

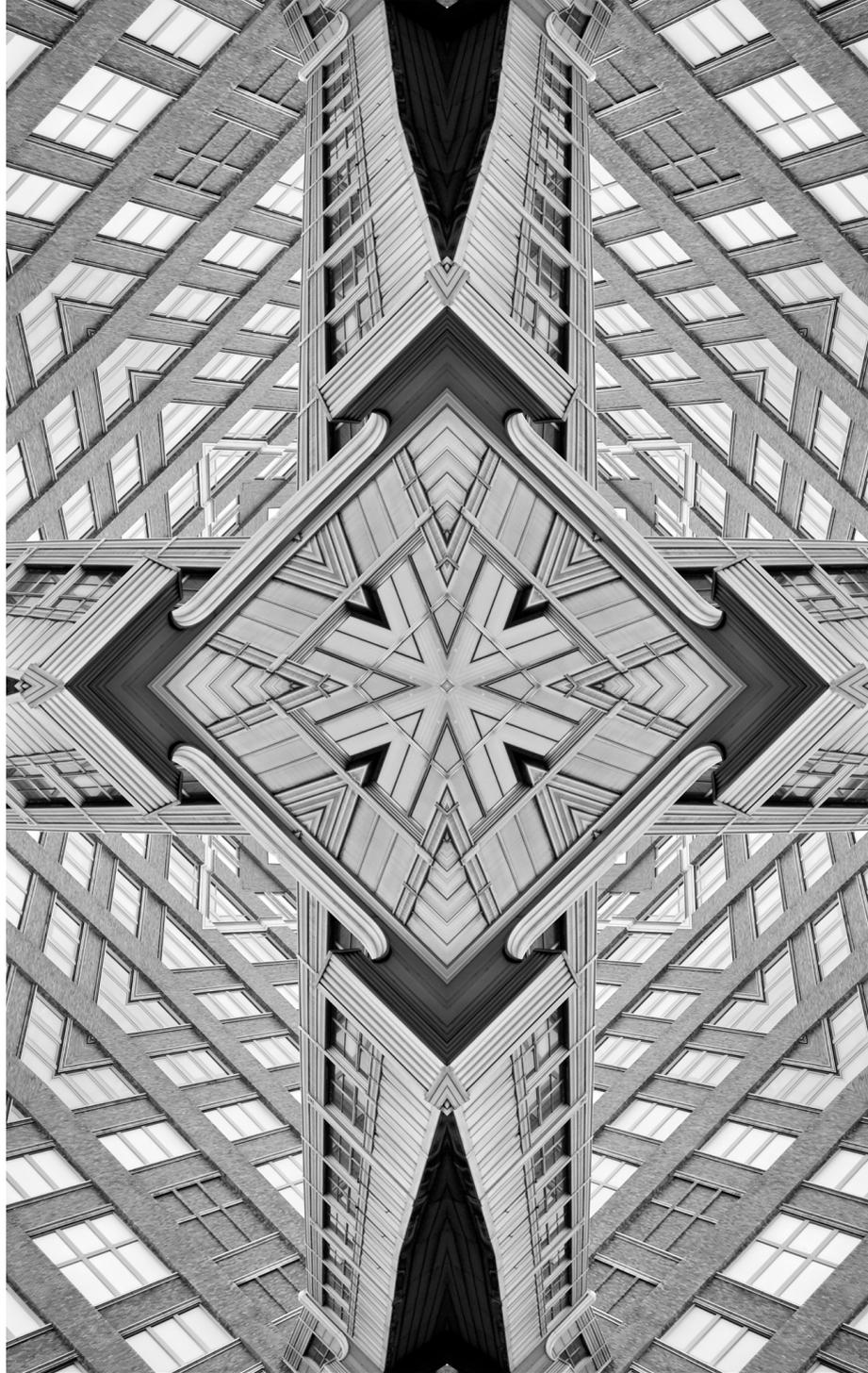
# Issue

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# Brief

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# The Enduring Link Between Conflict and Hunger in the 21st Century

