Human Rights Committee (HRC)

Ensuring food and water access in crisis regions

Forum: Human rights Committee

Issue: Ensuring water and food access in crisis regions

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Introduction

The United Nations Human Rights Council considers access to food and water a basic human right that has become an issue of humanitarian concern in conflict regions. Many of the crises (natural disasters, wars, conflict, political instability climate change) that contribute to food insecurity or lack of access to clean drinking water disrupts food systems and water supply networks too. So that millions of people in crisis areas still have to survive without having access to essential products.

Access to safe food and safe drinking water is essential to an individual's health, dignity, and stability, therefore, such access will be a priority issue for the HRC.

Food Access and Security refers to the ability of individuals to obtain enough amounts of food that meet their nutritional needs while Water Security refers to the ability of individuals to obtain safe and enough water for daily use and drinking purposes. The physical destruction of infrastructure, restricted entry to humanitarian assistance and the failure of public systems in areas affected by war make it almost impossible for people to achieve either Food Security or Water Security. International human rights law Food and Water Rights should never be suspended in an emergency situation in order to allow civilians a minimum of subsistence.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Malnutrition:** A condition resulting from inadequate consumption of nutrition , leading to health problems such as stunted growth, weakened immunity, and increased risk of disease.
- **Famine:** An extreme and widespread lack of food, usually caused by conflict, natural disasters, or economical problems, leading to severe hunger.
- **Humanitarian Aid:** Help provided to save lives and reduce suffering during and after emergencies, including food distribution, clean water provision, and medical support.
- **Supply Chain Disruption:** An event that causes a disruption in the production, sale, or distribution of products.
- **Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH):** A public health approach focused on safe water, proper sanitation, and hygiene practices to prevent disease.
- **Climate Resilience:** The ability of communities and systems to adapt to and recover from climate-related shocks such as droughts and floods.

- **Food Aid:** The direct provision of food to populations facing acute hunger, often delivered by international organizations or humanitarian agencies.
- **Infrastructure:** Physical systems such as roads, irrigation networks, wells, and water treatment plants that are necessary for food production and water distribution.
- **Food Security:** A condition in which all people, always, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs for an active and healthy life.
- **Water Security:** The capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable-quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and development.
- **Crisis Regions:** Areas affected by conflict, natural disasters, public health emergencies, or severe economic and political instability that significantly disrupt normal living conditions.
- **Humanitarian Access:** The ability of humanitarian actors to reach affected populations and deliver aid safely, impartially, and without obstruction.
- **Right to Food:** A human right recognized under international law, ensuring that individuals have access to adequate food or the means to obtain it.
- **Right to Water and Sanitation:** A human right that entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use.
- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees:** Individuals forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, or disasters, often facing heightened food and water insecurity.

General Overview

Increasing instability and the absence of food and water in crisis-affected regions is one of the most serious challenges for member states as a result of major humanitarian or human rights violations. These regions have regularly experienced extreme disruption from armed conflict, natural disaster, climate change, political instability or the failure of their economy.

Many crisis-ridden countries were already affected by longstanding structural poverty, weak and capable governance structures, and a restricted portfolio of public services further weakening ability to respond to emergencies. These economies have also been external dependent for many years, well beyond the initial settlement arrivals or first generations of those who remained in these regions. Armed conflict is a major factor for the destabilization of food and water systems. A loss of agricultural land and irrigation systems, destruction of food storage facilities, and destruction of water treatment facilities due to conflict will typically cause major disruptions to the food systems and water systems in the areas that experience these types of conflicts. The insecurity that goes with armed conflict disrupts food supply chains and hampers humanitarian access by blocking access to markets, agricultural lands, and clean water for civilians, which causes civilians to suffer from starvation and/or dehydration during times of conflict. Such acts are violations of international humanitarian law, which have long-lasting effects on local civilian populations.

Climate change adds to the challenges faced by crisis areas by undermining the ability of such areas to provide agricultural and/or livestock products for local survival. Increased frequency and duration of droughts reduce crop production and diminish the availability of water for crops and livestock to survive. Furthermore, flooding destroys crops and increases the contamination of drinking water, which can have devastating effects on local communities.

Major parties involved

Numerous international parties work together to provide food and clean water to those affected by crises worldwide. Each stakeholder brings different perspectives and responsibilities. The United Nations (UN) coordinates this effort and insists that food and water access are human rights that must be protected in all situations, including in times of armed conflict and natural disasters.

