# Round Table II: **Stability through Food Security**

## Context

Research by PRIO into 259 violent conflicts between 1964 and 2016 shows that during this period 60% of conflicts recurred, with peaceful periods averaging seven years.[1] Further research by FAO indicates that countries that have experienced violent conflict, and where high food insecurity endures after hostilities end have a 40% higher chance to return to conflict within ten years compared to those with better food security.[2] Anyone interested in preventing conflict and promoting peace and stability therefore does well to study its relation to food (in)security.

Research has firmly established that there is a two-way relationship between violent conflict and food security ([Delgado et al. 2022](#)). Violent conflict disrupts food systems by affecting the production, distribution, and access to food. War can destroy crops, block supply routes, and prevent people from accessing markets, leading to food shortages and insecurity. At the same time, food insecurity can contribute to the outbreak and persistence of conflict. When people lack access to sufficient food, it can fuel tensions, grievances, and violence. In 2022, the World Food Programme produced a synthesis study on the relationship between food insecurity and conflict: 'Dangerously Hungry'. The study brings together insights from 50 peer-reviewed articles from the previous five years, showing that research perspectives on drivers of food-related violence generally fall within three categories: 1) climate change, 2) conflict over resources, and 3) economic shocks (see figure on the 12 variables on Food-related instability below).[3]

Looking at the individual, micro-level, the study further outlines that in this research literature three categories are distinguished that shape the motivation of people and groups experiencing food insecurity to turn to violence: 1) desperation, 2) grievances, 3) limited government capacity. The reasoning is that where people cannot meet their basic needs, in some cases the returns from violent activity are higher than traditional economic activity, this may increase people's motivation to join a

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[1] PRIO (2016) Conflict recurrence
[http://file.prio.no/publication_files/prio/Gates,%20Nyg%C3%A5rd,%20Trappeniers%20-%20Conflict%20Recurrence,%20Conflict%20Trends%202-2016.pdf](http://file.prio.no/publication_files/prio/Gates,%20Nyg%C3%A5rd,%20Trappeniers%20-%20Conflict%20Recurrence,%20Conflict%20Trends%202-2016.pdf)
[2] FAO (2016) Investing in resilience to sustain rural livelihoods amid conflict. Technical note.
[http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5591e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5591e.pdf)
[3] [https://www.wfpusa.org/policy-advocacy/reports-publications/dangerously-hungry/](https://www.wfpusa.org/policy-advocacy/reports-publications/dangerously-hungry/)
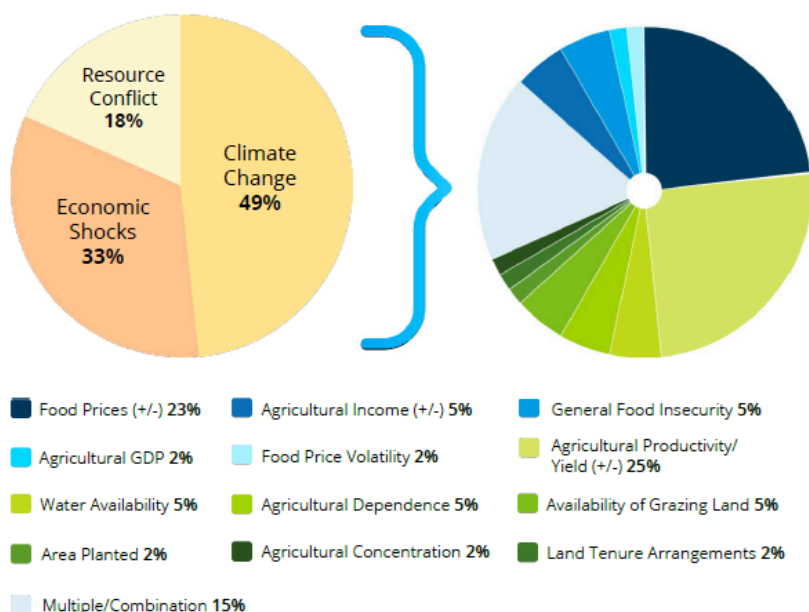
militia, gang or other violent group. Moreover, in many cases, hunger increases people's awareness of

**Figure 3. The 12 Variables of Food-Related Instability**

Some studies in this review (n=32) begin by examining economic shocks (e.g., food prices) or resource competition (e.g., water availability), regardless of their origins. Other studies (n=28) begin with climate change impacts like drought and temperature changes and examine the downstream effects of those events on economic shocks and resource competition. Almost 50% of peer-reviewed articles in this report examine the relationship between food insecurity and conflict through the lens of climate change. For that reason, the climate crisis is considered a stand-alone driver of food-related instability.