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## **Abstract**

The economic consequences of the ongoing pandemic have pushed millions of people into hunger and poverty. Yet, in some parts of the world, critical levels of widespread hunger, or famine, had already made a resurgence long before the outbreak of COVID-19. This brief studies the famine-like situation in four countries in two continents—Yemen, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and North Korea—to demonstrate the direct link between conflicts and modern famines. The brief argues that the current global order will fail in preventing mass starvation unless it fulfils goals not only on ending hunger (SDG 2), but also those on promoting peace, justice, and institutions (SDG 16). Peacebuilding should be an essential component of the fight against hunger.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about massive economic and humanitarian crises across the globe: 4.7 million people have died,<sup>1</sup> economic activity has slowed, some 220 million people lost their livelihoods, and poverty and hunger are on the rise. Indeed, the pandemic has reversed many of the development gains of the earlier decades and threatens to undermine efforts towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The pandemic has led to severe and widespread increases in food insecurity globally.<sup>2</sup> Certain populations in developed countries have also become food insecure due to reduced incomes, higher food prices,<sup>a</sup> and disrupted supply chains. Experts warn that hunger is likely to increase in over 20 countries unless relief operations are immediately scaled up,<sup>3</sup> even as between 720 and 811 million people faced hunger in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Some years prior, however, hunger had already begun to increase again after nearly two decades of consistent decline, and the world was nowhere near the target of eliminating extreme hunger even in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Famines<sup>b</sup> also made a comeback. In 2017, a famine was declared in South Sudan while Yemen, Somalia, and northeast Nigeria were on the brink.<sup>6</sup> Analysts attributed the famine-like situation in these countries to climate change and conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Poverty may be regarded as the main cause of hunger and undernutrition. However, as economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen observed, famines are characterised by populations not having enough to eat, and not by lack of food. Central to his thesis on famines was what he referred to as “entitlement failures”.<sup>c</sup> Sen stressed the role of democracies and adversarial politics in protecting the entitlements of the people, and conversely, how wars and military activities destroy these entitlements.<sup>8</sup> For their part, British political scientist Jenny Edkins, and anthropologist Alex de Waal, approach famines from a political

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a The Agricultural Commodity Price Index is at its highest level since 2013 currently.

b The UN and food organisations define ‘famine’ as a situation when at least 20% of the households in a country face extreme food shortages, more than 30% of the children under age five suffer from acute malnutrition, and mortality rates are two or more deaths per 10,000 persons every day. Other symptoms include widespread destitution, outbreak of diseases, social collapse, and large-scale displacement.

c Entitlements are the set of commodity bundles over which a household can establish operative control.

perspective. They both emphasise that the question of “who” caused a famine is more important than “what” caused it, as groups of people gain from episodes of mass starvation during conflicts.<sup>9,10</sup> Edkins and De Waal argue that states in conflict zones are often repressive and starve their own populations by denying them food. Modern famines are, therefore, crimes committed by political leaders or powerful groups, who should be made accountable by law.

Indian sociologist Amrita Rangasami, meanwhile, argues that famines should not be viewed as sudden collapses into starvation eventually leading to deaths.<sup>11</sup> Instead, attention must be devoted to studying the intervals between two famines to understand the reasons why famines recur in some countries. Her work is particularly helpful in understanding the case of many African countries that suffer from recurrent famines and droughts. Anthropologists Mamadou Baro and Tara F Deubel (2006), in their work, emphasise the structural vulnerabilities that impair the ability of African households to absorb shocks.<sup>12</sup> This approach is more appropriate for extremely poor countries mired in endemic poverty, low agricultural productivity, and are famine-prone. On similar lines, anthropologist William I Torry (1984) has observed that famine-affected people experience famine as merely a part of a long continuum of hardships.<sup>13</sup> His argument against the use of anthropometric measures of famine is particularly relevant because often, political considerations dictate the declaration of a famine even as it is clear that the population is already clearly suffering. Moreover, the declaration of a famine has technical requirements for which, often, data is largely absent especially in conflict zones.

This brief revisits the theory of a direct link between conflicts and famines—where conflicts invariably lead to entitlement failures and impair the capabilities of the underlying populations to address hunger. It argues that famines in these contemporary times are a direct result of conflict, with climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic compounding the challenges. The brief draws heavily from the works of Amartya Sen, Jenny Edkins, and Alex de Waal. The hypothesis of this brief differs from Homer-Dixon’s, which argues that environmental scarcities such as fertile agricultural land, forests, rivers and aquifers lead to violent conflicts in many developing countries. Homer-Dixon argues that environmental scarcities lead to violent conflicts that increase the demands on key institutions, notably the state, and reduce their capacity to meet

the demands of the people which in turn could lead to a fragmentation of the state or make it more authoritarian.<sup>14</sup> He also argues that poor countries are likely to be worse affected because they are less capable of protecting themselves from environmental scarcities and the consequent social crises.

