The Fragility Challenge

Summary

In 2015, world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 interrelated goals representing a comprehensive strategy to end global poverty. The SDGs include a goal to end hunger, as well as others to address the main drivers of hunger. The clarion call of the SDGs is to “Leave No One Behind,” and “Reach the Furthest Behind First.” Fragile states present the greatest challenges in achieving the SDGs. These are countries where high rates of hunger and poverty are compounded by civil conflict, vulnerability to climate change, and poor governance. 2030 is the deadline for achieving the SDGs. Humanitarian and development assistance are critical to making rapid progress, but to sustain progress and ultimately lead the way out of fragility there must also be a focus on institution building.

KEY POINTS

- Develop a whole-of-government plan to strengthen U.S. development assistance in fragile states and work with the international community to increase official development assistance to conflict-affected and fragile countries.
- Allow for much greater flexibility in how USAID partners with governments and civil society in fragile countries.
- Increase funding to address the growing gap between humanitarian needs and resources.
- Strengthen coordination of humanitarian and development activities to build resilience to shocks and stresses.
- Invest in social protection and rural development with a focus on small-scale farmers, especially women farmers.
- Help countries build more effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions for all.
Getting to Zero

Between 1990 and 2015, the global poverty rate was cut by more than half. During this same period, the hunger rate was cut nearly in half. See Figure i.1. This is faster progress than during any other time in history. In 1990, approximately one in four people in the world experienced hunger as a daily reality. By 2015, it was one in nine. No one knows for sure what the future will bring, but the recent past suggests that optimists have good reason to believe that ending hunger and poverty is within reach.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the international community in 2000, provided the institutional framework for this global mobilization against hunger and poverty. In addition to cutting hunger and poverty rates in half, the MDGs set hard targets in health, education, gender equality, and the environment to be achieved by 2015. Progress occurred more or less in all of these areas, but none was more impressive than what was achieved against hunger and poverty. We are not suggesting the MDGs were the main cause. The MDGs presented a simple, elegant framework to mobilize public support for action against hunger and poverty and other development objectives.

One thing the MDG experience taught us is that goal setting matters.

In September 2015, the international community adopted a new and much more ambitious set of goals known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A set of 17 interrelated goals, more than twice as many as the eight MDGs, they include goals to end hunger and poverty by 2030. Within this one framework, we find most, if not all, of the major social, economic, and ecological challenges of our time; and they apply universally, meaning to all countries, rich and poor alike. That means...
the United States, in addition to doing its part to help low-income countries achieve progress, has committed to ending hunger and poverty at home.

Today, most of the people who experience extreme poverty and hunger live in middle-income countries and their numbers are falling rapidly. A rising share of middle-income countries has sufficient domestic resources now to end poverty and hunger without relying on external financial support. Increasingly, hunger and poverty will be concentrated in low-income countries that do not have adequate domestic resources and will need the help of international partners. Some low-income countries face much stiffer challenges than others. Countries affected by conflict and climate change face the biggest challenges, and this is where the international community should focus support.

From 1970 to 2010, the world population grew by 87 percent, while the population in flood plains increased by 114 percent and in cyclone-prone coastlines by 192 percent.

Note: Based on the $1.90 per day poverty line.
*All numbers for 2015 and beyond are statistical projections.

When signing onto the SDGs, world leaders pledged to “leave no one behind.” The goals will only be considered achieved if they reach everyone everywhere. This makes the SDGs bolder and more visionary than the MDGs. The SDGs endeavor not only to leave no one behind but to “reach the furthest behind first.” This will require focusing on the most disadvantaged members of society and tackling structural inequalities that leave so many behind. The Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan of action for achieving the SDGs, calls for reviewing processes based on evidence and data disaggregated by “income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.”

To end poverty by 2030, many low-income countries will need to reduce extreme poverty by more than 3 percentage points per year, and to do so every year. Only 10 percent of all countries have ever reduced poverty at a rate of 3 percentage points a year, and no country has done it for so many years consecutively. At the household level, there is constant cycling into and out of poverty. The fact is, many families who are not poor are perpetually vulnerable to becoming poor, be it next month or next year. In several African countries, according to surveys, one-third to two-thirds of all households cycle into and out of poverty. In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, a study over a 25-year period found that an average of 14 percent of households in the selected communities got out of poverty every year; but over the same period, 12 percent of non-poor households fell below the poverty line. Thus, poverty is on the decline overall, but that will not do families who are newly poor any good.

It will not be possible to end hunger and poverty by 2030 by taking a business as usual approach. Ending hunger and poverty requires new thinking and innovations. The innovations most needed are not so much technical or about treating hunger as a scientific problem. They are more about how to work together, smarter and more efficiently. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are the only way we as humanity will realize the majestic vision of the SDGs. Success will come through more and better partnerships, whether government to government, governments working with civil society groups, civil society working with the private sector, or other configurations. But most of all, it requires participation from people who are living in poverty and enduring hunger. As Pope Francis said when he spoke at the 2015 SDG summit, “To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny.”
Understanding Fragility

A term often used for the countries we are talking about, the places where it will be hardest to end hunger, is “fragile state.” That doesn’t have a universally recognized definition, and many of the fragile states object to being called fragile. Bread for the World recognizes that fragile state is an imperfect and controversial concept, but we use the phrase in this report essentially as shorthand for “places where it will be hardest to end hunger.”

The idea of a fragile state can easily be extended to sub-national areas—fragile regions or communities. Any country can have fragile areas. In areas of the United States, we find conditions that have noticeable similarities to those in fragile countries. Box i.1 is a definition of fragility used by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID’s definition is not meant to be used inside the United States, but we can recognize that there are places whose residents have, for example, reason to question the effectiveness of government institutions. Some U.S. communities have poverty rates of 50 percent or more. One test of the U.S. government’s commitment to the SDG framework will be its response to development challenges in our own fragile environments.

In the international context, general definitions are meant to help clarify which countries are considered fragile. The World Bank considers fragile states to be countries “facing particularly severe development challenges: weak institutional capacity, poor governance, and political instability.” The average poverty rate in the countries the World Bank classifies as fragile is 51 percent. The World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report, Conflict, Security, and Development, focused attention on the development challenges in fragile states, noting that none of those listed

Box i.1

How USAID defines fragility

USAID has developed the following definition of fragility:

**Fragility refers to the extent to which state-society relations fail to produce outcomes that are considered to be effective and legitimate.**

Effectiveness refers to the capability of the government to work with society to assure the provision of order and public goods and services.

