



EXPLORING THE LINKS BETWEEN CONFLICT AND HUNGER IN SOUTH SUDAN

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan's independent history is short, but most of it has been spent at war. In December 2017, the country marked four years of devastating conflict and today, only a few months later, it has reached another critical point: more South Sudanese are hungry than ever before.

While the February 2018 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) – the country's official source for food insecurity data – does not declare famine, this is not the only situation where food insecurity threatens lives. Any classification of IPC 3 upwards means people need aid to survive. This means that 6.3 million people are struggling to get enough to eat, and are dependent on humanitarian aid that is increasingly difficult to access.

The IPC shows that South Sudan is locked in a year-on-year worsening trend with a clear cause: conflict. But it doesn't show which factors other than the ability to get food can be the difference between crisis, emergency and catastrophic levels of hunger. It doesn't show that, even within families, some people are more at risk than others. And it doesn't show that the people behind the numbers don't care what you call it. Because no matter where they sit on the scale, they need food, they need assistance, and more than anything, they need peace.

The links between conflict and hunger are well-known. Yet humanitarian funding and political commitment have not kept pace with the increasingly urgent needs of communities. When warring parties and the international community gather to discuss peace in South Sudan, they are not only negotiating a ceasefire, power-sharing between parties or accountability mechanisms – they are negotiating an end to the hunger and suffering of millions of South Sudanese civilians.

WHAT THE IPC SHOWS US: BEYOND THE KEY MESSAGES

More South Sudanese are hungry than ever before.

A surge in humanitarian aid meant that famine was pushed back by the middle of 2017. Still, 4.8 million people – nearly half the population – remained severely food insecure in the last IPC (September–December 2017), the time of year when food is supposed to be most plentiful. Now, a few months later, the situation has deteriorated significantly.

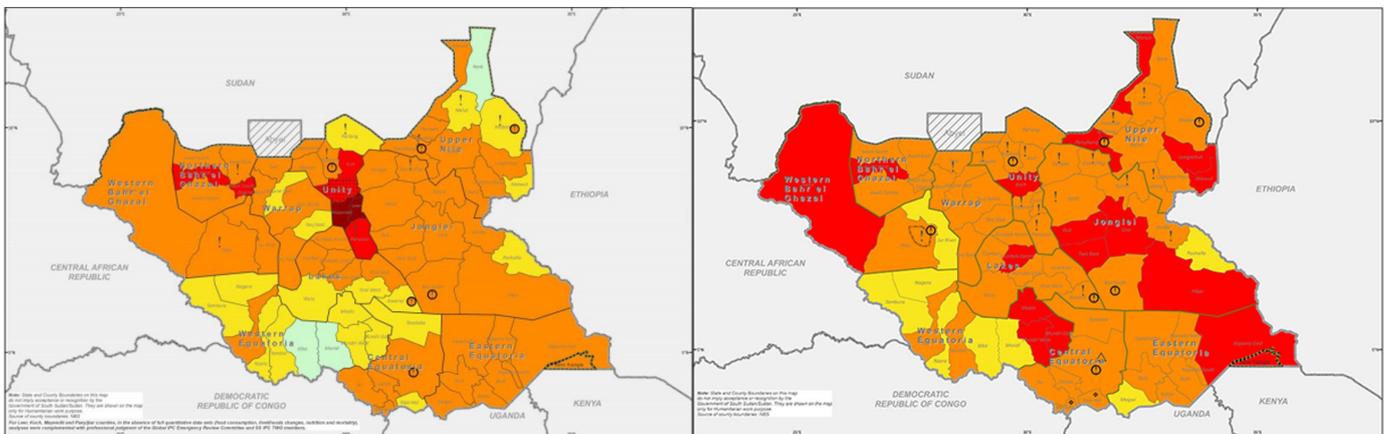
But comparing one IPC update with the previous one tells us very little about the scale of the food security crisis; comparing the same agricultural season across different years does. While the situation has deteriorated since the previous IPC, comparing the two pits levels of hunger straight after the harvest against those several months later, when food is becoming increasingly scarce. Even more telling: one year on from the famine declaration in February 2017, 1.3 million more people are hungry.

IPC 3 upwards means you need aid to survive.

According to the IPC, up to 50,000 people are currently in the most severe phase of acute food insecurity (IPC 5). In these households, starvation, destitution and even death are evident, and the urgency of their needs is extreme.

For famine to be declared, 20% of the population in a specific county must be facing these catastrophic levels of food insecurity. So, while famine has not been declared, it is possible that many people are experiencing famine-like conditions at home – they simply do not represent a big enough proportion of the population for a famine declaration.

But even this does not reflect the full extent of needs across the country – anyone in IPC 3 or above has a degree of dependence on humanitarian aid. This means that without assistance, by May 2018 nearly two-thirds of the population could face extreme hunger.