This brief analyses the famine-like situation prevalent in four countries—Yemen, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and North Korea—which are experiencing high levels of hunger, and prolonged conflicts. The brief argues that the global institutional order will fail in preventing the incidence of mass starvation if they continue to view as separate goals, SDG 2 (ending hunger in all forms) and SDG 16 (building peace, justice, and institutions). Rather, peacebuilding should be an essential component of the fight against hunger.

“Modern famines are a direct result of conflict; climate change and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic are compounding the challenges.”

# Theoretical Framework: Conflict and Famine

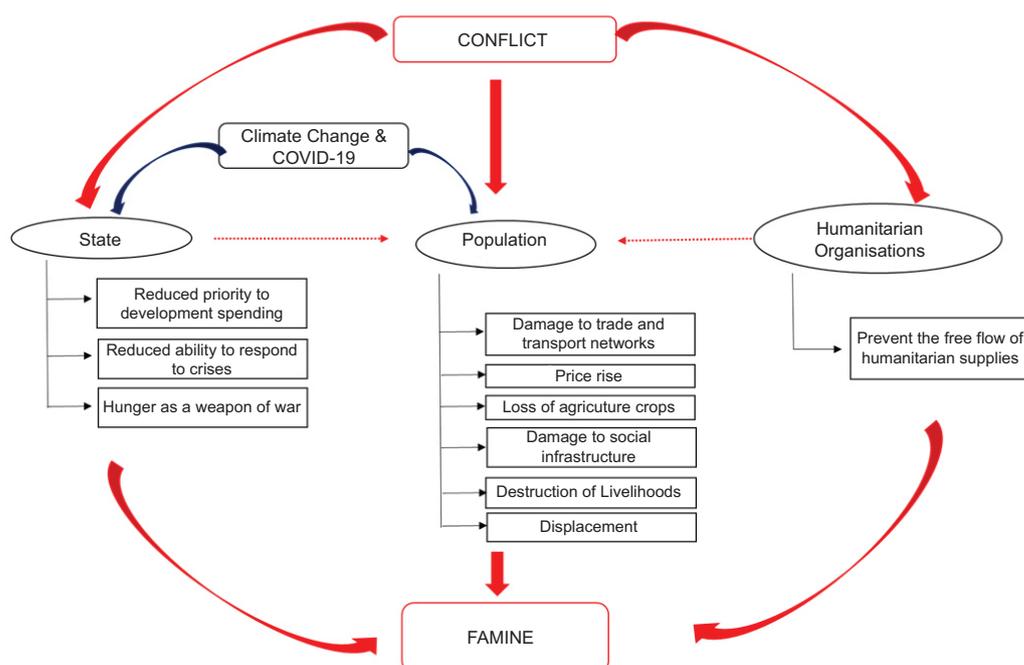
The numbers of people who die in famines have declined dramatically since the Second World War,<sup>15</sup> owing primarily to heightened humanitarian response and, specifically, rapid improvements in transportation networks that facilitate such relief efforts. Significant advances also occurred in famine prediction. For instance, the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) has been aiding humanitarian efforts since 1985 by monitoring and predicting food insecurity. At the same time, as Bailey (2013) has noted, famine early warning systems may be effective at predicting food crises, while not necessarily triggering early action.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, too, there is surplus of food grains globally. With well-developed transportation networks as mentioned earlier, food can relatively be easily moved from surplus regions to those that are deficient to protect the vulnerable populations. For these reasons, famines are widely considered to be an unlikely occurrence in the modern world. However, since 2017, there has been a re-emergence of famines in certain regions due mainly to the rise in conflicts in those areas, which in turn cause institutions to fail.

Figure 1 illustrates the causal links between conflicts and famines. Conflicts not only adversely affect the population but also the state and humanitarian organisations (*in bold red lines*) and undermine their ability to prevent humanitarian crises (*refer to dotted red lines*). Wars and conflicts typically damage trade and transport networks, leading to loss of livelihoods and a rapid increase in the price of essential commodities such as food.