Legitimacy refers to the perception by segments of society that the government is exercising state power in ways that are reasonably fair and in the interests of the nation as a whole.

Finally, fragility affects state-society relations in gradations, i.e., it is not a condition that is either completely present or absent. By implication, countries with the high levels of fragility can be expected to face steeper challenges in reducing extreme poverty than those with lower levels.

Source: USAID (2014), Ending Extreme Poverty in Fragile Contexts
as fragile was on track to achieve any of the MDGs.\textsuperscript{10} By 2015, several of these nations had met at least one of the targets, but overall, the record leaves little room for doubt: these are the countries furthest off track.\textsuperscript{11}

Not all fragile states are low-income. Syria and Iraq are middle-income fragile countries. Conflict in Syria and Iraq helps explain why their region, West Asia, is the only one in the world where the hunger rate increased during the MDG era.\textsuperscript{12} In this report, we focus on development, but we note that fragile states also need to be a priority for international mediation, conflict resolution, and peacekeeping support. No amount of humanitarian and development assistance can help if large groups of armed people continue killing one another or sowing terror.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also uses the term fragile state. Most OECD members are traditional donor countries—the United States, Canada, Japan, and Western European countries, including the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations. Figure i.2 lists the principles formulated to guide the OECD’s engagement with fragile states and situations. Like the World Bank, the OECD publishes an annual list of fragile states. Most of those on the OECD list are also conflict-affected countries, but the OECD interpretation includes countries that are “vulnerable to internal and external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters.”\textsuperscript{13} Bangladesh, for example, appears on the OECD list of fragile states but not on the World Bank’s list. It is not a conflict-affected country, but it is extremely vulnerable to natural disasters and the effects of climate change.

As it turns out, though, many conflict-affected countries are also vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change. For example, Somalia, one of the most conflict-affected countries in the world, is among the most vulnerable to climate change. According to one analysis, seven of the 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change are also at risk of conflict.\textsuperscript{14} The potential for climate change to destabilize countries in some of the most volatile regions of the world is why the U.S. military considers climate change a threat to national security.\textsuperscript{15}

The United Nations does not use the term fragile state. Instead, U.N. agencies such as the World Food Program (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) refer to countries in “protracted crises.” These are defined as “environments in which a significant proportion of the population is acutely vulnerable to death, disease, and disruption of livelihoods over a prolonged period of time.” Protracted crises are often the result of conflict or natural disaster.

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\caption{Principles for Good International Countries Affected by Conflict and Fragility & Situations}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Take context as the starting point
\item Ensure all activities do no harm
\item Focus on state building as the central objective
\item Prioritize prevention
\item Recognize the links between political, security and development objectives
\item Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies
\item Align with local priorities in different ways and in different contexts
\item Agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors
\item Act fast... but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance
\item Avoid pockets of exclusion (“aid orphans”)
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\textsuperscript{10}. Avoid pockets of exclusion (“aid orphans”)
in areas where “the state has limited capacity to respond to, and mitigate, the threats to the population, or provide adequate levels of protection.”\textsuperscript{16} Widespread hunger is a risk in any protracted crisis.\textsuperscript{17}

As a U.S.-based grassroots advocacy organization, Bread for the World’s focus is on what the U.S. government can do to help end hunger. This is where the public can have the greatest impact on global hunger. Humanitarian relief is vitally important and saves untold lives every year, and later in this introduction, we will discuss how it can be strengthened. But ending hunger for good, “sustainably” as it’s often called, means getting at the root causes of hunger.

**Risk and Flexibility**

The MDG era produced new agreements between donors and developing countries on how to partner more effectively. The 2005 Paris Principles of Aid Effectiveness is the most influential of these. Its first principle is ownership: countries themselves must lead their process of development. Other principles include, for example, that donors should base their support on a country’s development plan and priorities, and that donors should coordinate their efforts to be more effective overall.

Implementation of the Paris Principles has been slow. If anywhere there were the temptation for donors to ignore changing old habits, fragile states would be the place. There is an encyclopedia of risks associated with working in fragile states. The governance challenges add layers of risk to partnering in these countries and make donors ever more tentative about ceding control of aid to national governments. The challenges range from difficulties in working with understaffed and ineffective ministries, to strengthening institutions that are weak or need to be rebuilt from the ground up, and especially, of course, corruption.

A 2012 OECD report, *Aid Risks in Fragile and Transitional Contexts: Improving Donor Behavior*, says a lot by the title—and in these words of self-reflection: “While most donors have shown an increasing strategic interest in fragile states, few have developed approaches to risk that are specifically geared towards working in fragile and transitional contexts.”\textsuperscript{18} In the 2011 World Development Report, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia took the donor community to task for what she described as its “procedural conformism.” Months after taking office in 2006, President Johnson Sirleaf appealed for help in restoring electricity to parts of Monrovia, the capital city. The country’s infrastructure was shattered after two civil wars. Not a single kilowatt of electricity was...
being produced anywhere in the country. Governments in fragile states need to deliver visible short-term results to build legitimacy. Candidate Johnson Sirleaf had promised to begin restoring power soon after taking office. None of the donors she approached, including the World Bank, United Nations, the European Union, or United States, were able to act quickly. The Government of Ghana, another low-income country, was much more responsive, but all it was able to offer were two generators.

In 2010, Liberia was one of the founding members of an association of 20 conflict and post-conflict states known as the g7+. By being part of this association, fragile states are able to amplify their voices. “We, the member countries of the g7+, believe fragile states are characterized and classified through the lens of the developed rather than through the eyes of the developing.”

In 2011, g7+ members forged a New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which was endorsed by donors, that puts g7+ countries in charge of driving their own development agenda. The g7+ was also influential in the inclusion of Goal 16, to “promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies,” in the SDG framework, insisting that peacebuilding and state building be recognized as a foundation of economic and social development.

What g7+ countries say they want from donors is flexibility and a higher tolerance of risk. The United States may be the most risk averse of all the large donors. For example, the United States does not provide budget support, except to a very few countries it has special arrangements with, and usually for diplomatic or military purposes. Budget support provides funding directly to national governments to spend on national or local development priorities. The United States on principle does not route aid through government systems; that is, for example, instead of providing aid directly to the ministry of education, the United States will pay to build a school and handpick the contractors it wants to do the job. The World Bank, on the other hand, routes all of its aid through government systems. Despite the additional risks of working in fragile states,
the Bank has reported its projects in fragile states often outperform those in nonfragile states, according to both internal and external evaluations.\textsuperscript{23}

We’re not calling for all U.S. aid to be provided as budget support. But the flexibility to do so should be available. Most Americans are familiar with the success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding countries after World War II. The Marshall Plan routed U.S. aid through country systems. These were fragile states at the time, including some recent enemies. Today, it is hard to imagine anything that looked like the original Marshall Plan in U.S. foreign policy.