The maps show the estimated level of hunger in South Sudan in February 2017 (left) and February 2018 (right). The colours represent: **IPC 3 (crisis)**; **IPC 4 (emergency)**; **IPC 5 (famine)**.

The longer the conflict lasts, the worse the situation will become – and the longer it will take South Sudan to recover.

This year's heavy rainfall should have fallen upon productive crops, especially compared to last year, when harvests were adversely affected by prolonged dry spells. Yet, continued insecurity and displacement resulted in extremely low production, leaving little to tide communities over until the next harvest season.

In former Central Equatoria State – part of South Sudan's agricultural 'greenbelt' – food production has plummeted as a result of relentless fighting. Farmers who have managed to stay are only able to cultivate small areas around their homesteads for fear that travelling to lands further afield will put them at too great a risk. Many cannot even manage this subsistence farming. According to the UN, almost all villages in Central Equatoria accessed by the UN peacekeeping force (UNMISS) or other humanitarian organizations in early 2017 had been burned to the ground by warring parties.¹ Even if people feel safe to return home, these homes and livelihoods cannot be rebuilt overnight.

This means South Sudan is at real risk of an even graver humanitarian crisis by this time next year if humanitarian needs are not met, and peace remains elusive. The impact of fighting and displacement on food security lingers for months after the last bullet is fired. **Humanitarian funding must be forward looking, pre-empting rather than responding to declarations of famine. Investing more effectively in humanitarian needs before crisis hits builds the resilience of communities and lessens the impact of emergencies. Waiting for a declaration of famine means, for many, it may be too late.**

WHAT THE IPC DOESN'T SHOW US: HUNGER IS ABOUT MORE THAN FOOD.

Even within families, some people are more at risk than others.

Women and girls are typically more vulnerable to food insecurity than men,² often eating last and least. Cultural and social roles dictate that they should care for their families, feed them and even sacrifice their own portions when necessary. Men generally eat first and receive the largest share, with children and/or dependents eating next.

Women and girls are also usually tasked with collecting food. This is an extremely physically intense activity, taking at least four hours and up to an entire day. They also risk being attacked, raped or killed just to put food on the table.³ In Malakal (former Upper Nile State), over 30,000 people live in a congested Protection of Civilians (POC) site. Despite the presence of humanitarian agencies, current levels of aid cannot meet all their livelihood and nutritional needs. According to the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), men – perceived as affiliated with the opposition – chance death if they leave, leaving women to risk rape to bring money and food to their families.⁴

'Sometimes there's nothing at all. Just a little, which I give to my children. I will eat if there is something left, but the most important thing for me is that the children eat. Even if it means I don't have enough to eat, which happens quite often, I feel better.'

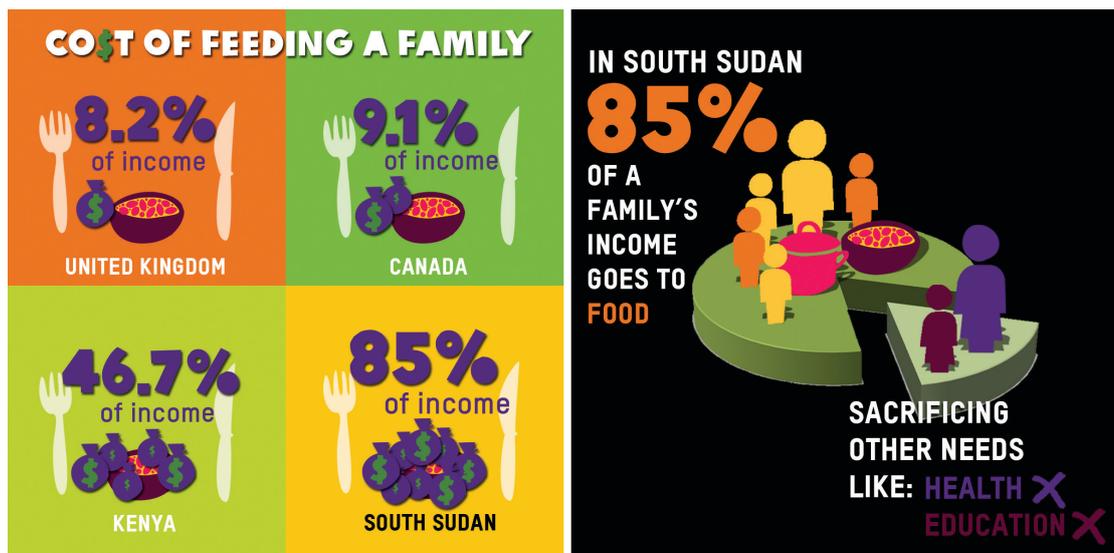
– Woman from Lankien

There is an undeniable link between these conditions and women's empowerment. Women's inclusion in decision making can help facilitate the adoption of reforms in public policies that improve their status in society, and has also been associated with broader improvement in socio-economic wellbeing.⁵ **Building on its existing commitment to a 25% quota for women's participation in government bodies,⁶ the Government of South Sudan should urgently take steps to promote the participation and representation of women in decision making bodies at national, state and local levels. Donors should also support this by ensuring that the assistance they fund addresses the disproportionate effects of food insecurity on women and girls, including in education, livelihoods, health, protection, governance and water, sanitation and hygiene programming.**

Conflict is driving the economy into the ground, which in turn is driving hunger.