Resource Conflict 18%
Economic Shocks 33%
Climate Change 49%

- Food Prices (+/-) 23%
- Agricultural Income (+/-) 5%
- General Food Insecurity 5%
- Agricultural GDP 2%
- Food Price Volatility 2%
- Agricultural Productivity/Yield (+/-) 25%
- Water Availability 5%
- Agricultural Dependence 5%
- Availability of Grazing Land 5%
- Area Planted 2%
- Agricultural Concentration 2%
- Land Tenure Arrangements 2%
- Multiple/Combination 15%

wider inequalities based on ethnic group, religion or class. Where large groups of people share such grievances, violence can arise. Finally, the limited presence, or capacity, of a government to support a population's basic needs can lead to questions about its effectiveness, which is a dynamic in which various groups can offer an alternative.

This micro-perspective has a limitation however. When looking broader towards food security literature in relation to conflict-affected contexts we can see a tendency to focus on practical, solution-oriented analyses of conflict, often leading to programmes designed to increase food availability. In short, if food insecurity motivates people to turn to violence, meeting their needs (through increased income, cash transfers, livelihoods support, subsistence production or food aid) will then decrease violence and conflict risk. However, the pathways linking conflict and food insecurity are not simple or universal. They are complex and specific to each context, meaning the way food insecurity causes conflict, or conflict disrupts food security, varies based on local conditions. To understand these pathways fully, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of food systems. Beyond the individual, needs-based perspective, various social, political and economic factors feed into the eruption of violent conflict that may or may not be related to food insecurity. Recent research by

Clingendael on grain value chains in fragile settings (unpublished, 2024) highlights how widespread insecurity, weak governance, infrastructure and policy deficiencies, and financial constraints disrupt every stage of these agricultural value chains—from input sourcing and production to transport, processing, and sales. These challenges severely undermine domestic food systems, making it difficult to meet the population's food needs in fragile settings.

At this more macro level, both the high dependence on international markets and value chains (which includes food aid) and the development of agricultural value chains in fragile settings are often intertwined with conflict dynamics. Increased economic activity in the agri-food sector can exacerbate conflict by funding armed groups or creating perceived inequalities in the distribution of benefits. If the gains from agricultural development are concentrated among elites or certain groups, it can fuel resentment, unrest, and conflict, especially along group identity lines. Interventions attempting to manage these risks would therefore require careful attention to distribution of benefits and the handling of changes to the power structure in ways that avoid alienating or provoking influential actors. It is therefore Important to integrate political and economic understanding into interventions aimed at improving food security to ensure they are equitable and effective, rather than reinforcing existing power imbalances or creating further conflict. This is reflected in the recent recommendation of IOB to take conflict sensitivity much more seriously in stability focused programming.

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**Inconvenient Realities: an evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law**

A recent IOB evaluation on the effects of Dutch efforts to promote stability in countries like Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan (2015-2022) found mixed results. While rural development programmes in these countries improved livelihoods and resilience, they did not lead to sustainable economic growth which  should have translated into further job creation or increased incomes. Programmes targeting macroeconomic development, support for the private sector, governance and gender transformative goals were generally only effective at local levels, showing no 'trickle up' effects. Moreover, programmes targeting governance were only effective in depoliticized areas where they had little impact on the political economy. The study suggests that in these fragile and conflict-affected contexts smaller scale interventions focused on basic infrastructure and skills tend to be more successful than large, transformative programs that require high partner capacity or complex infrastructure. IOB also emphasises the importance of conflict sensitivity and the "do no harm" principle as guiding for interventions in these types of contexts.

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Based on these insights, a way forward may be to look at the bigger picture—how the governance of the food system itself shapes outcomes, and how more inclusive governance may contribute to peace and stability. In short, a more political perspective on food systems is needed that takes into account

how political dynamics around access to resources, power distribution and group formations tie into food security and stability outcomes. This more political view would take into account that food insecurity is not just about a lack of food, but is often deeply rooted in inequalities related to how food is distributed and accessed - which points to structural, systemic issues within food systems affected by conflict and fragility. Food security is often tied directly to legitimacy of political actors and closely intertwined with the social contracts and authoritarian bargains that may be present in countries affected by conflict and fragility. In line with the advice of IOB, this would thus require a careful look at how interventions and engagements in the food system align with government engagement.

## Discussion questions

- How can we work through multi-stakeholder collaborations to mitigate structural inequalities in food systems that prevent conflict and promote peace and stability?