# Theoretical Framework: Conflict and Famine

**Figure 1:  
Causal link between conflict and  
famine**



Source: Author's own

People living in conflict zones are often displaced from their homes and forced to live in refugee camps in difficult, cramped, and unhygienic conditions. Displacement from homes also damages people's livelihood prospects, thereby increasing their food insecurity. As social infrastructures are damaged during conflicts—including health systems, drinking water supply, and education services—this compounds the distress of the populations.

Conflicts also affect the state and humanitarian agencies and impair their ability to address the needs of the people. Groups involved in relief and rehabilitation are unable to do their work amongst the vulnerable populations because the chaos hampers their mobility; the looting of supplies is also rampant.

# Theoretical Framework: Conflict and Famine

Wars and conflicts lead to reduced development spending as the government directs greater resources to military expenditure. The economic distress, damaged infrastructure, and the loss of lives, in turn, undermine the state's ability to function effectively and address the needs of their population. Moreover, unlike in liberal democracies where the state is accountable to its people, in the conflict zones studied in this brief, it is not uncommon for the state to turn against its citizens or specific groups within the country and use hunger as a weapon in the war. The Ethiopian case study explored later in the brief explores this in detail.

In the more recent years, climate change has been an additional stressor for people in conflict zones (*see blue lines in Figure 1*). Similarly, in the past one-and-a-half years, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the cascading challenges. These two events compound the institutional failures. A contrasting example is Australia: even as global warming has increased the frequency and intensity of droughts in the country, it is not being threatened by famine-like conditions. This could be attributed to the intervention of the government to work on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Similarly, even as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to large-scale job losses in certain developed countries, the presence of social safety nets has prevented a massive crisis from threatening overall food security.

These cases illustrate the argument of Amartya Sen about the role of institutions, particularly the state, in preventing famines. In conflict zones, the state often does not play a constructive role. Instead it underplays or hides the crisis, misuses humanitarian relief, and wields hunger as a weapon of war.

## Yemen

Yemen can be regarded as the world's worst humanitarian crisis in recent times: nearly 24 million people or roughly 80 percent of its population are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>17</sup> The crisis in Yemen is the result of the long-drawn conflict between allies of the internationally recognised government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi (the Saudi-led coalition) and the Houthi rebel movement—this started in 2015. The country's economy has collapsed, tens of thousands of civilians have been killed or maimed, essential infrastructure has been damaged, and the people have been living under extreme food insecurity. The closure of schools and hospitals has deprived people, especially the children, access to essential services. About 2.3 million children under five years of age<sup>18</sup> are suffering from acute malnutrition and more than 4 million people<sup>19</sup> have been displaced since 2015. By all indications, the country has been living in famine-like conditions since 2016.

There is no comprehensive political settlement to the conflict yet in the horizon. In 2020, the conflict intensified, and by December that year, pockets of famine-like conditions (IPC Phase 5)<sup>d</sup> returned.<sup>20</sup> Nearly 16.2 million people are expected to go hungry this year (IPC Phase 3<sup>c</sup>) out of which 5 million and 50,000 people are in IPC Phase 4<sup>f</sup> and IPC phase 5, respectively.<sup>21</sup> The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that 20.7 million Yemenis or 66 percent of the population need humanitarian assistance; of them, 12.1 million people are in acute need.<sup>22</sup>

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- d Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) is an internationally accepted five-phase classification of food emergencies. Phase 5 is regarded as 'Famine'. Areas under 'famine' conditions face extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality. Following technical requirements need to be met for an area to be described under 'famine' conditions: 1. At least 25 percent of households met at least 25 percent of their caloric requirements through humanitarian food assistance 2. At least 25 percent of households met at least 50 percent of their caloric requirements through humanitarian food assistance 3. Phase classification would likely be at least one phase worse without current or programmed humanitarian food assistance.
  - e Phase 3 is 'Crisis' level of food insecurity wherein households either have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition or are marginally able to meet minimum food needs following the depletion of essential livelihood assets.
  - f Phase 4 is an 'Emergency' wherein households face large food consumption gaps reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality or are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.

