

Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

Averting and preventing Famine: A New Approach

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Abstract

This article presents the case for a new approach to averting and preventing famine, given that rising numbers and recurrence demonstrate that we, as a global community, have not managed to eradicate what is essentially manmade. The article considers trends in famine and its measurement and breaks down the components that lead to famine as a basis for considering new approaches. Finally, the article presents a structure that could support a holistic and coherent approach to averting and preventing famine.

Context and Background¹

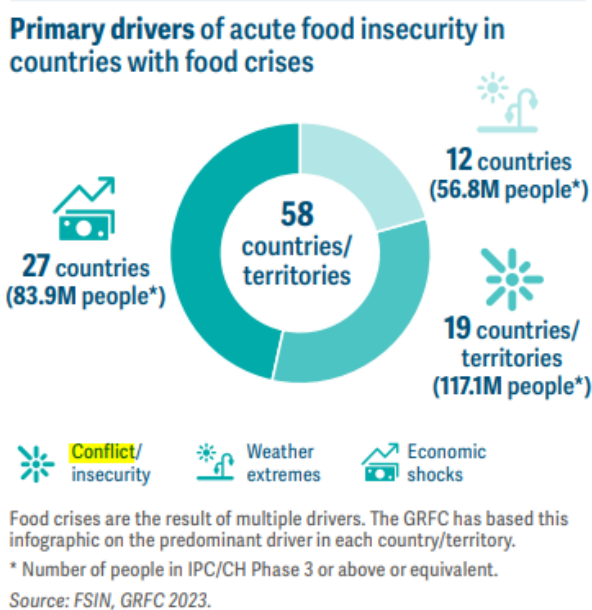
The most recent Global Report on Food Crises (at the time of writing) estimated that over a quarter of a billion people were acutely food insecure and required urgent food assistance. While figures took into account the war in Ukraine, they did not include the current crises in Gaza, yet this estimate already represented the highest number in the history of the report. The report opens by indicating that the goal of ‘Zero Hunger’ SDG2 remains ever more challenging as those subject to acute food insecurity² steadily increases. UN Secretary-General António Guterres wrote in the report’s foreword that the seventh edition of the report “is a stinging indictment of humanity’s failure to make progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 2 to end hunger and achieve food

¹ The authors draw on the work and research of Johanna Green, Programme & Policy Officer, Juan Gonzalo Jaramillo Mejia, Social Protection Officer and Deborah Yohendran, Programme Policy Officer of the World Food Programme.

² Acute food insecurity is when a person's inability to consume adequate food puts their lives or livelihoods in immediate danger. It draws on internationally accepted measures of acute hunger, such as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and the Cadre Harmonisé (CH). It is not the same as chronic hunger, as reported on each year by the UN's annual State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report. Chronic hunger is when a person is unable to consume enough food over an extended period to maintain a normal, active lifestyle. (World Food Programme [Global report on food crises: Number of people facing acute food insecurity rose to 258 million in 58 countries in 2022](#) | [World Food Programme \(wfp.org\)](#))

security and improved nutrition for all.” The SG rightly indicates responsibility lies with mankind as the primary driver of these numbers remains conflict.

More than 40 percent of the population in acute food insecurity resided in just five countries– the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Yemen. People in seven countries faced an extreme lack of food, namely Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Haiti, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. All are countries in conflict and with increasing governance deficits. Further, the report informs of the impact of the war in Ukraine on the global food system, given the significant contribution of Ukraine and the Russian Federation to fuel fertilizer and key foods (wheat, maize, sunflower oil). The ripple effect of the war on the higher cost of food globally came at the same time as countries faced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, the most fragile countries that rely heavily on imported food. Combined with 'weather-related shocks' and global regress in democracy and multilateralism, these are the four key drivers of food insecurity, and while these drivers interrelate with each other and exacerbate the severity of hunger, the key reason for increasing level of destitution remains manmade conflict caused by autocratic regimes.



There are different levels of severity within the spectrum of hunger. The most extreme is that of 'famine,' as referred to by experts as Level 5 in the Integrated Phased Classification (IPC) system. It takes time to reach this point, yet at the time of writing, IPC experts announce that 'with reasonable

evidence' northern Gaza will experience famine by the end of May 2024 as the necessary conditions to prevent famine have yet to be met. Warnings were issued in December 2023, yet the latest information states that 'during the projection period (mid-March to mid-July 2024), in the most likely scenario and under the assumption of an escalation of the conflict, half of the population of the Gaza Strip (1.11 million people) is expected to face catastrophic conditions (IPC Phase 5), the most severe level in the IPC Acute Food Insecurity scale."³

Similar warnings have been issued for Sudan, which hosts the largest number of internally displaced persons in the world, some 6.5 million people. Here, ten percent of the population, 4.9 million people are in the Emergency Phase of the IPC classification and predicted to slip into IPC 5 if conflict and instability continue.

