

Food Security and Unarmed Civilian Protection

Violent conflict, food insecurity and the protection of civilians are inherently interconnected, and one cannot be effectively addressed independently of another. To do so increases risks to affected populations and reduces the value of all programmatic investments. Investment in food aid is devoid of value if that aid cannot get to populations at risk. We need adaptable tools – like Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) – that can help address the ways that different types of insecurity – physical, material, or otherwise – are interconnected.

Introduction

The latest [Global Report on Food Crises](#) revealed staggering numbers of people experiencing hunger, with 281.6 million people facing ‘high levels of food insecurity’ across 59 countries/territories in 2023. In the last year, the number of people on the brink of famine has almost doubled. The majority of these cases are directly linked to violent conflict and a lack of humanitarian access.

The plethora of ways in which violent conflict disrupts market systems and increases food insecurity has been well documented. Supply chain disruptions, reduced humanitarian access, inflation, reduced production or imports, displacement and failures in banking systems are all well recognized causes. Yet, the dynamics of civilian safety and disrupted food systems are often overlooked.



Farming Extensionists (local community members who have undergone specialized training) teach others about farming and how to enhance communal safety. Malakal, South Sudan, 2023. ©NP

Overview: The impacts of violent conflict on food security

Food Production and Supply Chains

- People are unable to tend farms due to risks of crossfire or unexploded ordnance.
- Communities are unable to access their land for agricultural purposes due to threats of violence from neighboring groups.
- Conflict and reduced access to water resources reduces food outputs.
- Risks of physical violence and sexual and gender-based violence increase exponentially, with women who do attempt to plant or harvest exposed to increased risks of violence during these activities.
- Roads and trading routes become unsafe, both for the movement of resources and people.
- Suppliers or stall holders feel unsafe to go to markets or are unwilling to take the risk of transporting goods that are likely to be looted or subject to extortion on route.
- Humanitarian access for food provision drops amid conflict parties' disagreements.

Food Access

- Individuals may not feel safe to go to markets due to the distance, its location, the risk of crime or the risk of deliberate attack by conflict parties.
- Public transportation to travel ceases amid insecurity.
- Banks cease operations as staff feel unsafe to remain in place, thus reducing civilians' access to their financial resources.
- Community members may not feel safe to come to food distribution points (if they exist) due to poorly managed security arrangements or disputes with other communities.

Disrupted food chains and a lack of access to food is not the end of the story - this becomes a vicious cycle.

- Scarce land or agricultural input resources (such as water) lead to inter- and intracommunal violence (often causing further displacement).
- Poorly managed food distributions ignite new or existing tensions between individuals, groups or communities.
- Inflation in basic commodity prices results in increased crime.
- Reduced access to food supplies forces civilians to take even more risks when it comes to their personal safety and that of their families.
- Reduced purchasing power and food shortages are widely documented to exponentially increase negative coping mechanisms and protection risks, particularly for women and children.

Unarmed Civilian Protection as a food security tool

It is misguided, and potentially harm-inducing, to understand Food Security as a sector of activities that alone can solve a food crisis. Using basic Protection Mainstreaming and Conflict Sensitivity as risk mitigation tools after food security activities have already been decided is not sufficient. Addressing food security effectively means prioritising addressing root causes – the conflict that has led to violence. In the heat of crisis, the immediate safety and security of communities and individuals through the food supply chain must also be prioritized. This will not only increase the effectiveness of decided interventions but also support the resilience of existing or alternative supply mechanisms.

“There are truck drivers and others throughout entire supply chain who don't feel safe to do their jobs - so even if we had all the food aid we needed, the famine can't be addressed until people feel safe.”

- Nic Pyatt, NP Head of Mission in Sudan

What can this look like in practice?

Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) is one such methodology already being implemented in communities facing these interconnected threats. UCP is an approach to protecting civilians – led by and for civilians – that interrupts immediate and emergent violence, whilst also working to strengthen local peace and safety mechanisms over the long term. UCP hinges on relationship building and acceptance-based models of security that can also ease pathways for providers of material aid.

What this looks like in practice depends on the conflict context, and the needs and leadership of civilians themselves:

- In [Sudan](#) and [elsewhere](#), Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) teams have worked with local communities, authorities, and other humanitarian agencies to expand the reach of material aid providers. Through community negotiation and relationship building, NP has facilitated safe access for material aid and providers where it otherwise was not feasible due to local security conditions.
- In many countries, women face significant risks of violence when planting, harvesting, and moving between locations. NP's Community Protection Teams (CPTs) comprise of members from the community committed to and trained in UCP, including many women who have been targeted by such violence themselves. CPTs work to put in place strategies to reduce violence, including patrols, protective presence, and negotiation with armed actors often responsible for harm. This not only reduces direct protection risks to those engaging in food security activities but also improves inclusivity and the likely yield from these agricultural activities.