“Slowly, almost imperceptibly, over several decades, the compliance side of U.S. government aid programs has grown at the expense of the technical, program side,” writes Andrew Natsios, former administrator of United States Agency for International Development (USAID), describing the compliance side as a counter-bureaucracy: “a set of U.S. government agencies charged with command and control of the federal bureaucracy through a set of budgeting, oversight, accountability, and measurement systems that have grown over several decades to a massive degree, with extraordinary layer upon layer of procedural and compliance requirements.”\textsuperscript{24}

The counter-bureaucracy discourages innovation and is hostile to the risks and uncertainties common to doing business in fragile states. For example, in 2013, the United States Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) recommended suspension of a health program that USAID was funding. Between 2003 and 2012, USAID invested in expanding low-cost health services, led by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health. The program involved building a chain of health clinics across the country, but its real objective was institution building, trying to ensure what was achieved under the program would be sustainable once the Afghan government took it over. Under the program, child mortality rates were cut by more than half, life expectancy increased from 42 to 62 years, and 90 percent of the population was covered by basic health services, all at a cost of $4.50 per head.\textsuperscript{25} The program was successful beyond all expectations, yet SIGAR recommended cancelling it not because it found any waste or fraud; the problem was the Afghan Ministry of Public Health had failed to comply with the required U.S. government accounting standards.\textsuperscript{26}

“Development,” says Natsios, “is at its root an effort to build or strengthen institutions (public, private profit-making, and nonprofit civil society) in poor and fragile states, with the ultimate goal of developing a capable state, market economy, and civil society that can manage public services, design good policies, create jobs, and protect human rights and the rule of law on a reliable, sustainable basis after the aid program is over and funding ends.”\textsuperscript{27}
Civil Society—Vital Partners in Development

Faustine Wabwire, Bread for the World Institute

Civil society around the world has played a critical role in achieving progress on key development outcomes. Civil society is defined as “the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.”

Civil society has enabled dialogue and exchange of information between marginalized communities and government. Evidence shows that improved delivery of services depends on the ability of citizens to engage with the government and advocate for themselves. Deepened civil society engagement has the potential to inform evidence-based policymaking in key sectors, such as agriculture, health, gender equality, and education, among others.

Donors have not focused enough on strengthening the capacity of civil society in developing countries. Capacity building takes time and requires patience, particularly in challenging post-conflict environments. Strengthening the capacity of civil society on important issues affecting development outcomes, such as analysis of government budgets, makes it possible for citizens in developing countries to hold their governments accountable.

In 2011, President Obama, in partnership with seven other heads of state, launched the Open Government Partnership (OGP) at the U.N. General Assembly. OGP’s 70 participating countries represent one-third of the world’s population. As a result of the OGP, more governments are opening up their budgets to public scrutiny.

In January 2017, the United States will have a new administration. It should build on the work the Obama administration has done in forging meaningful relationships between civil society and governments in developing countries.

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Zeroing in on Conflict and Climate-related Disaster

Famine was declared in Somalia in May 2011 and continued through October of that year. It was the first, and so far the only, full-fledged famine of the 21st century. Conflict and climate change converged to push this chronically hungry nation into starvation. Two years of severe drought—the worst in the country in 60 years—caused a collapse in food production. At the same time, fighting among several militia factions closed millions of people off from humanitarian supply lines from outside. The death toll was more than 250,000. About 200,000 survivors sought refuge in neighboring Kenya or Ethiopia and an additional 200,000 were displaced from their homes but remained in Somalia. Nearly half a million children younger than 5 were malnourished. In some areas, levels of severe acute malnutrition, also known as wasting, exceeded 50 percent.29

A child living in a developing country that is affected by conflict is twice as likely to be hungry as a child living in a developing country that is at peace. Even short bouts of hunger and malnutrition during early childhood can cause death or lifelong damage.30 A child growing up in a country affected by conflict is nearly three times as likely to be out of school as a child in a nation at peace.31 In Syria, 2.1 million children are out-of-school, plus another 700,000 living as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.32

In 2015, one in eight live births worldwide took place in a conflict zone, more than 16 million babies.33 The number of babies born in conflict zones has been rising steadily over the last decade, along with the number of conflicts. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of major civil wars nearly tripled, from four to 11, compared to the previous decade when the number had been declining. At the beginning of 2016, there were 33 active conflicts around the globe, and the number of people forcibly displaced by conflict reached 65 million, the highest number since World War II.34

More people die from hunger and disease in conflict zones than from violence.35 Conflict is one of the greatest threats to human development. Paul Collier, author of The Bottom Billion, describes the effects on nations as “development in reverse.” Within two years of the start of the Syrian civil war, the country had lost 35 years of development gains: 3,000 schools damaged or destroyed, another 2,000 converted to shelters for displaced people; 31 percent of public health centers destroyed; half the population living in poverty, half the workforce unemployed.36
The effects of conflict endure long after the fighting ends. Four decades after the 1967-70 Nigerian civil war, researchers found that people born during the war were shorter (stunted) on average than others in the population. Similar findings were reported among people born during violent conflict in Burundi and Zimbabwe. Stunting occurs as a result of chronic malnutrition during the 1,000-day period between pregnancy and age two. In addition to shorter stature, the enduring effects include increased risk of chronic illness, poor school performance, and reduced labor productivity. Preventing stunting is one of the most cost-effective strategies to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. All it entails is simply providing children, as well as pregnant and lactating women, with adequate nutrition during this critical growth phase. Presently 156 million children under 5 years of age are stunted. Stunting and wasting are both higher in fragile than nonfragile states. See Figure i.3.

Climate change is growing in importance as a cause of fragility. More than 200 million people per year are directly affected by climate-related disasters, and their numbers are rising. Most are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the regions with the highest rates of stunted children and hunger. Four out of five people experiencing hunger live in areas susceptible to natural disasters. Climate-related disasters are a subset of natural disaster. Floods, droughts, tropical storms, heat/cold waves, and forest fires are considered climate-related. Sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affected by drought, while South Asia is disproportionately affected by flooding. Drought is the world’s costliest natural disaster, and one of the main reasons African farmers give up trying to earn a living from their desiccated soils and migrate to cities. Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, densely populated countries in South Asia, are highly vulnerable to flooding. In the summer of 2010, heavy monsoon rains swelled the Indus River in Pakistan and flooded one-fifth of the country. It was the worst flood so far this century, affecting more than 21 million people, more than the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined.