These figures represent the deterioration in the first quarter of 2024; however, when looking at the trends over time, the Global Network's "Famine and Protracted Emergency IPC/CH Analysis."⁴ covering last year cites four countries, Burkina Faso, Mali, South Sudan, and Somalia, as having a total population of 128,600 persons in famine. These countries are not only in conflict but have low and deteriorating levels of governance indicators⁵. The increase is staggering.

³ [Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for 15 February - 15 March 2024 and Projection for 16 March - 15 July 2024 | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(ipcinform.org\)](#)

⁴ [GN_Famine_Emergency_IPCCH_Jan2024_final.pdf \(fightfoodcrises.net\)](#)

⁵ <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/iag>

Given famine is manmade, a rethink of solutions and actions that can stem this deterioration, beyond the critical cessation of hostilities, is urgently needed. It is against this backdrop that the following proposal is outlined for consideration.

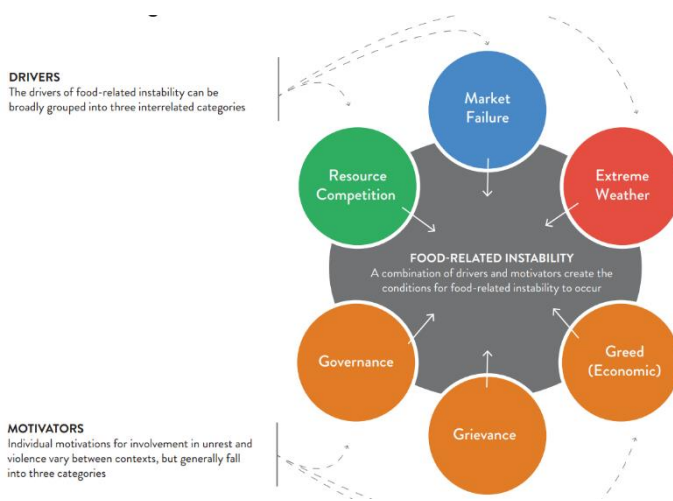
Main Challenges & Considerations

a. It is often too late, and the only option left to the humanitarian community to save lives that are already bearing the brunt of famine is humanitarian assistance, particularly emergency food assistance. Despite a steady and significant increase in humanitarian assistance over the past years (since 2000), levels of acute food insecurity are outpacing financial allocations. According to the Global Network Against Food Crises' Financing Flows and Food Crises Report 2023, "Humanitarian financing witnessed a significant increase of 52 percent from 2021, peaking at over USD 15 billion in 2022. Yet acute food insecurity continued to escalate..." It is clear that emergency food assistance alone cannot abate the trend of rising acute food insecurity.

b. The protracted nature of food insecurity in almost all of the countries experiencing IPC 5 or famine indicates a recurrence that warrants a deeper understanding of hunger in the country. An understanding not just of the drivers of hunger but also the structural or root causes of hunger, which are different and more deeply entrenched in the governance and access to resources by populations, is critical. Together, they provide a more precise picture of the problem and, therefore, a more accurate departure for designing and implementing solutions. In this context, it is important to differentiate famine from acute food crises; although famines can be triggered by drought or climate shocks, food crises do not often develop into famine conditions unless exacerbated by adverse human and

political actions or inactions that cause comprehensive failures of food systems and policies to protect livelihoods and respond to shocks.

In a noteworthy review of the literature⁶ on food insecurity and instability, Dr Sovo states that all modern conflicts can be brought together around six common factors. Three drivers, namely *market failure* evidenced through spikes in food prices, food price uncertainty, and volatility, which are often linked to social unrest and seen mostly in countries who rely heavily on imports; *resource competition*, especially over land and



water when these are insufficient to sustain agricultural livelihoods and also seen through state-run redistribution measures, poor land tenure laws, and land grabs; and where market failures and

resource competition are driven by 'short term variations in weather and climate creating desperate conditions for individuals, especially in the developing world, whose primary occupation is growing food.' Three motivators center around *inequalities* when food insecurity surfaces societal divisions and tensions; *economic* motivation where instability is seen to provide a greater economic return than non-action and finally *governance* where the state has failed its populations in providing food security.

c. Only when fully understanding the deep-seated reasons for a country facing extreme hunger can solutions be developed to address food crises differently and

