

# Famine Fact Sheet

July 2019



*“To remain silent is to be complicit.  
We as Presbyterians must speak out.”*

— Resolution to Advocate for the Human Rights of All Citizens of Yemen,  
approved by the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, 2018  
Photo: Hope Restoration South Sudan

## **WHAT IS FAMINE?**

Famine is fundamentally “a crisis of mass hunger that causes many people to die over a specific period of time.”<sup>i</sup> The difference between chronic hunger/malnutrition and famine is that with famine there is a dramatic increase in hunger *over time* and it impacts a *large number* of people in a particular area.<sup>ii</sup>

Internationally, organizations use a system called “Integration Food Security Phase Classification” (or IPC) to determine the level of food insecurity in a specific area. IPC will indicate that an area has reached the Phase 5 level of food insecurity (famine) when 20 percent of households are facing

extreme food shortages, 30 percent of the population faces acute malnourishment and there are at least 2 hunger-related deaths per 10,000 people per day.<sup>iii</sup>

When famine has been declared in an area, it means that people have been undernourished for some time, people have been dying and continue to die from starvation or illnesses due to compromised immune systems, and children are suffering from short and long-term harms of acute malnutrition such as stunting, disease and death.<sup>iv</sup>

## DRIVERS OF FAMINE

### **Myths**

One of the main untruths that people believe about famine is that it is merely a case of *overpopulation and food shortage*. The world's population has increased from around 1 billion in 1860 to 7 billion today, but famine deaths have decreased over time while the per capita food supply has increased.<sup>v</sup> Often in famines, food may be available, but people may not be able to access food for various reasons including high prices, displacement, and a breakdown in transportation and food distribution. Another untruth is that famine is a *natural disaster*. Today it is primarily a man-made disaster, in the sense that political decisions and policies, as well as conflict tend to be the main drivers of today's famines.

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“When armies march,  
there is no harvest.”

—Maxime Rafransoa

All Africa Council of Churches, 1985

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### **Conflicts and War**

Sixty percent of the world's hungry people live in countries that are affected by conflict.<sup>vi</sup> Most 21st century famines are characterized by violent conflict and war. Conflicts lead to displacement from the land and livelihoods, disruption of food production and distribution, and trauma. Often food is used as a weapon of war. Food supplies can be withheld, or its transportation can be blocked. Food and the means for producing food are frequently destroyed in today's conflicts, guaranteeing years of food insecurity long after the conflict has ended.

### **Poverty**

Since poverty is the number one cause of world hunger, it shouldn't be any surprise that it is a driver of famine. In fact, famine tends to occur in poorer countries where

incomes are lower and government investments in infrastructure and services are low compared to wealthier countries. Countries are poor for many reasons including colonialism, authoritarian governments, developing-world debt, imbalanced trade, etc. So when drought, political instability, or conflict is present, a country's economy can suffer from a lack of investment and a devaluation of local currency, which can then translate into increased food prices and reduced incomes. Poor people already spend a high percentage of their incomes on food, so they are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices. The combination of increased food prices and reduced incomes creates a situation where poor people cannot afford to buy food or the inputs for food production.

### **Climate Change or Drought**

Climate change and warming temperatures present a challenge for food security and access to safe drinking water. Variability in weather patterns is already leading to unpredictability in crop yields, especially in regions that depend on rainfed agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organization found that climate variability and extremes are among the leading causes of recent increases in global hunger and severe food crises.<sup>vii</sup> When it comes to famine, drought plays a role in the crisis, but the government response or lack of response is really what determines whether or not drought leads to famine. In order for famine to occur, not only would food availability have to be limited but also access to other foods, including imported foods or even access to humanitarian assistance, would have to be limited as well.

### **Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law**

Under international humanitarian law, there are protections which guard against the starvation - deprivation of food, water and basic survival necessities - of civilians

during armed conflicts.<sup>viii</sup> It is prohibited to use starvation as a method of warfare, destroy crops and necessity goods, appropriate or destroy objects essential to the survival of civilians, and obstruct access of humanitarian aid for civilians during armed conflict.<sup>ix</sup> The right to food, meaning “a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life, and to the means to access them”, is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>x</sup> The majority of today’s famines are taking place because of political decisions made by state actors that violate international humanitarian and human rights laws. Farms, homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. Humanitarian assistance has been delayed and blocked. Governments have failed to respond when all the signs of famine were on the horizon.