 Through its various agencies and mechanisms, the UN supports a rights-based method of delivering humanitarian assistance while monitoring incidents where these rights are not being protected and advocating for cooperative action by all nations to meet both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term structural issues preventing access to food and water. The primary duty bearer under international human rights law in regions experiencing crisis is the national government. It is the government's duty to ensure access to adequate food and safe drinking water for its citizens and to protect civilian infrastructure necessary to safely deliver them. However, national governments have varying capacities and willingness to fulfill this duty based on their level of political stability, available resources, and the nature of the crisis faced by their country.

In some cases, national governments engage with international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance, while in other cases, limited access to food and clean drinking water may occur due to security concerns or political differences.

Humanitarian aid organizations provide life-saving, emergency put food support, develop and promote sanitary conditions through clean water development and improvement of Sanitation facilities for vulnerable populations, provide nutritional support programs for at-risk individuals, promote safe access to food and water through development and Maintenance of local industry, non-state actors have considerable influence in conflict situations.

 In conflict situations, armed non-state actors may be the primary actors controlling territorial areas, resource areas, access routes, etc. Their actions impact and often interrupt the civilians' access to food and water through either permitting or blocking assistance operations or damaging supporting infrastructure. Such actions are likely to be considered a source of humanitarian suffering as well as violating international human rights laws.

Donor nations and international financial institutions provide funding and technical expertise for humanitarian and development assistance. Donor nations and financial institutions use their influence and funding to determine the types and quantities of food and water help and develop and watch adequate programs to provide food and water aid. Although donor nations and international financial institutions place immense importance on creating accountability,

efficacy, and sustainability with their help, funding shortfalls and political considerations can prevent donor levels from automatically expanding throughout each nation.

In addition, local communities and civil society organizations have a key role to play in tackling food and water insecurity. They are familiar with local contexts, have the capacity to help identify needs in the local community and serve as the first responders during a crisis. Their involvement in the response increases the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance to those in the affected population, as well as ensuring the response is culturally proper and more widely accepted. They also empower those most affected by the crisis.

Lastly, civilians living in areas affected by crises, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, are the parties that are directly affected by the crisis. Therefore, the experiences and needs of these individuals must be at the front of all responses to crises. In addition to being critical for their survival, ensuring that these individuals have access to enough food and safe water is essential to protecting their human dignity and supporting their fundamental rights. Consequently, all actors involved in responding to crises share a common responsibility for protecting the rights and dignity of these individuals.

Timeline of Events

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR established the foundation for recognizing access to food and an adequate standard of living as basic human rights. Although water was not explicitly mentioned, the declaration laid the groundwork for later interpretations linking human dignity, survival, and access to essential resources.

1966 – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The ICESCR formally recognized the right to adequate food and the obligation of states to take steps to end hunger. This treaty strengthened the legal framework for holding states accountable for food security, particularly during crises and emergencies.

1977 – Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.The Additional Protocols prohibited the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and protected objects indispensable to civilian survival, including food supplies and water installations. This marked a significant step in linking humanitarian law with food and water access during armed conflict.

1990s – Increase in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. The post Cold War period saw a rise in complex emergencies involving conflict, displacement, and state collapse. These crises highlighted how food and water insecurity is often driven by political instability and violence rather than natural scarcity alone.

2002 – UN Committee General Comment No. 15. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights officially recognized access to water as a human right. This clarified states' obligations to ensure sufficient, safe, and affordable water for all, including during crisis situations.

2010 – UN General Assembly Resolution on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. The General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. This resolution increased global attention to water access in humanitarian and development contexts.

2015 – Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) reinforced the global commitment to ensuring food and water access. However, progress in crisis regions remained limited due to conflict and climate-related challenges.

2020s – Escalation of Conflicts and Climate Impacts. Recent years have seen a sharp increase in food and water insecurity due to intensified conflicts, climate change, economic shocks, and global supply chain disruptions. These factors have pushed the issue to the forefront of international human rights and humanitarian discussions.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Historically, a combination of emergency humanitarian relief, development programs and legal frameworks aimed at reducing suffering and protecting human rights has been used to deal with food and water insecurity in countries experiencing crises.

Large-scale emergency responses were the first to be implemented to help communities during crisis, and agencies like World Food Program, UNICEF, MSF, and other national and international NGOs led these emergency efforts. In these situations, agencies deliver food rations, nutritional supplements, safe drinking water and sanitation facilities to millions of people whose lives are influenced by conflict, natural disasters, or economic collapse.

Although these emergency interventions have saved countless lives, they are predominantly reactive (i.e., responding after the fact), provide only temporary assistance, and do not provide solutions to long-term causes of insecurity. In addition, emergency responses are reliant on donor funding, which can vary greatly depending on the political and economic climate, and they can

be complicated by logistical impediments, insecurity, and barriers to accessing the affected populations.

