



Supporting Sustainable Security in a Hot and Hungry World



Policymakers increasingly recognize the links between hunger, climate and security, and are aware that transnational challenges like food and climate drive wars and conflict. Global famine has reached unprecedented levels, with [one in ten](#) people going to bed hungry daily. The links between hunger, instability and climate risks are becoming steadily clearer: in the past few years, escalating violence and governance challenges in Africa and the Middle East, Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and the increasingly visible impact of climate change have exacerbated global food insecurity and demonstrated the limits of multilateral governance.

Despite (or even because of) the gaps and vulnerabilities in the global agri-food system, food is also a rare [opportunity for multilateral cooperation](#) and collective action in today's otherwise contentious geopolitical environment. The process of mainstreaming food security into key policymaking and multilateral processes has already begun to some extent, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Food security is a [growing priority](#) for UN agencies; regional bodies like the [African Union](#), [European Union](#) and [Organization of American States](#); gatherings like the [Munich Security Conference](#), and more. Promisingly, [tens of billions of dollars](#) have been pledged for food and agriculture since COP28, including more than \$3 billion in official funding and \$10+ billion in regional initiatives. However, gaps remain. Despite growing international attention to the climate-hunger-security nexus, just [3 per cent](#) of climate finance has been allocated to the green transition of food systems. Furthermore, [roughly \\$300 billion](#) is still needed annually to adapt to climate change, including support to food systems that are future-fit and environmentally sustainable.

In the coming years, the world will be increasingly hot and hungry, with nexus challenges defining stability, welfare and geopolitics. Recognizing that the world is now in an era of compound risks and polycrises, policymakers and shapers of multilateral governance must act now to shift the focus towards strategic assessment of systemic risks, breaking down silos, preventing redundant lines of effort and better integrating nexus approaches into their thinking and action.

Food as a threat multiplier and a foundational factor for sustainable security

Investments into food security are investments into global peace and resilient communities. As noted by [recent World Food Programme reporting](#), food insecurity is “predominantly driven by conflict, climate-related disasters and economic conditions”. Beyond climate-related impacts on food availability and crop yields, there is a strong [correlation](#) between hunger and conflict. The two are inextricably tied, with conflict driving hunger and vice versa. People living in conflict-affected areas are [three times more likely](#) to be undernourished, with breakdowns in governance and spikes in violence damaging food supply chains and disrupting markets. Conflicts often displace large portions of the population, cutting them off from existing food sources, straining local economies and causing spikes in acute hunger. Given today's interconnected food systems, even localized conflicts can have wide-reaching effects on global food security. Russia's war in Ukraine is a key example of this dynamic, as a European war that [affected food availability and prices](#) in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Beyond the short-term implications of conflict, food security is also a long-term challenge driven by a variety of development, security, governance and environmental factors. The impacts of climate change exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in the Global South as extreme weather events lower crop yields and put pressure on local economies. On the other side of

the coin are the effects of food production, consumption and distribution on climate change: modern food systems and eating habits are increasingly unsustainable, generating [a third of global greenhouse emissions](#).

Local food insecurity is a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing socioeconomic divides and driving populations to the point of violent conflict. Women, girls and small farmers are disproportionately affected by food insecurity and malnutrition. Rising prices and food shortages are interrelated with political instability, and hunger drives security risks, such as [land-grabbing in Africa](#), or [historic stockpiling](#). Lastly, food can be a powerful tool for violent non-state actors. Terrorist organizations like the Islamic State and Boko Haram [are known](#) to offer potential recruits food and money, and to control local agricultural resources in order to consolidate power.

Despite these security risks, food has traditionally been viewed as a humanitarian challenge, with a network of governments, NGOs and private sector donors working to close supply chain gaps and support populations impacted by hunger. These efforts have been critical in alleviating human suffering, with organizations like the UN World Food Programme (WFP) assisting 160 million people a year, a significant portion of the [783 million people](#) facing chronic hunger worldwide. However, the challenge is multidimensional and systemic. There is still work to be done to move beyond emergency responses and holistically address the hunger-climate-security nexus.

Interventions on the ground and the current operating environment

Interventions on the ground reflect these dynamics and showcase that hunger is not just a humanitarian issue, but a geopolitical challenge for security and diplomatic actors as well.

[Recent initiatives](#) that factor in hunger-climate-security interlinkages include:

- Western Sudan, where water security investments have contributed to reduced tensions between pastoralists;
- Colombia, where financial support and creation of rural job opportunities have interrupted pathways to conflict; and
- Pakistan, where agricultural improvements have helped communities resist extremist recruitment.

However, despite programs like these that demonstrate a growing recognition of these links, silos remain both within and between institutions working on food, climate and security. Humanitarian organizations and civil society actors on the ground are often strained for resources, balancing the interests of local populations and donor priorities, and working to connect short-term aid to long-term development goals. Security organizations are increasingly called to act outside their traditional warfighting capabilities, supporting humanitarian and disaster response operations and interacting with local stakeholders. This is a novelty, as in the past, the defense establishment saw hunger as outside its mandate. On the other side, development practitioners have only recently made the connection between the granular drivers of hunger and broader factors that contribute to peace and security. As a result, there is a divide both within different arms of major development agencies, as well as between civilian organizations and military operators. This has led to redundant lines of effort, prevented governments from leveraging “co-benefits” amidst limited funding, and most importantly,

served as a critical barrier to fully addressing the hunger-climate-security nexus.