In March 2021, the Humanitarian Country Team in Yemen appealed for US\$ 3.85 billion in international aid.<sup>23</sup> According to UNICEF, the situation is “catastrophic.”<sup>24</sup> Earlier, in 2017 and in 2019, the international community came together to assist Yemen with then-unprecedented levels of humanitarian assistance and succeeded in preventing a famine from occurring. Today the country stands as the worst example of mass starvation in contemporary times.

Unlike in 2017 or 2019, however, there is greater awareness that humanitarian assistance alone will not guarantee that extreme hunger and famine-like conditions will no longer revisit Yemen. As the Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Qu Dong, has said: “Keeping people alive by maintaining the flow of food is imperative, but this cycle cannot continue forever. Yemen needs a cessation of conflict, which is the primary driver of food insecurity in the country. Yemeni families need stability and security – and livelihood assistance to help them resume normal food production, so that they require less external support, and can build more resilient and self-sufficient food systems.”<sup>25</sup>

### **South Sudan**

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has declared that South Sudan is witnessing the highest level of food insecurity it has ever experienced since its independence in 2011.<sup>26</sup> Nearly 60 percent of its 11.2 million people are hungry, and the UN estimates that about 8.3 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance – an increase of some 800,000 from just 2020.<sup>27</sup> The famine-like conditions in South Sudan are not a sudden occurrence. South Sudan has been experiencing extreme deprivation and hunger since its inception as an independent country—a direct outcome of the protracted conflict that has afflicted the country since 2013, when civil war broke out. More than 400,000 persons have been killed since,<sup>28</sup> and 1.6 million, displaced.<sup>29</sup>

Years of conflict have led to the severe depletion of assets and livelihoods, and the South Sudanese people do not have the capability to absorb shocks. The civil war and the subsequent inter-communal fighting have massively impacted the lives of children, in particular, who are denied access to food, education, health services, and safety and security. More than 65 percent of the displaced population in the country are under 18.<sup>30</sup>

In 2017, famine was declared in two counties of the Unity state which was home to nearly 100,000 people.<sup>31</sup> The famine of 2017 was widely regarded as “government made”: during the armed conflict between government forces loyal to President Salwa Kiir and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army led by Riek Machar, government forces denied the people humanitarian relief and killed many of them.<sup>32</sup> The current crisis, meanwhile, can be traced to more localised acts of violence, led by community leaders, which have engulfed many parts of the country. This, even after President Kiir and Vice President Machar, engaged in armed conflict since 2013, signed a peace agreement in 2018. The peace deal has not led to peace, nor has it resulted in any improvement in the material conditions of the South Sudanese people.

To be sure, fighting between troops loyal to Kiir and those of Machar has ebbed. However, the political elites of Juba, the Sudanese capital, continue to stir violence in many parts of the country.<sup>33</sup> Sudanese youth, who had earlier participated in the civil war have returned to their communities. Without food and livelihoods, these young people have resorted to looting and plundering, and other acts of violence.<sup>34</sup> There are reports of community militias randomly attacking people, burning crops, abducting children, and stealing their cattle.<sup>35</sup>

The heightening violence in the Equatoria region, which is the country’s bread basket, has not only killed many people and forced families to flee their homes, but has also prevented farmers from working their land. Violence has erupted in other regions such as Upper Nile, primarily the result of boundary changes and competition for local resources. The move to convert Pibor, a region dominated by members of the ethnic group Murle, into an administrative unit has led to conflict with leaders in Jonglei because the region is rich in gold and oil.<sup>36</sup>

Compounding the people’s food insecurity is the frequent episodes of flooding. Nearly 90,000 people were affected by flooding brought about by torrential rains in 2020 and 2021, which destroyed homes and farming activity in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Unity, Upper Nile, and Warrap states of South Sudan.<sup>37</sup>

Although the IPC’s Famine Review Committee found evidence of famine in the Pibor region of the country and identified the condition as “famine likely”, the Sudanese government has decided to downplay the crisis.<sup>38</sup> The release of the IPC report in November 2020 led to a standoff between the IPC Review

Committee and the government, which came out with its own report that does not mention famine. According to the government, “only” 11,000 people were experiencing “catastrophic hunger”, a fraction of the figure from IPC at 100,000.<sup>39</sup>