- **NP teams** around the world have partnered with food security providers and communities to reduce risks of violence at distribution sites. Using their in-depth knowledge of communities, NP has provided other humanitarian agencies with conflict sensitivity analysis and supported them to enhance their communication with communities prior to food/cash or other aid distributions. These activities enable better planning that reduces the likelihood of conflict at the activity and ensures specialized arrangements can be put in place for vulnerable persons. NP teams also support dispute mechanisms to de-escalate tensions and conflict at distribution sites.
- Some of NP's core work is setting up or strengthening community peace groups and their planning for potential threats and negotiating disputes. As communities navigate food insecurity, land disputes and climate shocks, having strong pathways to address potential conflicts is critical before they spill over into violence or disrupt engagement in food security activities or access to food supplies.

Case Study - Nyirol county, South Sudan

In parts of South Sudan, violence inhibits the ability for people to gather safely at marketplaces – both to access food and sustain independent livelihoods. To address this in Nyirol county, NP engaged youth, local authorities, duty bearers and community leaders to lay the foundation for a Weapons Free Zone (WFZ) in the key town of Lankien. Various efforts were made by community groups to drive acceptance of this approach and weapons being carried are now left at the assigned locations with police outside the WFZ. This has allowed greater levels of trading, provided safer market access for all and increased food security in the area.

*Protection mainstreaming
during food distribution.
Mangateen, South Sudan.
November 2020 ©NP*



UCP and food security: Key principles for implementation

To be impactful and to reach those most in need, food security strategies need to integrate civilian protection commitments and peacebuilding goals. Utilizing UCP principles and practices is an opportunity to meet these objectives. These principles can be read as a set of recommendations for policymakers, implementers, donors, communities, and other actors across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors.

1. Be led by civilians themselves and build on existing community strengths

Communities know best how to protect themselves, what changes are needed to secure their safety, how market systems work and what creative solutions may be applied to certain situations. Humanitarian best practice should be centered around community-led design. Yet all too often this is not the case, with humanitarian agencies simply contextualizing global activities to their local operational environment.

Funded projects need to recognize the time and resourcing it takes to drive a truly community-led approach and to provide programmatic flexibility rather than require pre-proscribed activities. A community solution to unsafe market access may vary from provision of transportation, weapons agreements, protective accompaniment or changing times and locations of market days. These solutions cannot be driven downwards within rigid project frameworks.

2. Engage with and influence armed actors

Provisions within International Humanitarian Law and UNSC Resolution 2417 define the minimum responsibilities of those engaged in conflict to prevent conflict-induced food insecurity. These legal commitments must be upheld and accountability by the international community for actors who violate these standards is essential. As noted above, the presence of armed groups impacts mobility and safety for civilians, which can also cause and exacerbate food insecurity.

To address these challenges, engagement with armed actors at local, national, and international levels is essential to strengthening protection environments. Accordingly, civilian actors willing to engage in pragmatic negotiations need to be upskilled and resourced to do so responsibly and safely. Working with armed actors to understand and implement **practical measures** they can take to prevent and mitigate food insecurity is critical.

3. Address programmatic gaps through triple nexus approaches

Successful food security programming depends on integrating material aid and livelihood support with protection and peacebuilding programming. Protection, peace and food actors need to leverage each other's strengths to minimise gaps in programming whether at distributions or thinking about longer-ranging supply chains. The default should also not be to distribute food if there are quick actions that can be taken to support market systems and/or improve their functionality. Where distributions are deemed the most appropriate,

interim methodology, minimizing protection risks and ensuring conflict sensitivity should be sufficiently resourced/ prioritized to prevent further cycles of violence and marginalization. By centering civilian protection in program design, food security projects can be more cost efficient, contextually appropriate, sustainable and shock absorbent.

4. Prevention first: protection and peace investment as an antidote to food insecurity

Investment in food insecurity prevention must be multifaceted and forward leaning. Civilian protection programming can interrupt cycles of violence and prevent the exacerbation of protection risks that disrupt food chains, both proximately and longer term, before they even happen. In the longer term, we also need to ask what sustainable food security looks like for communities themselves, and work to create and strengthen resilient local food infrastructures.

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