In 2015, the medical journal *The Lancet* reported that climate change could undermine 50 years of progress in global health. Diseases that mainly affect poor people are expected to increase the most due to climate change. Eighty percent of the deaths related to climate change occur among children in developing countries. Most could be prevented with better access to safe water and improved sanitation. Drought forces people to use lower quality water sources that increase the risk of contamination. Diarrheal outbreaks occur after flooding when drinking water becomes contaminated. The linkages between stunting and diarrhea are well documented. Children with diarrhea are unable to absorb nutrients, compounding the effects of malnutrition. Rising temperatures increase the chances that infectious diseases will spread to new areas. For example, climate change is expected to cause malaria-bearing mosquitoes to spread. Ninety
percent of the people who die of malaria live in sub-Saharan Africa—of whom 78 percent are children under the age of 5. This is mainly due to limited access to health facilities in rural areas. Dengue fever, on the other hand, is predominantly an urban disease, due to poorly managed water and solid waste systems. There has been a 30-fold increase in global cases of dengue in the last half century, with most cases in the Asia-Pacific region. Climate change has also been implicated in the spread of the Zika virus.

The international community has the tools to address the humanitarian and development challenges outlined above, and in the following sections we will delve into the toolbox. The traditional role of humanitarian actors has been to provide food assistance and other forms of relief to people in emergencies. Two-thirds of humanitarian aid goes to people who have needed it for eight or more years. In this context, it makes little sense for humanitarian and development actors to be working separately, with relief on one side and development on the other.

As we see in Figure i.4, poverty has become more concentrated in fragile states, which are the least likely places of all for relief and development to follow a linear progression. With the average length of displacement at 17 years, longer than a child’s full school career, relief and development must be treated as flexible concepts. People affected by conflict and natural disaster are themselves asking for durable solutions. As Eva von Olreich, president of the Swedish Red Cross, says, “Affected people don’t see the institutional divides between humanitarian and development aid. They only know whether the support they get is relevant and useful and helps them to be independent.”

Modernizing Crisis Response

Donors are providing more humanitarian assistance than ever before. Between 2004 and 2015, humanitarian funding increased six-fold, from $3.4 billion to $21.8 billion, and fragile and conflict-affected countries have been the largest recipients of this assistance. But in spite of this dramatic increase in resources, donors now meet less than two-thirds of the annual humanitarian needs. See Figure i.5. In 2014 and again in 2015, the World Food Program had to temporarily suspend food aid to 1.7 million Syrian refugees because of funding shortfalls. U.N. appeals for Syria brought in only 53 percent of the $7.4 billion needed. And this was for a refugee crisis that receives constant media attention, unlike dozens of others that are generally out of sight and out of mind. For example, Gambia, a West African country that receives almost no media attention.
in donor nations, received only 5 percent of requested funding.\textsuperscript{60}

The international community will simply not be able to end hunger by 2030 without adequate financing for the global humanitarian system. A steady, reliable stream of revenue commensurate with the level of need is essential. Every day, more than 40,000 people are displaced by violence and conflict,\textsuperscript{61} while another 60,000 are displaced by climate and weather-related disasters.\textsuperscript{62} Donors need to give more and they also need to give better, allowing for more flexibility in how humanitarian resources can be used. It is significant that as we go to press, the World Bank is negotiating the terms of the 18th replenishment of its zero-interest rate lending arm, IDA, which for the first time could substantially increase World Bank funding to deal with the refugee crisis, especially in Syria, and to work in fragile countries.\textsuperscript{63}

Presently, humanitarian assistance is financed on a voluntary basis. As we can see from the response to the Syrian refugee crisis, this just does not work. Humanitarian aid is a public good—all people should be able to count on it in times of need. It should therefore be financed with mandatory contributions from all countries with the means to contribute. Charges should be levied at the national level in the same manner that contributions are collected to finance UN peacekeeping operations, a system that is also woefully underfunded and needs to be strengthened.

Closing the funding gap will require a transformational change in how the humanitarian system works. Resources are currently raised through an annual appeal. Hundreds of humanitarian organizationa and U.N. system agencies delivering food, medicine, shelter, and other assistance in conflict- and disaster-affected areas assess their annual needs and together present an appeal

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\caption{Humanitarian Funding Requirements and Proportion of Requirements Met, 2015}
\label{fig:humanitarian-funding}
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Notes: The data does not include the Yemen Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan. To avoid double counting of the regional appeals with the country appeals, the Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) does not include the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) component; the Central African Republic (CAR) RRRP only includes the Republic of the Congo component; the Nigeria RRRP is not included. CAR: Central African Republic; DPR Korea: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Data is in current prices.


to donors. Nearly two-thirds of the global humanitarian assistance provided by governments comes from five countries. The United States gives the most in absolute dollars.64 See Figure i.6. Donor governments altogether provide three-fourths of global humanitarian assistance, with the rest coming from private sources.65 The aid is not necessarily distributed strictly according to need. Donor governments are more interested in some countries than others for security reasons. Private funding comes mainly from individuals. Generally, people are more willing to donate to assist victims of natural disasters, but that has changed for now with the Syrian crisis, which received the most private funding in 2015.66

A yearly fundraising cycle, like voluntary contributions, is a poor way of handling complex crises. For one thing, it wastes money: WFP has estimated that with multi-year financing, it could save between 23 percent and 33 percent on the cost of purchasing and transporting commod-

![Figure i.6](image-url)
ties.\textsuperscript{67} Being able to plan multi-year programs is not only more cost-effective, but also enables humanitarian assistance to better help people, particularly children, in the long run. If child nutrition programs could be planned further in advance, and the ready-to-use therapeutic foods that save children’s lives could be ordered and on hand, more children would survive and more survivors would avoid the lifelong damage caused by stunting.

Another important reform is to move toward giving cash rather than shipments of food aid. Assistance could be delivered more quickly and aid workers could stretch limited resources further. Currently, cash transfers and vouchers combined are only 6 percent of international humanitarian aid.\textsuperscript{68} In one study, 70 percent of a sample group of Syrian refugees traded their in-kind food assistance for cash.\textsuperscript{69} The cash offered the flexibility to obtain what they (not someone else, perhaps thousands of miles away) considered to be their most immediate needs.

