A hunger-free world in a war-torn one?

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Bonn, 16 October 2016. Despite a commitment by the international community to end hunger by 2030, there were some 38 million more people going hungry in 2016 than in 2015. A recent report by the United Nations identifies armed conflict as the main reason for this dramatic increase. With today being World Food Day, we need to step up our efforts to draw the attention of development policy actors to the unique challenges that exist at the interface between food security and peace-building.

Man-made hunger

It is quite evident that hunger has many faces and many causes. In Bangladesh, it could affect an agricultural labourer, who only earns enough for one meagre meal a day. In Mexico, it may keep street children awake at night. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where most of those suffering from hunger live, drought and flooding have been destroying crops and decimating animal herds for months. Most of those going hungry are smallholders who cannot produce enough to feed themselves properly in the face of increasing population density, limited reserves, soil degradation and lack of support.

However, the main factor driving hunger is found somewhere else. Most of those suffering from hunger live in countries where statehood is being eroded and violent conflict is rife. In fact, weak institutional capacities and ongoing conflict open the door to severe famine. This has been seen clearly in recent months, especially in South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen, where conflict parties may well be systematically using hunger and poverty for their own ends. Rebels and soldiers are torching fields, destroying seeds, poisoning wells and making it difficult for humanitarian organisations to access crisis regions.

The deteriorating food situation in crisis and conflict countries stands in opposition to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, which seeks to end hunger worldwide within the next 13 years. With the credibility of the 2030 Agenda and, by extension, the United Nations, heavily dependent on progress in the fight against poverty and hunger, Germany also needs to find effective ways of combating hunger worldwide. The success of development policy measures in fragile states and conflict regions will be decisive in this endeavour. The following four proposals could help in this regard.

Coherent development policy is key

In the first instance, it is necessary to iron out discrepancies in the strategic orientation of the German Government's external policies. The issues of food security and peace-building cannot be kept separate, but rather must go hand in hand. Currently, however, neither the German Sustainable Development Strategy nor the guidelines on civilian crisis prevention address the link between hunger and conflict in sufficient depth. While the German Government's latest Development Policy Report explicitly recognises development cooperation as a peace policy instrument, it lacks a coherent vision that integrates other areas of policy action.

Secondly, the new cabinet should link emergency and disaster relief more closely with long-term development initiatives. In particular, this involves rolling out transitional assistance to a greater number of countries and improving cooperation between the German Federal Foreign Office (responsible for humanitarian aid) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (responsible for transitional assistance).

Building on this, it is essential to place a greater focus on (potential) crisis regions. Rather than leaving them behind, development cooperation actors should take special account of troubled areas and weak states. This is the only way to establish structures that guarantee peace in the long term and at the same time help to counteract and prevent growing deficiencies.

Last but not least, better conflict monitoring would make development policy significantly less vulnerable to crises. Just as they have done with climate proofing, development policy actors could also incorporate conflict proofing, that is, the process of reviewing development cooperation projects in terms of their potential impact on conflicts and vulnerability to conflicts, into their standard repertoire. This would allow a sensitive approach to conflict prevention and peace-building to be integrated systematically into day-to-day development policy work.

Backing up words with actions

Implementing the SDGs is a colossal task for the international community. The global 2030 Agenda will only be successful if all stakeholders join forces and make serious efforts to realise the SDGs. This is especially true when it comes to ending all forms of hunger. In order to achieve this basic intention, German development policy actors need to attach greater importance to the interface between food security and armed conflict. Only then will we be able to truly put into practice the 2030 Agenda's commitment to leave no one behind.