Falling oil prices and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has left the Sudanese government with limited funds to implement the peace agreement and there is widespread public discontent. Foreign donors have also shied away from directly funding the peace agreement. Already, there are allegations of misappropriation of funds allocated for implementation of the peace agreement.<sup>40</sup> Fundamental aspects of the peace agreement have not been implemented and there is mutual distrust between the president and vice president. The Sudanese people are also questioning the commitment of the government to the peace agreement, to begin with. A report by the country’s National Dialogue Steering Committee that gathered the views of ordinary Sudanese called on both leaders to resign before the elections in 2023 as they have neither the moral authority nor the political will to pursue the conditions of the peace deal.<sup>41</sup>

There are various obstacles to the implementation of the peace agreement, among them: the formation of an army uniting the government and former opposition forces, and the number of states the country will be divided into and where their boundaries should lie.<sup>42</sup> Several opposition soldiers—i.e. soldiers who were fighting for Riek Machar during the civil war—are dying of starvation in the cantonments as they wait to join a unified national army. At least 77 starvation deaths have been reported among the opposition soldiers.<sup>43</sup>

The government has also introduced numerous administrative hurdles which are preventing the smooth flow of food aid.<sup>44</sup> Continuous violence, looting of food convoys,<sup>45</sup> and crippled infrastructure hamper the work of humanitarian agencies and prevent them from reaching those in need.

Indeed, South Sudan is one of the most difficult and unsafe countries for humanitarians as 128 aid workers have been killed across the country since the outbreak of the civil war in 2013. Four aid workers have so far been killed in 2021.<sup>46</sup> Much like in Yemen, the protracted conflict in South Sudan has caused

the prolonged famine-like conditions in the country. While the peace agreement of 2019 led to an end of the decade-old civil war, political leaders continue to be at odds, and violence has not abated.

## Ethiopia

The Tigray region of Ethiopia is in the throes of another massive famine. In the last famine in 1984, it is estimated that some one million people lost their lives.<sup>47</sup> The current famine is the direct outcome of the conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. About 400,000 people are already living in famine conditions, and another 1.8 million people are on the brink.<sup>48</sup> The Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, a Nobel peace laureate, stands at the heart of the crisis; he is widely accused of using hunger as a weapon of war. The conflict started in November 2020 when the Ethiopian government launched a military offensive in Tigray after months of feuding between Abiy Ahmed and the leaders of Tigray's dominant political party, Tigray People's Liberation Front. The military offensive escalated into a wider war and the ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans.<sup>49</sup> A famine is unfolding in the region due to continuous killing of civilians and the use of starvation as a tool of war.<sup>50</sup>

The Ethiopian and Eritrean armies are blocking convoys of food and medicine, burning grain stores, slaughtering oxen, and preventing farmers from tilling their land.<sup>51</sup> The Ethiopian government also closed the airspace over Tigray in June 2021. Though the decision was reversed under pressure, it is unclear whether organisations like the World Food Programme will get access to conduct relief operations.

Like the South Sudanese government, the Ethiopian Prime Minister has categorically denied that there is hunger in Tigray and promised to provide access to humanitarian agencies.<sup>52</sup> However, given the severity of the crisis that the region is facing, sporadic access to humanitarian agencies will not address the famine.

## North Korea

North Korea is a country that is more known for its military programme and is largely absent from global conversations about development. However, the people of North Korea have experienced famines in the past. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent cuts in foreign aid, the country experienced a severe famine in the 1990s. While the exact number of deaths is not known, United States Congressional Staffers estimate that about 900,000 to 2.4 million North Koreans died of hunger between 1995 and 1998.<sup>53</sup>

Nutrition levels in North Korea improved after the famine years and the incidence of childhood wasting in the mid-2000s was lower than in other low-income countries. This was despite poor economic conditions, the absence of a food public distribution system, and a decline in foreign aid.<sup>54</sup> Table 1 shows that stunting and wasting levels in North Korea declined significantly from 62.3 percent and 16.6 percent in 1998 to 27.9 percent and 4 percent, respectively.