Advances in digital payment systems make it possible to transfer cash efficiently on a wide scale. Digital delivery of cash transfers using mobile phones can reach people where in-kind aid is not a viable option. During the 2011 famine in Somalia, aid agencies were able to get millions of dollars in cash to people to buy food in areas deemed too insecure to deliver food aid.\textsuperscript{70} We may think of people in crisis areas as being malnourished and at risk of death because there is no food where they are. This is sometimes true, but not always. Food may be available in local markets, but people cannot afford it at the inflated prices.

Cash doesn’t work best in all circumstances, but in appropriate settings it is unequivocally more efficient. The U.S. government, the largest donor of humanitarian food assistance, provides mostly in-kind food aid sent from the United States on U.S.-flagged ships. Speed and agility mean everything in a crisis, and when food is available in local markets, it doesn’t make sense to ship it from thousands of miles away. WFP uses debit cards that refill each month to provide food assistance to millions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan.\textsuperscript{71} The boost to local economies in these countries helps compensate for some of the financial burden they bear in hosting refugees.

A much-needed change is for donors to move toward partnering directly with national and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in crisis-affected countries. In 2014, only 0.2 percent of humanitarian funding was routed directly to national and local NGOs.\textsuperscript{72} International NGOs, favored by donor governments, employ local NGOs as subcontractors, meaning their contributions to lifesaving work go largely unnoticed. Donors don’t recognize their distinct
contributions because of a lack of transparency in the humanitarian aid funding chain. If all the links in the chain were documented, clarifying the value of everyone involved, donors would have a much better sense of local capacity. The direct involvement of national and local actors not only improves the effectiveness of the efforts in progress, but extends the impact of humanitarian relief since these organizations and professionals will have more experience and capacity to manage future emergencies in their countries.

The obstacles to improving coordination between humanitarian and development activities have been debated for many years. There are clear differences in operational cultures and in the circumstances of much of their work. With the current financing structure, humanitarian actors have no choice but to plan for short-term operations. Development organizations more often enjoy multi-year financing. Humanitarian actors operate in risky environments that require them to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Development actors are conditioned to be averse to risk, as we heard earlier from Andrew Natsios. National ownership is the guiding principle of development actors, while humanitarian actors operate under the inviolable principle of neutrality. In 2014, 329 aid workers were killed, kidnapped, or wounded.73 In conflict zones, where allegiances have consequences, neutrality or perceived neutrality can be a matter of life and death.

All of these differences do not preclude better coordination between humanitarian and development actors. Most aid organizations that do humanitarian work also provide development assistance. USAID has created joint planning cells to bring together relief and development teams to “layer, integrate, and sequence” humanitarian and development assistance.74 Notwithstanding these positive steps, there is still not enough coordination between the agency’s humanitarian and development specialists. Neither humanitarian nor development programs are doing enough as yet to help people build resilience, although the concept of resilience has reframed the work of both humanitarian and development actors operating in fragile environments. USAID defines resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth."75 This is obviously a critical concern in fragile environments.

The World Humanitarian Summit held in 2016 was the first-ever dedicated to the humanitarian landscape. Bread for the World was represented at the summit by board chair Sandra Joireman. Organizers attempted to address some of the differences that complicate efforts to more closely coordinate the work of humanitarian and development programs. U.N. Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon, who presided over the meeting, said, “Achieving [better coordination] will require international providers to set aside artificial institutional labels of “development” or “humanitarian,” working together over multi-year horizons with the SDGs as our common overall results and accountability framework.” The Summit produced several “commitments,” including expanding the use of cash and scaling up funding to local and national NGOs. But countries were under no obligation to make commitments, and the United States committed to neither of these.

A less heralded but significant breakthrough for coordination was the announcement of the Education Cannot Wait Initiative. Presently, less than 2 percent of humanitarian aid goes towards education. In 2015, there were 80 million school-aged children and youth whose education had been disrupted by conflict or natural disaster, 37 million out of school altogether and the remainder receiving uneven support. The MDG era produced significant gains toward universal primary education, particularly among girls, and the SDGs promise children everywhere access to a quality, free primary and secondary education by 2030. With a funding target of $3.85 billion over five years, the Education Cannot Wait Initiative is a down payment on that promise for children trapped in crisis-affected countries, as well as a big step towards leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first.

Rural Development and Social Protection

In 2015, the three U.N. food and agriculture organizations—FAO, WFP, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)—calculated how much it would cost to end hunger by 2030. In their report, Achieving Zero Hunger, they estimated an annual cost of $265 billion from 2016 through 2030, or about 0.3 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP). That’s an additional $160 per year per person living in extreme poverty.

At the launch of the report, FAO Director-General José Graziano Da Silva underscored that whatever figures are used, they are a fraction of what hunger costs societies, economies, and individuals. In human terms, the amount of suffering that would be prevented is incalculable. But let’s continue with economics. In a 2011 paper for the Copenhagen Consensus on Human Challenges, economists Sue Horton and Richard Steckel modeled the losses in global GDP from hunger over the course of the 20th century, and then projected the losses out to 2050. Based on historical trends, they project a 6 percent loss in global GDP through 2050, and as much as 12 percent in countries with exceptionally high poverty rates. In other words, it doesn’t make financial sense not to invest in ending hunger—since 0.3 percent of

More than two-thirds of people in the world who are hungry live in rural areas of developing countries, the majority of them in Asia, earning what little income they make in the agricultural sector.
Hope for Refugee Children Through Education

Jesuit Refugee Service

Lebanon has welcomed about 1.5 million Syrian refugees since civil war erupted in neighboring Syria in 2011, accounting for about a quarter of Lebanon’s current population. But the influx of an estimated 502,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children has stretched the host country’s public schools to the limits.

Even when Syrian refugee children are accepted into Syrian schools they often find it difficult to assimilate, as they face challenges such as language barriers, discrimination, bullying, social and economic issues, and unpredictable enrollment regulations.

So in response, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) offers extensive education and language training programs in Jbeil and in Kafr Zabad—two areas in Lebanon with high concentrations of Syrian refugees—to help refugee children prepare for Lebanese public schools.

In 2015, more than 800 children were enrolled in JRS-classes in Jbeil and in Kafr Zabad during the first half of the year—about double compared with the same time period in 2014. And despite the program’s progress, increasingly high demand for classes mean there is a waiting list of potential students eager to enroll.