Fighting and displacement have disrupted planting and harvests, and the economic crisis caused by ongoing conflict has resulted in a near complete breakdown in markets and rising inflation. **The limited food available is fast becoming unaffordable.**

Many South Sudanese were previously able to afford more food and diversity in their diets. A rapidly depreciating South Sudanese Pound (SSP) combined with conflict-related disruptions to markets have spiked transportation costs and the price of food – often shouldered by the consumer.



In January 2018, the retail price of a kilogram of sorghum – a staple grain for South Sudanese households – was 105 SSP in Juba; 34% above last year's price.⁷ Meanwhile, the wage rate for casual labour was approximately 346 SSP (less than \$2 USD/day). This means that a total day's work in Juba may buy just enough to feed the average family for a day,⁸ but means sacrificing school fees, medical expenses, electricity and other necessities.

Paired with a general lack of livelihood opportunities, this is forcing growing numbers in the nation's capital – including children – to turn to begging. In many countries, capital cities are centres for economic growth and offer most residents comparatively better living conditions. Yet, Juba and its surrounding areas are at crisis levels of food insecurity (IPC 3), and humanitarian assistance is a key factor keeping worse hunger at bay.

Unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene can be deadly – especially when paired with hunger.

In South Sudan, death by starvation – while it does happen – is not happening on a large scale. However, **many more people are dying because with or without food, their bodies can't use it.**

Access to safe water is one of the most basic means of survival. In an emergency situation, a minimum of 15 litres are needed per person for drinking, cooking and hygiene.⁹ Unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene are closely linked to the spread of diseases and malnutrition. It can

cause diarrhoea, which quickly causes dehydration and prevents the retention of the nutrients required to survive, ultimately leading to malnutrition.



In Weijchol (former Jonglei State), the population has more than quadrupled to accommodate a swell of displaced people fleeing nearby military offensives. With only two remaining boreholes, displaced people and host community members – mainly women and girls – are waiting four to five hours every day to collect two jerry cans of water, equal to less than 7.5 litres per person.¹⁰ (Photo by Servasius Koli/Oxfam)

Malnutrition weakens the immune system, making the body weak, more susceptible to disease, and ultimately causing muscle and fat tissue to waste away. According to the latest IPC update, by May 2018 multiple counties are expected to face extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition,¹¹ and most counties in four of the 10 former states are expected to reach critical levels.¹²

A recent report by Oxfam¹³ on eating habits in Nyal (former Unity State) found that while wild plants are a critical part of the regular local diet, conflict and displacement-related challenges to farming and the near-total collapse of markets mean that people are depending almost entirely on what they can forage.¹⁴ They are forced to eat more of the less preferred wild foods that are difficult to collect and prepare, have terrible taste, and cause stomach pains and diarrhoea – and they are forced to eat them more often. While these foods may ease the ache of hunger, they have very little nutritional value; the report estimates that this diet leaves most people on less than 1,000 kcal/day at the height of the lean season – nowhere near the recommended 2,100 kcal/day.¹⁵

These conditions paired with limited access to health services have contributed to the outbreaks of multiple diseases.¹⁶ For example, cholera is more likely to affect malnourished populations, and – in turn – cholera exacerbates the severity of malnutrition in those who are already suffering from it. In 2017, South Sudan was gripped by the deadliest cholera outbreak since independence. Previous outbreaks lasted an average of six months; the end of

last year's outbreak was declared earlier this month after 19 months, and killed 436 people.¹⁷ And conditions are ripe for another outbreak this year.

Considering food insecurity solely in terms of access to food masks **the urgent need to respond to food insecurity more holistically**. While 68.4% of funding required for 2017 for food security and livelihoods was pledged, 64% was pledged for nutrition, 35% for water, sanitation and hygiene, and only 26% for health.¹⁸ **Donors should prioritize multi-sectoral approaches to food insecurity, as inadequate funding for these sectors undermines the impact of food assistance.**

WHAT THE IPC REALLY MEANS: AID SAVES LIVES – BUT IT'S HARDER FOR PEOPLE TO GET IT.

