**Response to Call for Inputs – Healthy and Sustainable Food: Reducing the Environmental Impacts of the Global Food System on Human Rights**

Habitat International Coalition

People living in contexts of protracted armed conflict, occupation, and under forms of sanction and closure are some of the most vulnerable to harmful environmental impacts of the global food system. Yet these contexts are often absent from discussions of environmental and other impacts of the global food system, and around the pressing need for radical food system transformation more broadly.

Breakdowns in governance and economic stability during protracted conflict often lead to dependence on humanitarian assistance and foreign aid. Assistance provided to the agricultural sector in emergencies rarely includes best practices for the long-term health of the environment, often focusing exclusively on immediate short-term needs of affected populations. However, combined with a decline in traditional small-scale agriculture due to conflict-related displacement from agricultural land, such emergencies often open the door to policies that introduce or advance harmful practices embedded in the dominant global food system.

In Iraq in 2004, the U.S. occupation issued a new patent framework, “Order 81,”[[1]](#footnote-1) allowing manufacturers of genetically modified seeds to patent traits found in traditional seeds, putting those traditional seeds at risk of restricted use by Iraqi farmers who have been using them for generations. While Order 81 was not implemented in Iraq,[[2]](#footnote-2) its acceptance during a period of intense conflict and upheaval remains a clear example of the vulnerability of conflict-affected countries to policies that advance external interests of an industrial agriculture agenda, and to the negative environmental impacts tied to those industrial practices.

Governance breakdowns during conflict also lead to a collapse in capacity of governments to ensure acceptable standards of food production and food quality. During the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Regional Consultation for Near East on the Preparation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition,[[3]](#footnote-3) the representative for Syria highlighted a decline in food safety in the country as a result of the conflict, as a population desperate to acquire adequate quantities of food have few quality options to choose from. The Syrian Centre for Policy Research has also found a “significant deterioration in the quality of available food” since the conflict began.[[4]](#footnote-4) Throughout the 10-year conflict the government has been unable to continue to monitor quality of food being sold, with environmental standards on the production end also going unmonitored. While tactics used during armed conflict often lead directly to various forms of environmental degradation, unmonitored intensive food production practices are also significant contributors to degradation in times of war. Over-exploitation of fragile lands, for example, led to a 21% decrease in arable land in Syria between 2010 and 2014, while forest cover also was depleted by more than 20% in 2012-2019, largely due to a combination of agricultural expansion and institutional weakness in natural resource management.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Occupying powers have also been found to “export” the harmful environmental impacts of their food systems to the territories that they occupy. In occupied Palestine, Israeli-owned pesticide and agro-chemical manufacturer Geshuri & Sons Industries operates within an illegal industrial settlement in the Palestinian city of Tulkarm.[[6]](#footnote-6) The plant previously operated inside the Green Line (in Israel), but, after concerns there around the impact of pollution caused by the plant, it relocated to the industrial complex in the occupied West Bank. Research published in *The Lancet* shows that residents of Tulkarm “have among the highest rates of cancer, asthma, and eye and respiratory health anomalies compared with residents in other districts,”[[7]](#footnote-7) with authors linking these shocking health impacts to emissions from the factory.

We encourage the Special Rapporteur to consider the UN Environment Assembly Resolution on the Protection of the Environment in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict[[8]](#footnote-8) as being also related to food systems during times of conflict, and remind the Special Rapporteur of the 2030 Agenda commitment calling “for further effective measures and actions to be taken, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, which continue to adversely affect their economic and social development as well as their environment."[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Iraq [Order No. 81 on Amendments to Law on Patent, Industrial Design, Undisclosed Information, Integrated Circuits, and Plant Variety](https://wipolex.wipo.int/en/text/229977), WIPO IP Portal, Section 1 Amendments to the Patents, Industrial Design, Undisclosed Information, Integrated Circuits and Plant Variety Law (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dahlia Wasfi, “[Iraq’s Agricultural Industry was Pillaged, its Farmers Devastated, but it’s Still Free of GMOs](https://www.mintpressnews.com/despite-decades-of-war-iraqs-agricultural-industry-remains-gmo-free/223169/)” *Mint Press News* (15 December 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UN Committee on World Food Security Regional Consultation for Near East on the Preparation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, Cairo, Egypt (25-26 September 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “[Food Security and Conflict in Syria,](https://www.scpr-syria.org/launch-of-food-security-conflict-in-syria-report/)” *Syrian Centre for Policy Research* (14 May 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roba Gaafar, “[The Environmental Impact of Syria’s Conflict: A Preliminary Survey of Issues](https://www.arab-reform.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Arab_Reform_Initiative_en_the-environmental-impact-of-syrias-conflict-a-preliminary-survey-of-issues_17955.pdf?ver=afd7ebe8acc057f4faaf6c5ae14f0739)” (Paris: Arab Reform Initiative, 7 April 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Benjamin Pontin, Vito De Lucia and Jesus Gomero Rus, [*Environmental Injustice in Occupied Palestinian Territory: Problems and Prospects*](https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/alhaq_files/publications/Environmental.Injustice.Report.En.pdf) (Ramallah, Palestine: Al Haq, 2015); Heather Elaydi, Tanya Lee and Meriel Watts, "[Human Rights and Toxic Chemicals in the Occupied West Bank (Palestine).](https://files.panap.net/resources/OccupiedWB-Palestine-Human-Rights-Toxic-Chemicals.pdf)" (Amman: Arab Group for the Protection of Nature; Penang: PAN Asia Pacific, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Danya M. Qato and Ruhan Nagra, "[Environmental and public health effects of polluting industries in Tulkarm, West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory: an ethnographic study.](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2813%2962601-X/fulltext)" *The Lancet*, Vol. 382 Special Issue (5 December 2013), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNEP, [Protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict](https://undocs.org/en/UNEP/EA.2/Res.15), UNEP/EA.2/Res.15, 4 August 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. UNGA. [Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf). (2015). A/RES/70/1. para. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)