All of the more than 170 JRS students in Jbeil and in Kafr Zabad who took placement tests for the Lebanese school system during the first half of 2015 earned passing grades. But with classroom space tight, it’s uncertain how many children will have the opportunity to attend regular public schools.

Increasingly desperate living conditions of refugee families have created stressful home environments that threaten to undermine their children’s education, with some children dropping out of school so they can work to support their family. So JRS added social workers to its educational programs in 2015. Absentee and dropout rates since have dropped significantly.

In addition to education needs, JRS also routinely provides refugee families with food baskets, hygiene products and items to help them cope with winter, such as blankets, heaters, drapes and carpet.

JRS students in Lebanon say they’re grateful for the opportunity to continue their studies but can’t wait to return one day to their home country.

*Find out more about Jesuit Refugee Service at jrsusa.org.*
global GDP is far less than 6 percent.

The basic formula for ending hunger is simple, according to Achieving Zero Hunger: economic growth to raise incomes and lift people out of poverty, along with social assistance programs (which we call social protection in this report) to meet urgent human needs. The key economic sector is agriculture. FAO has shown that investment in agricultural development in low-income countries is up to five times as effective in reducing hunger and poverty as investments in any other sector.83 Box i.4 has examples of the agricultural investments we’re talking about. In the countries with the lowest per capita incomes, an average of 70 percent of the workforce is employed in agriculture. Most fragile states have economies based on agriculture.84

Despite the importance of their agricultural sectors, fragile states are more dependent on food imports than other developing countries.85 This makes them more vulnerable to international price shocks, as we saw in 2007-2008 when global food prices skyrocketed, pushing millions more families into poverty and triggering protests and rioting in 48 countries.86 The Middle East and North Africa region, which includes the countries of the Sahel that border the Sahara Desert, is the most dependent of all on imported food. This is one of the most conflict-prone areas in

Box i.4

**Agricultural development assistance—key interventions to support small scale producers:**

- Improve road infrastructure to expand market access.
- Build storage facilities to reduce post-harvest losses.
- Invest in research to increase crop productivity and resistance to pests and diseases.
- Intensify use of climate-smart agriculture practices.
- Diversify production to increase consumption of nutritious foods.
- Strengthen governance of land tenure and other natural resources.
- Empower women farmers with inputs, extension, credit and other financial services, labor- and time-saving technologies, and legal rights.
the world, and also one of the most affected by climate change.

After the 2007-2008 food-price crises, donors committed to increasing investments in agricultural development. The food-price crisis was a wake-up call for them. For the better part of two decades, donor governments had been reducing support for agriculture and pressing developing country governments to open their markets to cheap imports from subsidized farmers in rich countries. It is fair to say that donor countries contributed to making poor countries more vulnerable to the food-price shocks.

Haiti is a perfect example. In the 1970s, the country was fully self-sufficient in rice production. In the 1980s, market deregulation and trade liberalization led to rapid disinvestment in the agricultural sector. Donors, led by the United States, insisted that the Haitian government invest less in agriculture and more in other sectors. Cheaper, subsidized rice from the United States flooded the domestic market. In addition, the Haitian government’s capacity to respond to hunger emergencies was eroded by insufficient budget support to programs that once addressed food security. Haiti stands out among all the countries affected by the 2007-2008 food price crisis, because rioting in Port-au-Prince, the capital city, led to the fall of the government.

Feed the Future, the U.S. government’s global hunger and food security initiative, was born out of the food-price crisis. So too was the Global Agricultural and Food Security Program, a multilateral trust fund managed by the World Bank and supported by the United States and other donors. Neither of these programs is targeted exclusively to fragile states. In fact, most of the countries where Feed the Future is active are not fragile. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the most fragile region, do however receive the largest share of assistance through Feed the Future. Africa never had a Green Revolution, as did Asia and Latin America beginning in the 1960s. From 1960 to 2010, per capita cereal production increased by 44 percent and 48 percent in Asia and Latin America respectively, while production decreased by 13 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Investments in agricultural development are essential to ending hunger. But it is also essential to support social protection programs. *Achieving Zero Hunger* argues that we don’t need to wait for improvements in agricultural productivity to end hunger. The world can end hunger very quickly by expanding social protection. Ghana, the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to cut hunger in half during the MDG era, linked investments in social protection with agricultural development. School meal programs sourced their foods from local farmers, providing the farmers with a guaranteed market and school children with a daily meal. Brazil was the first country to create
this linkage as part of its nationwide food security strategy, developed under the leadership of the former Minister of Food Security José Graziano Da Silva.

Social protection emerged only in the last couple of decades as a key policy tool to reduce hunger and poverty in developing countries. It started in Latin America with the adoption of conditional cash transfers. Parents of young children receive a cash allowance from the government to keep their children in school and ensure they receive vaccinations and other basic health care. The number of countries that have conditional cash transfer programs has grown from 27 in 2008 to 64 in 2014.89 Educational attainment and good health are building blocks for overcoming the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Because they apply to both boys and girls, the transfers also reduce gender inequalities, which are a root cause of hunger and poverty. In developing countries, girls still receive fewer years of education than boys, particularly at the secondary school level. One reason is that they are more likely to be pulled from school to work and help support the family. Almost always, cash transfers are given to a woman. In Brazil, in fact, it's legally required for the transfers to be controlled by women. Women are more likely than men to spend an increase in income on their children, including on the quality and quantity of foods they consume.90

In addition to conditional cash transfers, there are many other instruments of social protection. The three main forms of social protection are social safety nets, social insurance, and labor market measures.91 See Table i.1. School feeding is the most common safety net program in developing countries.92 The international community has supported school feeding for decades. In El Salvador, the school meals program was started by WFP in the midst of a civil war in the 1980s, and it was not until 2007, after many transition phases, that the government of El Salvador finally assumed full control over the program.93 Thirty-eight countries have successfully taken over school meal programs started by donors in the past 45 years.94

More than 2 billion people in the developing world are benefiting from some form of social protection.95 The lowest coverage and the fewest services are in countries with the highest poverty rates. Two-thirds of those living in extreme poverty are not covered by any type of social safety

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table i.1 Social Protection Includes Safety Nets, Social Insurance, and Labor Market Policies</th>
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<td><strong>Category</strong></td>
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| **Social safety nets (or social assistance)** | • Conditional and unconditional cash transfers, including noncontributory pensions and disability, birth and death allowances  
• Food stamps, rations, emergency food distribution, school feeding and food subsidies  
• Cash or food-for-work programs  
• Free or subsidized health services  
• Housing and utility subsidies  
• Scholarships and fee waivers |
| **Social insurance** | • Old age, survivor, and disability contributory pensions  
• Occupational injury benefits, sick or maternity leave  
• Health insurance |
| **Labor market policies** | • Unemployment, severance, and early retirement compensation  
• Training, job sharing, and labor market services  
• Wage subsidies and other employment incentives, including for disabled people |

net, and in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the regions with the highest concentrations of extreme poverty, the coverage is thinnest of all. Historically, national governments have not invested in expansive social protection programs until their countries have had several years of strong economic growth. National social protection systems are mainly financed with a country’s own resources, and this is true today in middle-income countries. The world’s five largest social protection programs are in middle-income countries and, combined, reach more than 526 million people.