## **REALITIES OF FAMINE**

### ***Food Insecurity***

The most extreme form of food insecurity is famine. The World Health Organization says that in order for there to be food security, food has to be available, accessible and useable. During times of conflict, food production is often interrupted when people are forced to flee violence. War also damages distribution channels for getting food to market and makes it unsafe for people to visit markets. Drought and flooding can pose problems to food availability by damaging and limiting production. Food price inflation sets in when food availability becomes stressed, which makes it harder for people to pay for food, especially when their livelihoods have been destroyed. When famine is declared, 1 in every 5 households faces extreme lack of food.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Malnutrition and Disease***

When famine is declared, acute malnutrition (wasting) is greater than 30 percent, which is when people are underweight for their height due to not having enough nutritious food to eat.<sup>xii</sup> A

child suffering from severe acute malnutrition is 9 times more likely to die of disease than a well-nourished child.<sup>xiii</sup> Malnourishment leaves people with weakened immune systems and susceptible to disease and death. Diseases that are quite common in famine situations are diarrhea, cholera, anemia, measles, pneumonia and malaria.

“We shall encourage those programs which combat hunger through integrated development and empowerment of people, both in this country and throughout the world . . . we shall be advocates in the centers of political and economic power, supporting policy changes which will provide food for poor and hungry people... that empower their self-development, and that enable them and us by just and peaceful means to be free from oppressive unjust systems that fail to meet basic needs.”

—Common Affirmation on Global Hunger, amended by the 203rd General Assembly, 1991

### ***Starvation and Death***

The most extreme form of malnutrition is starvation. When famine is declared, starvation is already a reality, but starvation among small groups or individuals is not famine – starvation must impact a large number of people for it to be considered famine. Starvation is a process that happens when a person’s caloric energy intake is well below their expenditure of caloric energy. Starvation is a very painful and drawn out death. The body initiates processes to prolong life - depleting glucose and fat reserves and then attacking muscle proteins. If a healthy adult has access to water, they can live for up to a couple of months under starvation conditions before they die.

## ***Displacement and Migration***

According to the U.N. World Food Programme, as food insecurity increases, for each one percentage point increase in food insecurity, 19 people out of every 1000 will choose to migrate, and when there is conflict at the same time, the migration numbers grow by 4 people per 1000 multiplied by each year of conflict.<sup>xiv</sup> Most people who are faced with severe food insecurity have limited resources and will often flee to the nearest city, neighboring country or refugee camp in search of safety and assistance. Once people are displaced they are cut off from their livelihoods and abilities to generate income, they become dependent on humanitarian assistance and can place heavy burdens on the limited resources of host communities and countries.

*“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

—Matthew 25:40

*Learn more, take action, and give at [www.pcusa.org/phpfamine](http://www.pcusa.org/phpfamine).*



<sup>i</sup> De Waal, Alex. 2018. *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine* (p.17). Medford, MA: Polity Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> World Hunger Education Service. 2017. [Hunger Notes](#).

<sup>iv</sup> Bread for the World. 2017. [Fact Sheet: Nutrition During Famines](#).

<sup>v</sup> Hasel, Joe. 2018. *Our World in Data*. [“Does population growth lead to hunger and famine?”](#)

<sup>vi</sup> World Food Program. 2018. [Hunger & Conflict Fact Sheet: Saving Lives, Changing Lives](#).

<sup>vii</sup> FAO. 2018. [“The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Building Climate Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition.”](#)

<sup>viii</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. 2017. [“International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare.”](#)

<sup>ix</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières. [“The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law.”](#) Accessed May 20, 2019.

<sup>x</sup> OHCHR. 2010. [“Fact Sheet No. 34: ‘The Right to Adequate Food.’”](#)

<sup>xi</sup> FEWS NET. [“Integrated Phase Classification.”](#) Accessed May 15, 2019.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> UN NEWS. 2017. [“As famine looms, malnutrition and disease rise sharply among Somali children – UNICEF.”](#)

<sup>xiv</sup> World Food Programme. 2017. [“New WFP Report Finds Food Insecurity Accelerates Global Migration.”](#)

\*Photo on this page by PHP partner *Generations Without Qat*, Yemen.