**Table 1:**  
**Levels of Stunting and Wasting (in %) in North Korea, 1998-2012**

	1998	2000	2002	2004	2009	2012
Stunting	62.3	45.2	41.6	37	32.4	27.9
Wasting	16.6	10.4	8.5	7	5.2	4

Source: Smith (2016)<sup>55</sup>

The country is once again facing extreme hunger and famine-like conditions. In an address in June 2021, North Korean President, Kim Jong Un acknowledged the severity of the incidence of hunger and asked his people to prepare for another “arduous march”.<sup>5</sup> Prices of staples such as rice and corn have increased by 1.7 times and 2.4 times, respectively in less than a month’s time between May 28 and June 15.<sup>56,57</sup> As a result, undernutrition has become prevalent.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>g</sup> ‘Arduous March’ refers to the famine years of the 1990s

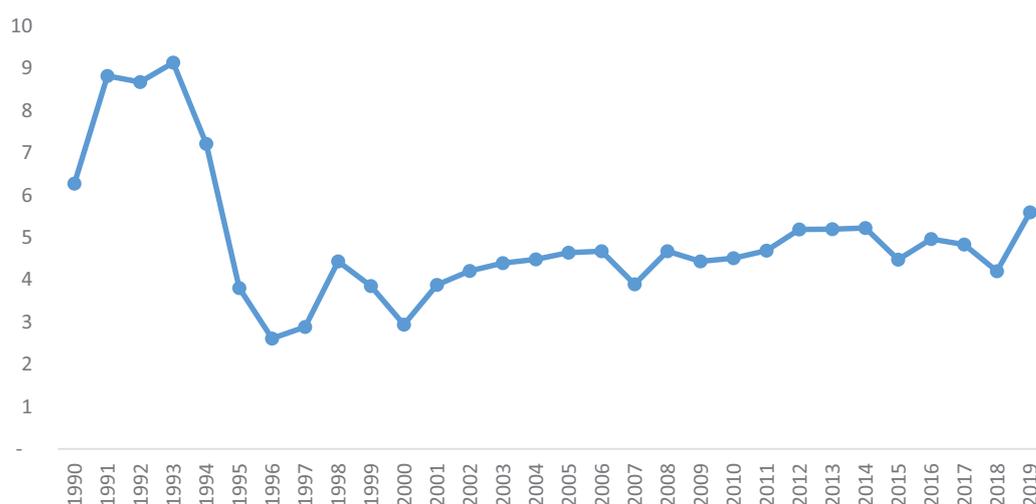
Accurate data about conditions in North Korea are difficult to find. The country is under an authoritarian regime, and all international organisations that might have been able to provide information, have left the country. According to a June 2021 survey by Asia Press, a collective of independent journalists, nearly 30 percent of the households in one farm in North Hamkung Province and 50 percent of households in a farm in Ryanggang Province were “food insecure”.<sup>59</sup>

North Korean authorities have instituted price controls and announced the decision to sell corn and prices lower than the market in official grain marketing centres. However, the efforts of the government to institute price controls have proven to be largely ineffective.<sup>60</sup> About 5-7 kilograms of corn each were distributed to registered households in some areas in the months of June and July 2021.<sup>61</sup>

The precipitating crisis in North Korea can be attributed to the end of trading with China as a result of restrictions imposed by the authorities to control the spread of COVID-19. However, North Korea is a complex country. To understand the current crisis, it is important to take into account its history, the nature of agricultural production, and the imposition of UN sanctions for its nuclear programme. In particular, the famine of the 1990s offers clues to understanding the present situation.

Even as undernutrition declined in the post-famine years, agricultural production did not increase significantly. The production of cereals in fact dropped from 9.1 million tonnes in 1993 to 2.6 million tonnes in a short span of three years (See Figure 2). While production picked up in the next few years, cereal production at 5.6 million tonnes was much lower than the peak in 1993 as shown in Figure 2. The country is chronically deficient in food grains and the total utilisation of food exceeds availability. The country is under comprehensive UN sanctions and its only trade partner is China, on which it is dependent for food and fuel imports, as well as aid. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates the country’s food gap at 858, 000 tonnes.<sup>62</sup>

**Figure 2:**  
**Production of cereals in North Korea**  
**(in '000 tonnes) from 1990 to 2019**



Source: FAOSTAT

North Korean agriculture is extremely dependent on crude oil and the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council have severely limited the ability of the country to purchase fuel. Since 2006, the country has faced international sanctions. In September 2017, the UNSC imposed new sanctions on North Korea which included a ban on the sale of crude oil to the country and on its textile exports; countries are also prohibited from providing work authorisations to its nationals.<sup>63</sup> The sanctions are meant to pressure the North Korean government to return to the denuclearisation debate but they have failed to stop the country's military and nuclear ambitions. At the same time, because of the sanctions, there is shortage of fuel, thereby impacting agriculture and other sectors.