⁶ Winning the Peace, Food Security and instability, 2017

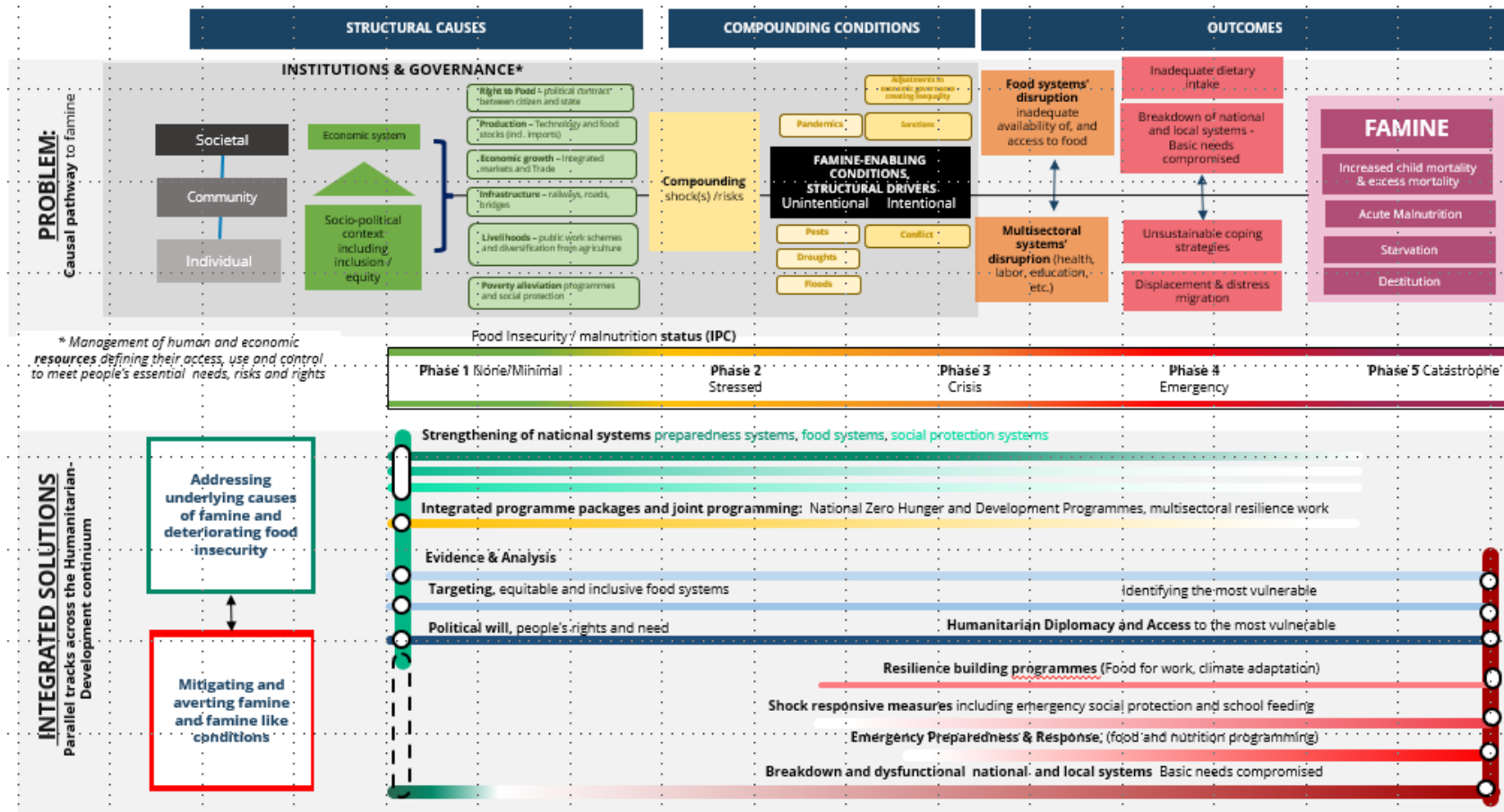
permanently. As such, addressing immediate needs to respond to and avert famine must be coupled with preventative action. The option of not investing to prevent deterioration into acute food insecurity and, eventually, famine should not be a choice, especially when the drivers and root causes of famine are evident in certain contexts. This is critical not only to protect lives and livelihoods from the worst effects of famine conditions but also to avoid incurring significantly higher humanitarian costs of operations that occur in famine/(-like) conditions- in terms of lives and donor resources.

d. Beyond responding to acute food insecurity, actions to prevent famine conditions require sequenced and multi-sectoral coordinated interventions, programming, and political actions that address a complex range of factors. Moreover, such actions require multi-sectoral, whole-of-society participation that directly tackles underlying drivers and structural causes of hunger, alongside enhanced political will and advocacy mechanisms for strengthened accountability. This is outlined in the proposed Famine Prevention and Response Framework developed by the United Nations World Food Programme.

In outlining the pathway to prevent famine, it correspondingly proposes integrated solutions that span a number of areas that do not traditionally fall within one organizational mandate. As such, to prevent famine we require strong and innovative ‘trilateral cooperation’ where member states, international organisations, civil society, private sector, private philanthropy and academia that cover humanitarian, development and peace work, come together to co-create flexible, cost-effective and innovative solutions. Importantly, such integrated solutions lie across country, regional and global level.