Development-focused programs have also been implemented to build resilience and improve long-term food and water security. These programs include the construction and rehabilitation of irrigation systems, wells, and water treatment facilities, support for smallholder farmers through access to seeds, fertilizers, and technical training, and initiatives to improve soil fertility and crop resilience. However, in regions affected by ongoing conflict, political instability, or displacement, such programs often fail. Infrastructure is often destroyed, local capacity is insufficient to support systems, and instability prevents consistent implementation. Even successful interventions are vulnerable to disruption, illustrating the difficulty of achieving sustainable outcomes in fragile environments.

Cash-based aid and food voucher programs have appeared as alternatives to direct food distribution. These programs aim to provide households with flexibility and dignity, while supporting local markets. In principle, cash-based programs allow recipients to purchase food and other essentials according to their needs and priorities. However, in many crisis regions, market collapse, high inflation, limited banking infrastructure, and security concerns reduce their effectiveness. Cash aid cannot fully substitute for direct food or water provision when basic markets or supply chains are disrupted.

Legal and policy frameworks have also been used to address food and water insecurity. The recognition of the rights to food and water under international human rights law, along with provisions in humanitarian law prohibiting the deliberate starvation of civilians, has strengthened advocacy and monitoring. States are obliged to protect civilian access to essential resources even during emergencies or armed conflict. Despite this, enforcement is limited, particularly in regions where government authority is weak, non-state actors control territory, or accountability mechanisms are inadequate. Violations, such as attacks on food supply lines or contamination of water sources, continue to occur with impunity.

Peacekeeping and stabilization missions have contributed indirectly by improving security and enabling humanitarian access. These missions create safer conditions for aid delivery and can help protect civilians from direct attacks or sieges. However, peacekeeping alone cannot address the structural and political causes of food and water insecurity. Missions are often temporary, underfunded, and limited in mandate, leaving underlying issues unresolved.

Overall, earlier attempts demonstrate that while emergency aid, development programs, legal protections, and peacekeeping efforts are necessary, they are insufficient when implemented in isolation. Food and water insecurity in crisis regions is a complex and multidimensional problem, requiring a coordinated strategy that addresses immediate humanitarian needs while simultaneously building long-term resilience, governance, and local capacity.

Possible solutions

Addressing food and water insecurity in crisis regions requires a multifaceted approach that integrates legal, humanitarian, developmental, and governance strategies. A fundamental solution is strengthening the protection of civilians and ensuring unhindered humanitarian access. All parties, including states and armed non-state actors, must comply with international human rights and humanitarian law, protecting food systems, water infrastructure, and aid workers. Enforcement mechanisms, monitoring, and accountability structures must be enhanced to prevent violations such as the deliberate destruction of crops, water contamination, or the obstruction of aid delivery. Safe, reliable access for humanitarian actors is essential to reach vulnerable populations and deliver life-saving assistance effectively.

Another solution focuses on integrating emergency relief with long-term development and resilience-building initiatives. Immediate food and water provision must be linked with investments in climate-resilient agriculture, water management systems, and disaster preparedness. Programs supporting smallholder farmers, rehabilitating irrigation networks, constructing wells, and improving storage facilities can reduce dependence on emergency aid. In addition, promoting agricultural techniques that withstand droughts, floods, and other climate-related shocks strengthens community resilience and ensures more sustainable access to food and water.

Community involvement is also essential. Solutions must be inclusive, participatory, and culturally proper. Local populations, including women, children, displaced persons, and marginalized groups, should be actively involved in program design, decision-making, and implementation. Community-led approaches increase the effectiveness, sustainability, and social acceptance of interventions, ensuring that aid and development initiatives respond to the actual needs of affected populations.

Strengthening international cooperation and funding mechanisms is another key measure. Donor states and international institutions should provide predictable, long-term, and flexible funding that supports both emergency response and long-term resilience. Coordination among UN agencies, NGOs, and local actors must be improved to maximize efficiency, avoid duplication, and ensure that resources reach the most vulnerable populations. Collaborative approaches can use technical expertise, financial resources, and political support for effective solutions.

Finally, addressing the root causes of food and water insecurity is crucial for long-term impact. Political instability, conflict, weak governance, corruption, and economic collapse all contribute to chronic insecurity. Conflict prevention, inclusive governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and economic stabilization are necessary to create environments where food systems, water infrastructure, and humanitarian operations can function effectively. By combining emergency measures with structural reforms, international cooperation, and community empowerment, sustainable access to food and water in crisis regions can be achieved, protecting human rights and fostering long-term stability.

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