In September 2015, USAID released *A Vision for Ending Extreme Poverty* to coincide with the adoption of the SDGs. The document outlines a strategy based on five pillars of inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Social protection—or more specifically, safety nets—is one of these pillars. This could signal a shift in how USAID works with national governments. A donor cannot contribute to a social protection system without working closely with and through the national government. A system is not the same as a program or collection of programs. As FAO puts it, if a social protection system “is not institutionalized in domestic budgets, structures, tax and labor market policy and overall political processes—if they are not part of a dynamic social contract between the state and citizens—then they are not a real social protection system.”

**Good Governance and Inclusive Institutions**

During the 2007-2008 food-price crisis, protests were common in countries around the world. Those that turned violent occurred mostly in countries with poor governance. Good governance is an effective shock absorber and has been shown to reduce the risk of conflict by 30 percent to 45 percent.

Good governance may best be understood by what it requires, starting with accountability to citizens. Peaceful protest is a way for citizens to make their voices heard, a form of holding government accountable. In stable democracies, citizens expect to be heard at the ballot box and for elections to be legitimate. Most definitions of good governance though stop short of requiring elections. In post-conflict countries, it is recommended not to rush into elections, which can be destabilizing before peace has had time to take root.

Good governance requires transparency in government decision making. A lack of transparency provides cover for corruption. Transparency International publishes an annual...
Corruption Perceptions Index, based on surveys in more than 100 countries. In general, the poorer the country, the more corruption is perceived and reported. Most people’s perceptions of corruption are based on their experience with public services they desperately need. Transparency International’s surveys ask whether you have had to pay a bribe for public services in the past year. A weak governance environment with little or no accountability provides myriad incentives for private gain. Public servants in these countries earn very little compared to their peers in rich countries, and some, such as police officers and lower level administrators, may be earning barely enough to feed their families. Accepting bribes may be more a matter of survival than anything else.

The professionalization of the civil service is necessary to improve governance. Building and maintaining a professional administration to fulfill government responsibilities requires a reliable source of financing. As Figure i.7 shows, strengthening local tax systems has not been a high priority for donors. Even low-income countries can raise substantial tax revenue. Fragile states are frequently rich in natural resources. Conflicts are often fought over control of these resources. The people profiting from extractive industries, whether inside or outside government, are naturally not eager to pay taxes. Ways of holding elites accountable must be built into government structures—not an easy task. One way for international partners to help is by enabling governments to set up effective financial management systems.

Donor governments often pressure national governments to be more accountable to citizens, but it’s not easy to create political will when it doesn’t already exist to some degree. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a U.S. development agency that provides aid to low-income countries committed to good governance, requires partner countries to meet strict criteria on a checklist of items such as controlling corruption and spending on health and education. But donor resources can never be fully insulated from the political context of the country. MCC was forced to abruptly terminate compacts in 2009 with Madagascar and in 2012 with Mali because of military coups.

A nation’s leaders are the face of governance, while state institutions are the vital organs that pump life into systems that make it possible for governments to function and serve their populations. The World Bank’s 2011 report *Conflict, Security, and Development* tells us that it takes, on average, anywhere from 15 to 40 years to reform state institutions. Not only do institutions change slowly, the direction of change can be very unclear as it is taking place.
Donors can do little independently to build effective institutions. They have tried their hand at institution building, and when it is done with a heavy hand, the results have not been good. The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s attempted to accelerate economic growth and development in developing countries. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund led the charge by imposing strict conditions on countries to qualify for aid. The results were mixed, especially in Africa. One lesson from this period stands out. Reforms should not be forced on a country that are not supported by leaders or a majority of citizens.

Institution building is an internal process, steered by local actors. These may be government leaders, but civil society and others outside government can also have a strong influence. One good example of how international partners can support local actors in strengthening institutions is from Guatemala. The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG) was created in 2007 by an agreement between the United Nations and the Guatemalan government. The motivation to establish the commission, however, came from pressure by Guatemalan civil society groups to do something about wide-scale government corruption and its links to rising levels of violence.

CICIG works with the country’s judiciary and security institutions, building their capacities to investigate and prosecute organized crime—capacities Guatemala had previously lacked. In 2015, CICIG, working jointly with the Guatemalan Public Prosecutor’s Office, unearthed a massive multimillion-dollar corruption scheme that reached all the way up to the president. The investigation led to the president’s resignation and subsequent prosecution on corruption charges. None of this would have been possible without the advocacy of civil society groups and the courage of a committed group of government officials able to stand up to intimidation.

The successes against corruption in Guatemala through CICIG, and in countries that have qualified for MCC funding through their commitment to improved governance, hinge on the broader principle of respect for the rule of law. Where there is the rule of law, government cannot arbitrarily use its power against citizens. Legal frameworks are transparent, and all people are accountable to the same laws. In societies that fully respect the rule of law, the rights of all citizens are upheld, regardless of wealth, social status, political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
Getting to Zero in the United States

One chapter of this report is on the United States. The United States is not a fragile state, and we’re not suggesting that it is. But this report is about the places where it will be most difficult to end hunger and poverty by 2030. Within the United States, those places are areas of concentrated poverty—communities where 20 to 40 percent, or even more, of residents live below the poverty line.

The path out of hunger and poverty is similar in every country. First, people need to be able to earn a living so that they can provide food, shelter, and other necessities for their families. Second, social protections to cope with shocks, such as a serious illness; or to manage barriers to work, such as access to affordable child care. Third, a system that is just and treats all people fairly.