Famine Response and Prevention framework

Reducing food insecurity, malnutrition and humanitarian need while tackling risks and vulnerabilities



This Framework, formulated by policy and programme staff at the World Food Programme for its own internal use and understanding of where its interventions contribute to averting and preventing famine, is built on the phases reflected in the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) that underpin the evolution of acute food insecurity and famine conditions.

The structural causes of famine are interconnected, reinforce each other, and create compounded shocks that operate through institutions and governance at individual, community, and societal levels. If such systems foster social exclusion in terms of inability of individuals or communities to fully participate in political, economic, and cultural life." (World Bank, 2022) coupled with low levels of resilience of communities, shocks such as climate change, violent conflicts, and rising food prices may create "famine-enabling conditions." These enabling conditions are often politically, naturally, economically, and socially induced and created either intentionally and/or unintentionally.

The incentives that drive famines as systems indicate why emergency food assistance cannot prevent famine but rather point to the fact that it must be part of an integration solution that goes beyond food and has a longer-term planning horizon. Emergency food assistance can build and strengthen national systems, in particular social protection systems, that can be developed in a shock-responsive manner during emergencies with a view to transferring to government authorities as and when possible. Emergency assistance is also critical for smallholder farmers who have lost livelihoods due to shocks, allowing them to stay and maintain their production rather than moving and seeking alternate incomes. Similarly, emergency assistance is provided through careful monitoring and analytical activities to facilitate targeting that maximizes equitable assistance and minimizes harm. This is especially important since, in many instances, marginalized communities bear the brunt of evolving famine conditions. This critical step supports social contract-making, including social cohesion at a community level, and can help to build state trust, where appropriate. Within this, a focus on proper nutrition at an early age, physical growth, and intellectual development is critical and, when damaged, can lead to long-term negative impacts on individual achievement as well as broader economic growth and stability. More than 50 percent of those displaced from their countries by conflict, violence, and persecution are under the age of 18.

As such, emergency food assistance and nutrition, social protection and safety nets, and agricultural interventions serve as a foundation for integrated packages of support that should be designed with the objective of reducing and ending hunger through a multi-year plan that gradually hands over activities to government, communities, and the private sector. Such interventions have a lasting impact only when combined with the political will and improved governance to address the structural or root causes of hunger, namely when development and national investments in agriculture and food production, infrastructure and transport, integrated markets and trade, strong employment, social protection programmes, and national level policies and accountability mechanisms that secure the people's right to food.

Practical Recommendations for the G20

I. Harness the knowledge of famine prevention and address the global gap in the understanding of the structural causes of famine through the expansion and strengthening of the Famine Review Committee.

Scenario

Research and expertise in famine is limited to a few well-known individuals, some of whom are members of the Famine Review Committee of the Integrated Phased Classification (IPC) office. The FRC was created as an independent and neutral body to assess the data and information from countries that are deemed to be at risk of famine and are the body that 'declares' a famine. As we well know, this is far too late for any type of preventative action and serves only to trigger urgent resources to save lives, recognising that this is far too late. The challenges this group faces must be carefully addressed to strengthen its effectiveness. Furthermore, this body must be sufficiently expanded to include representation from the global south and must, in turn, be well-resourced (noting all members work under the FRC voluntarily), with full respect for their neutrality and independence.

Furthermore, the Famine Review Committee's terms of reference should be expanded to include the development of knowledge on the structural causes of famine in countries and models of success that could support governments in their efforts to build lasting solutions. This group, as an independent and neutral body, could then be an integral support to Brazil's G20 Hunger and Poverty.

Alliance agenda. The Famine Review Committee should be supported by an academic institution or foundation to ensure its continued ability to advise on what is essentially a

highly political area of work. Such a commitment would be a global good and an important complement and support to the critical service Brazil seeks to offer countries who wish to end hunger for their populations.

II. Building on Brazil's Bolsa Familia model establish a central/single structure (building on existing efforts) that can surface successful models of reducing hunger (including in conflict settings), through a Peer-to-Peer arrangement that supports the design of holistic multi-stakeholder, multi-year, nationally lead solutions to address food crises. (This might be logically attached to the above proposal).

Scenario

Documented knowledge, success, and challenges in addressing hunger are sporadic and sit across a variety of institutions. Combining this learning into a single platform and initiating a series of 'Peer to Peer' knowledge exchanges that is government-led with the intention of addressing gaps in a country's efforts to reduce and end hunger. This would place the leadership of affected countries in the driving seat of developing solutions for their populations. This effort could be linked to the National Food System Summit Convenors underpinned with the requisite knowledge repository through the Global Network Against Food Crises, and drawing down on the expertise of the Famine Review Committee as outlined above.



Let's **rethink** the world