Smith (2020) calls the comprehensive UN sanctions against North Korea imposed in 2017 "unjust".<sup>64</sup> She argues that the expanded sanctions failed to distinguish between military and civilian economies and led to a fall in the agricultural production.

There are important similarities in the hunger experiences of the people of Yemen, South Sudan, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia: there is prolonged conflict, which have caused institutions to fail, including those whose task it is to ensure that there is food to eat. Though droughts are common in both South Sudan and Ethiopia, and they have contributed to the challenges in agriculture, the blame is primarily on man-made conflicts. In these countries, the affected populations suffer from the direct economic consequences of fighting: death of the breadwinner, displacement from their home, loss of livelihoods, damage to crops, inability to sow crops due to displacement, damaged capital and infrastructure, and rise in prices of essential commodities.

Unlike in democracies where institutions are functioning as they should, the governments in the countries analysed in this brief do not actively engage themselves with famine prevention. The South Sudanese government, for example, chooses to downplay the crisis and refuses to fund the implementation of a peace deal between the warring rebels and state forces. The Ethiopian government, for its part, is accused of creating the famine in Tigray by preventing the flow of food and essential goods in the region.

Historically, humanitarian aid has been the lifeline for most people in these conflict-ridden countries. The question is how effective such aid is. To prevent famines, international organisations are calling for more resources to expand the scale of humanitarian action and improve access to the most vulnerable groups. Aid often does not reach its intended beneficiaries and is often looted by armed groups and soldiers controlling the regions. Human rights abuses and gross violation of international humanitarian law is common and hunger is often one of the weapons of warring parties. Under such circumstances, an approach to famine prevention that relies on humanitarian operations alone will continue to be ineffective, without addressing the underlying cause of the massive hunger—i.e. conflict.

Moreover, should preventing a famine be the focus of the international community, or eliminating hunger *per se*? As discussed in this brief, the declaration of a “famine” is based on certain technical criteria, for which data is often unavailable. For example, significant resources have been spent on preventing famines in Yemen and South Sudan since 2016. While there has

been no official declaration of famine in these countries, the populations in these countries have been suffering severe hunger. A corollary issue is that humanitarian aid could even prolong a conflict by supporting political leaders who have an interest in prolonging the strife and misappropriate aid for their own benefit.<sup>65</sup>

Yemen, South Sudan, and Tigray offer the same lesson: that countries in conflict do not need aid; rather they need peacebuilding in order to find an end to their famine-like conditions. Ending hunger (SDG 2<sup>h</sup>) will not be possible without genuine peace (SDG 16). Greater resources should be deployed to efforts towards peacebuilding and finding political resolutions to discord, rather than to immediate, short-term relief operations.

North Korea's case is different, as it is still technically at war, and the leadership prioritises military ambitions over development. Its leader is not threatened by the prospect of famine given that there is no political opposition and the people do not have the democratic means to resist. The country fits the problematisation set by Amartya Sen: "The ability to prevent famines exists widely across the world. However, it is remarkable how often this power is left unused. The governments may lack the political incentive to provide this protection if they feel unthreatened by the prospects of a famine."<sup>66</sup> While the North Korean government's military pursuit at the cost of human development lies at the root of the crisis, the UN cannot be a bystander as millions starve in the country. The UN sanctions have played an important role in causing famine-like conditions in the country without denting the military pursuits of the regime. The UN sanctions must be lifted.

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<sup>h</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

# Conclusion

**F**amines, which in popular thought is relegated to a footnote in history, have re-emerged in recent years because of prolonged armed conflicts. This author has earlier argued that the global Zero-hunger goal cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, its links to other SDGs must be acknowledged—in particular, peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).<sup>67</sup> The international community must work towards political solutions to conflicts in Yemen, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, as well as climate adaptation measures especially in developing countries.

The lessons drawn from the hunger experiences in these four countries are applicable in other conflict-ridden regions of the world. Peacebuilding is key to a hunger-free world. 

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