Almost 14 million people live in communities of concentrated poverty—twice as many as in 2000.107 The number of people who live in high-poverty neighborhoods has risen much faster than the number of people in the United States as a whole who fell below the poverty line. As a community becomes poorer, there are more and more barriers to people lifting themselves out of poverty. The difficulties reinforce and amplify each other. A survey of the literature on concentrated poverty shows that the most negative symptoms of poverty (e.g., chronic joblessness, dropping out of school, crime, among others) generally are not seen in neighborhoods whose poverty rate is less than 20 percent. But they appear and begin to increase at poverty rates of more than 20 percent, and they increase rapidly as the poverty rate rises to 40 percent or more.108

To end hunger in the United States by 2030, public policies and

Nate Gordon strives to give his children the life he never had. Like many men who struggle after serving time in prison, he was near despair before he found a program that helps men like himself reintegrate into their communities. Now he is co-director of that program, HELP, in Cincinnati, Ohio.
resources must be much more focused on reducing concentrated poverty. Some small-scale demonstration projects have shown promise, but they come and go rather than being brought to scale. We will need a long-term commitment to resolve the many interconnected problems in high-poverty communities.

Expanding access to affordable housing would make a big difference. The majority of families in poverty spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing, and in some metropolitan areas it is more than 70 percent, leaving little room for food or much else. Federal housing assistance lifts a higher share of its recipients out of poverty than any other safety net program. The problem is that only one in four low-income families who is eligible for housing assistance actually receives it. In Chapter 3, we discuss some proposals to improve housing policies and their implementation. For example, one idea is to establish a universal voucher program for families who earn less than a specified income.

Progress against hunger is interconnected with justice for all. We all know from the news, if not from personal experience, that the law and law enforcement are not applied objectively or fairly. All over the country, there have been incidents of police killing unarmed African American men. People who are convicted of similar crimes do not get similar sentences. Race weighs heavily in the outcome. Black men are 6 times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and 2.5 times as likely as Latino men.

The incarceration of so many men, mostly young men, has devastated the communities where they are from, and these are among the most disadvantaged communities in the country. Two-thirds of families with a member who is incarcerated struggle to meet basic needs such as food and housing costs. Much of the “collateral damage” of incarceration is inflicted on children. Children from families with someone imprisoned are more likely to drop out of school and to have contact themselves with the criminal justice system.

Concentrated poverty is a reflection of some of the most charged political and social problems in the United States and an enormous barrier to ending hunger and poverty. There are other issues that affect hunger and poverty, but the racism embedded in government institutions is at the top of the list. To leave no one behind means we must call institutionalized racism what it is and move aggressively to dismantle it.
International Law is Limited on the Rights and Treatment of Refugees and Displaced People

Sandra F. Joireman

Up until the turn of this century, the 1951 Convention on Refugees has provided a flexible approach to dealing with individuals and groups of refugees. The Refugee Convention gives authority to the 146 signatory states and to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to assess and protect refugees. However, times have changed in terms of both conflict and climate change, and this framework is less useful than it has been in the past. Indeed, we are in need of more and better international agreements that can address the challenges of forced migration in the 21st century.

There are two key documents on refugees, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its implementing legislation, the 1967 protocol, both of which define a refugee as “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”1

Individuals who want refugee status need to prove they are threatened with harm in order to receive asylum in another country. However, since the 1960s, UNHCR and states have also recognized groups of people fleeing risk of harm (prima facie refugees) who “on the basis of readily apparent, objective circumstances in the country of origin” qualify for refugee status.2 This is typically determined by states or the UNHCR in situations of armed conflict. For example, Syrians are right now considered to be prima facie refugees, so the possession of a Syrian passport is enough to qualify as a refugee, without any need for an individual to prove a threat of harm.

One of the most significant problems with the Refugee Convention is that it only applies to those who have crossed an international border. Many people are displaced within their countries of origin and remain without international protection and sometimes without any assistance. This is a particular problem when the state is a party to the conflict that is causing forced migration. There are twice as many internally displaced people as there are refugees worldwide. In 2015, there were 27.8 million new displacements due to conflict, violence and disasters, bringing the overall total to 40.8 million internally displaced people worldwide.3 The African Union has developed the Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), or the Kampala Convention, which applies international humanitarian law to internally displaced people and compels states to both monitor internal displacement as well as to protect and assist the internally displaced. The Kampala Convention stands alone; other regions of the world have not developed similar instruments for the protection of IDPs, nor has there been any additional international law. Without an international convention that applies to displaced people, there is no obligation on states to count, monitor, or provide for the displaced.
A second problem with the Refugee Convention is that it cannot address the increasing numbers of people forced to migrate as a result of climate change. While many climate migrants move within their own countries, for example farmers who change residence from rural to urban areas due to drought, some also cross borders. In the case of sudden-onset disaster situations, the closest place of safety may be across an international border. For example, when the Haiti Earthquake occurred in 2010, many Haitians fled to the neighboring Dominican Republic, but they are not refugees nor could they be considered such under international law. This has been an issue of concern for some time. Indeed, the Nansen Initiative, launched in 2012, was a state-led consultative process designed to address the issue of protection for those forced to cross borders by natural disasters and climate change. The Nansen Initiative resulted in agreement on a protection agenda in 2015, but the agreement, which only garnered the acceptance of 109 state delegations, is non-binding and does not hold the weight of an international convention. Thus, the problem of protecting climate change migrants, both the internally displaced and those crossing state boundaries, remains.

The third problem with the international law regarding refugees is that it does not address the concerns of migrants displaced by violence that is not the result of civil or international war. In 2014, the number of unaccompanied child migrants from Central America trying to cross the border into the United States surged to levels never seen before. They were fleeing the threat of harm from gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, some of the most violent countries in the world. According to U.S. law, each of these children must individually be assessed for their asylum claims. U.S. law, based on the Refugee Convention, allows individuals to apply for asylum in the United States if they can show past persecution or prove, as an individual, a well-founded fear of future persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. This is obviously extraordinarily difficult for children to do, particularly if they do not have legal representation. These children, though fleeing violence, would not qualify as prima facie refugees, as there was no war and the United States did not choose to recognize the children as a protected class.

There is every reason to expect that with a rising global population, more climate change-related weather events, and poor civilian protection within some states, these sources of forced migration will continue. The 1951 Refugee Convention was agreed upon in the era immediately following World War II in response to the massive population displacement that was seen at that time. While states remain strong supporters of the Refugee Convention, they may be reluctant to adopt any new international legal instruments that would require them to take on the responsibility for additional groups of displaced people, however great the needs of those groups may be.

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