People are fleeing hunger as well as conflict.

A third of the population of South Sudan have been forced to flee from their homes: 1.8 million are internally displaced, and 2.4 million have fled across the border into neighbouring countries.¹⁹

In Akobo (former Jonglei State), Oxfam staff recently reported that displaced people continued to cross into Ethiopia when fighting in the surrounding areas temporarily subsided, driven by rising hunger. In the hopes of getting food, they walk up to seven days in gruelling heat that can reach 40 degrees Celsius. They risk theft and violence, including sexual violence, along the way.

While asylum in another country may mean they are safe from fighting, it does not necessarily protect them from hunger.

The huge influx of South Sudanese refugees and a massive lack of funding has forced humanitarian agencies to cut rations several times. The 2017 Refugee Response Plan was only 33% funded,²⁰ leaving an impossible burden on a region that is already challenged by internal and cross-border displacement. 700,000 South Sudanese fled to neighbouring countries in 2017²¹ – a rate of more than one person per minute.

In 2017, getting assistance to those who need it was harder than ever before.

South Sudan is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be an aid worker. Despite Presidential statements, the 2015 peace agreement and more recent ceasefire agreement, international law,²² and – most importantly – the increasingly desperate needs of South Sudanese, humanitarian access impediments are on the rise. 1,159 humanitarian access incidents were reported in 2017, well above the 908 reported the previous year. Nearly half involved violence against humanitarian personnel and

Oxfam Food Distribution Manager Benjamin Flomo shares his experience of delivering humanitarian assistance in former Jonglei State:

*'The work can be very dangerous and heart-breaking for us. Back in April 2017, when armed clashes escalated in Akobo West and Central (in and around Yuai, Waat and other areas), thousands of displaced people fled to Akobo East seeking food and other support, while others tried to cross over to Ethiopia. Because of intensified fighting, aid workers were forced to evacuate. It was very painful for me, seeing thousands of people at the airstrip watching aid workers get evacuated. Some of us shed tears after witnessing this moment. **For those who evacuated, they had no choice. They could be killed if they stayed behind.**'*

assets.²³ At least 97 humanitarian aid workers have been killed since the start of the conflict, the vast majority of them South Sudanese. This increasingly difficult and dangerous environment, paired with rising administrative hurdles and pressure, is having serious implications on humanitarian operations.

Unimpeded humanitarian access is urgently required to turn the tide against rising hunger. Donors should work with their diplomatic counterparts to tackle access issues. While on-the-ground access negotiations are part of aid agencies' day-to-day work, the more systemic issues require diplomatic action at negotiating tables in Juba and key capitals around the world. Aside from having the remit and clout to support humanitarian access in this way, by not doing so, diplomats transfer risk to aid workers on the ground who are considerably more vulnerable.

What the people of South Sudan ultimately need is an end to the conflict.

Catastrophic hunger in Wau County (former Western Bahr El Ghazal State) demonstrates the clear correlation between conflict and food insecurity.



Wau used to be considered South Sudan's 'second city,' with roads, a sports stadium, hotels, and electricity pylons (though no longer functional) – signs of its former development and promise. (Photo by Tim Bierley/Oxfam)

The city has been hard-hit by continued violence, and faced persistently challenging humanitarian access, including limited freedom of movement for civilians. Improved access for humanitarian organizations over the past few months means that the situation has improved slightly. Yet, currently over half of the population are estimated to be severely food insecure. Maintaining this access is going to be critical to preventing a worsening situation – including 5,000 people suffering famine-like conditions at home (IPC 5) – in the months ahead.

This vicious and self-reinforcing cycle of hunger and violence must end; for that to happen South Sudan needs a durable peace that allows farmers to once

again tend their plots, markets and livelihoods to resume, and people to freely access the services and assistance they need.

The February 2018 round of peace talks at the High-Level Revitalization Forum ended without agreement, and a ceasefire signed by warring parties in December has been repeatedly violated. Further dialogue is needed, and **parties should commit to these negotiations in good faith, including through a complete cessation of hostilities and unimpeded humanitarian access on the ground.**

While the international community has not caused the current crisis, it has not consistently responded with the urgency and decisive action required. **The regional and wider international community needs to reinvigorate and redouble diplomatic action to incentivize peace and effectively hold warring parties accountable for violations of the ceasefire, human rights and international humanitarian law. The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development should maintain the current momentum of the High-Level Revitalization Forum with a clear, binding and transparent timeline for the process itself, and for the implementation of the peace agreement.**

Aid can keep people alive. But only peace can give them their futures.

NOTES

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This paper was written by Elysia Buchanan. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Elizabeth White, Rhea Catada, and Tim Bierley in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-185-5 in February 2018. DOI: 10.21201/2017.1855

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