Furthermore, as hunger and geopolitics intertwine, the humanitarian and security operating environments become increasingly complex. This has recently been demonstrated by the use of food as a weapon of war during Russia's war in Ukraine and how it has strained existing aid pathways, including the collapse of the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the divided attention of stakeholders as the conflict continues.

Geopolitics, food and climate increasingly align beyond Ukraine as well: climate change is affecting production in both [India](#) and [China](#), shifting the policymaking of two major world leaders and the food security of more than one third of the world's population. Meanwhile, countries in the Global South remain [disproportionately impacted](#) by climate shocks and [fluctuations](#) in global food prices, which potentially deepen their vulnerability to the weaponization of food for geopolitical competition. All these generate significant implications for the modus operandi of humanitarian, development and security actors, requiring them to adapt to this altered landscape.

Given these dynamics, the geopolitical implications of food must be integrated into future interventions and climate finance efforts. To do so effectively, development practitioners, multilateral actors and security institutions must learn from successful interventions and begin working in tandem.

Connecting diplomacy, development and defense: The way forward

First and foremost, it is critical that these actors develop a better understanding of the interplay between food security, climate risks, political instability and conflict – and the challenges this poses for sustainable security. Peace and security is multifaceted, and policy failures related to governance, development, climate, trade and economic policy ultimately lead to hunger, which then exacerbates security and climate risks through complex feedback loops. Such complexity necessitates integrated responses combining humanitarian aid, resilience and long-term development and peace perspectives. Investments in food security are not just humanitarian wins, but pay foreign policy dividends in terms of peace, security and climate action as well.

For a sustainable way out of the global food crisis and moving towards food systems that are conducive to international security, we need long-term investments, greater emphasis on resilience building, flexibility and multilateral action. Key lines of effort should include:

- **Recognizing food as a powerful predictive tool and a role for the national security community:** Food security is ultimately driven by geopolitics. Given the link between food and conflict, factors like crop yields, fluctuations in prices of staple goods, and national stockpiles can be indicators of hunger and conflict to come. An example of a missed opportunity to leverage security actors comes from the US: although the US security and defense sectors have the capacity to contribute to food insecurity early warning due to their field-based personnel and analytic capabilities, inter-agency food security efforts remain largely development- and diplomacy-focused and are plagued by long-standing silos between different policy areas. Governments and multilateral organizations must incentivize better cooperation and [include defense stakeholders](#) in interagency efforts.

- **Moving away from a donor-driven approach and investing in systemic responses:** Current food security programming is driven by global donors lacking a systemic approach. Some of this is a natural consequence of each institution's unique bureaucracy, priorities, expertise and culture. However, the status quo incentivizes competition over cooperation, consolidates silos and often implicitly [imposes](#) institutional approaches from rich countries onto poorer recipients – most of whom are in the Global South. It also perpetuates age-old disconnects between emergency response efforts run by larger agencies and long-term development approaches led by local partners. Adopting a systemic approach, improving coordination and fostering a truly locally led approach (both through the UN cluster system and with external actors) is the only way to durably support long-term security.
- **Disincentivizing policy silos and duplicative programming:** Policy silos between development, diplomatic and defense institutions will be challenging to bend and break. Within government, funding constraints and age-old turf wars tend to incentivize infighting and duplicity. Outside government, humanitarian organizations are wary of the politicization of aid and coordinating with hard security actors, while the military is often underprepared to include non-traditional challenges into its conception and operationalization of security. Despite these barriers, leaders must push for nexus approaches that address the underlying elements of the hunger-climate-security nexus.

Overall, fighting hunger and creating resilient food systems can serve as an area of opportunity for a divided and resource-constrained international community. Hot and hungry people are a warning sign for conflict to come, and mitigating these dynamics is a humanitarian and security imperative. Humanitarian and security actors alike must adapt now, break silos and adopt hunger-climate-security nexus thinking.

Additional resources:

- Nexus²⁵: [Food Security and Climate Migration. Multilateral Approaches to Complex Crises](#) (January 2023)
- WFP: [Dangerously Hungry. The Link Between Food Insecurity and Conflict](#) (April 2023)
- Center for Climate and Security: [Feeding Resilience: A Review of Policies at the Intersection of Climate Change, Food Security, and National Security Policy](#) (August 2023)

Nexus²⁵ is a joint project of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome and the Center for Climate and Security (CCS) in Washington, DC. The project, led by Dr. Nathalie Tocci at IAI, Erin Sikorsky at CCS and Dr. Michael Werz at the Center for American Progress (CAP), is funded by Stiftung Mercator in Germany. This discussion paper was written as input for the Nexus²⁵ side event at the 2024 Munich Security Conference, and was prepared by Siena Cicarelli, Asli Selin Okyay, Michael Werz, Erin Sikorsky, Luca Cinciripini and Nathalie Tocci.

In addition to the side event at the 2024 Munich Security Conference, Nexus²⁵ will host additional events on the sidelines of the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington, DC and a Conference in Rome in 2024. For additional information please visit <https://www.nexus25.org> or contact the Nexus²⁵ team at info@nexus25.org.

February 2024

Front cover: View from above of a small village near Bouteyni (Senegal), a local town with a market where shepherds and farmers sell their products.

Photo credit: Riccardo Venturi / Akronos

