

What are the root causes of food insecurity?

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Input for Starvation Report

Submission to United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food

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Hunger often results from lengthy and obscure social processes, yet the focus is predominantly on the end result: food insecurity. This narrow view obscures the complex root causes. What if we thought about food insecurity differently? What if we start thinking about hunger as a form of violence?

When people think of violence, they usually think of direct violence, like bombings or shootings. Direct violence often has clear perpetrators and immediate purposeful destruction. Hunger is frequently seen as collateral damage. However, this narrow view overlooks that causal factors such as conflict, environmental degradation, governance issues, and corruption, may not be deliberate but still involve perpetrators and collective responsibilities. When hunger results from various factors and a dispersed collective of actors, it becomes less visible as a form of violence, but it remains one, nonetheless.

Most hunger crises represent what environmental scholar Rob Nixon terms “slow violence”: they unfold gradually and often go unnoticed.¹ Hunger is typically an event that we could label as such, as it has no clear beginning and end. For instance, when conflict abates, hunger may linger for years, even after peace agreements.

To boost prevention, we should broaden the definition of violence to include hunger, highlighting its root causes. Sociologist Siniša Malešević defines violence as “a scalar social process in which individuals, groups or social organizations find themselves steeped in situations whereby their – intentional or unintentional – actions generate the coercively-imposed behavioural changes or produce physical, mental or emotional damage, injury or death”.² Violence is thus a social process more often than specific events. It may take time before the damage is caused, as is the case with food insecurity.

Broadening the definition of violence can enhance our analysis of the roots and responsibilities behind hunger crises. For instance, deforestation along the Gulf of Guinea and the melting of polar ice directly impact rainfall patterns in the Sahel. The interplay of factors contributing to

¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, n.d.).

² Sinisa Malesevic, *He Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15.

hunger includes not only limited rainfall but also conflict and intensive mining. Mining has wiped out over 577.15 km² of forest, harming animal habitats and farmland, and consequently, negatively impacted food production in the Sahel. Hunger here is the outcome of a series of actions and behaviours. Whether these actions are intentional or unintentional, they remain part of a violent social process, causing harm and death.

This underscores that hunger is not an insurmountable force; it is human-made and thus changeable. Addressing hunger requires more than just humanitarian aid. It involves comprehensive efforts to tackle underlying factors, such as reducing carbon emissions to mitigate climate change, promoting fair economic policies, and ensuring political stability and good governance.

Realigning our understanding from “food insecurity” to “hunger as violence” reintroduces a clearer question of agency: not just in terms of prevention, but also accountability. The prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC) applied for arrest warrants for both Hamas and Israeli leaders on 20 May 2024. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and defence minister Yoav Gallant, are accused of “starvation of civilians” as a war crime.³ The ICC is perhaps the most visible arm of individual criminal accountability in international law. Starvation of civilians as a war crime is the most obvious mode of accountability for the violence of hunger. If we refocus our understanding of food insecurity however, options for both accountability *and* prevention could be amplified.

For example, the United Nations appears close to beginning negotiations for a treaty regulating the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity. The current draft articles of this treaty do not include starvation.⁴ The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide also does not include starvation as a separate crime. In ongoing proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), however, lawyers for South Africa insist that ongoing hunger in Gaza is an integral part of Israel’s noncompliance with the convention, and indeed the genocidal intent of its officials.⁵ Hunger as violence might therefore be inferred as coming under the remit of either a genocide or crimes against humanity convention. There is

³ International Criminal Court, ‘Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A. Khan KC: Applications for arrest warrants in the situation in the State of Palestine’, Statement, 20 May 2024, [<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-applications-arrest-warrants-situation-state>].

an opportunity, however, for it to become explicit within a possible new treaty. Additionally, future orders of the ICJ, and the hearing on the merits of the case between South Africa and Israel, could make hunger as violence more explicit in legal interpretations of the Genocide Convention.

The global hunger affecting 783 million people highlights the need to redefine hunger as a form of violence. This perspective is crucial for understanding current food crises and preventing future famines, as resource scarcity, environmental damage, economic inequality, and political instability intensify these emergencies. Recognizing hunger as violence helps identify its roots in systemic issues, intentional actions, or neglect, and underscores human agency's role in exacerbating hunger through conflict, environmental harm, and inequitable policies. This approach will increase the range of mechanisms – from criminal or treaty courts to UN-adopted concepts and norms such as *Responsibility to Protect* – available to prevent and punish hunger crimes.