically create opportunities to share research findings and outcomes back to stakeholders who contribute to the research process. This will include the key audience of aid agencies, but also affected communities who rarely hear about the outcomes of their participation in research or have a chance to meaningfully engage with research findings related to their communities.

VI. Research question and sub-questions

- What are the context-specific links between conflict and food insecurity?
- What are the related protection risks and how do they play out at a community level?
- What are the potential pathways forward in reducing associated protection risks?

1. **Analysis (Exploring the Threat, Vulnerability, and Capacity of Risk Caused by (Directly or Indirectly) Conflict-Induced Food Insecurity)**

- Which actors are directly and indirectly responsible for aggravating and mitigating protection risks related to conflict-induced food insecurity?
    - Whose interests are shaping the current protection dynamics in the selected contexts and whose are absent?
    - What are the behaviours, attitudes, needs and positions of those responsible for these protection risks and what factors drive these?
- How are intersectional gender roles defining threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities to respond to food insecurity related protection risks?
    - How do intersectional gender roles inform protection risks that cause food insecurity?
- What are the specific protection risk patterns in contexts where conflict-induced food insecurity and climate shocks have occurred simultaneously?

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[23] World Health Organization (2007). Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies.
Geneva. https://www.who.int/gender/documents/OMS_Ethics&Safety10Aug07.pdf
[24] InterAction (2021, May). Gender-based violence prevention: A results-based evaluation framework.
https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GBV-Prevention-Evaluation-Framework-05-26-21.pdf

- What are the specific drivers and patterns playing out in contexts of deliberate deprivation?
  - What are the contextually-specific disruption points within these patterns?

2. **Contextual Pathways for Creating Change**
   - What priorities, knowledge, and capacities are factored into locally-based responses and how is this leveraged to reduce protection risks?
   - Where can the different voices of affected civilians be amplified and how can this be given greater influence in the decision making of humanitarian and conflict actors?
   - What can humanitarian organizations in selected contexts learn from locally-based responses and how can these responses be supported?
   - What are the local traditional/cultural and religious frameworks, that could be leveraged to influence the conduct of conflict actors in order to mitigate protection risks?
   - Do these factors and/or frameworks also contribute to civilian harm and if so, how?
   - How can multiple disciplines and sectors work together to identify appropriate pathways for reducing protection risks as a results of conflict-induced food insecurity?
   - What are the dynamics and various considerations that need to be understood if multi-disciplinary strategies are to be supported and effectively implemented?