



**In Defense of Food Security: Understanding the Intersection of Food Security and National Security in a Turbulent World**

**Summary of the Second Roundtable**

**Thursday, September 28, 2017**

The Stimson Center, as well as the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University convened a second roundtable on issues pertaining to the role of the military and other interagency actors in addressing global food security. The roundtable held on the campus of the National Defense University, included representatives of the U.S. government, military, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society. The discussion continued to drill down on issues raised in the first roundtable held in July 2017 which addressed the role of the U.S. military in global food security initiatives.

Participants immediately identified a major challenge in how to best utilize the reach, resources, and networking capabilities of the United States military in support of ensuring food security in humanitarian operations. Participants also noted that beyond humanitarian assistance, the nature of conflict had also inserted the military into many situations where some activities overlapped with development actors operating in countries with weak or fragile governments and environments.

The consensus of those in the room suggested the U.S. military does certain jobs well. In moments of humanitarian intervention the military is quick to step in and reestablish order allowing civilian aid agencies to support the distribution of food and medical aid to victims of conflict or natural disasters. However, a concern amongst many participants was the role that the U.S. military plays when its activities have the potential to affect long-term development programs, many of which take at least 5-15 years to fully implement. The changing nature of conflict and the long wars being fought in Afghanistan and Iraq have underscored the need to gain a better understanding of what types of programs the military undertakes in conflict zones that impact the work of other government agencies and NGOs when it comes to ensuring food security.

According to a recent study written by food economist Emmy Simmons, “Food insecurity is an important element in each of these conflicts, both as a result of the ongoing violence and as an accelerant that has contributed to civil unrest”. Further, when one area is swept into conflict, there are inevitable spillovers into neighboring countries, thus extending instability and food insecurity. Humanitarian assistance continues to play a role in meeting food needs even in a time of war, but its limitations are painfully evident. The security of humanitarian personnel involved in food aid is threatened, and the peaceful conditions and/or political commitments essential for safe passage of assistance have been elusive. Conflict-related food insecurity today is seriously testing the capacities of the international community to respond.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The changing nature of global conflict which has demonstrated its impact on food supplies and access to food is what led the National Intelligence Council in 2015 to determine that food insecurity in weak and fragile countries, states with limited institutions of government, is a national security issue for the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) National security, a concept which developed mainly in the United States after World War II, is the protection of states and their citizens through a variety of means, including military might, economic power, diplomacy, and power projection. Due to this reality, participants agreed that the U.S. military certainly has a supportrole to play in food aid initiatives beyond immediate stabilization efforts, but there was no clarity as to the specifics of what the activities should be. Everyone recognized the need for increased cooperation, communication and the creation of formal mechanisms that would help promote better understanding of how different organizations engage with each other in the field. There was also recognition of greater training needs for U.S. military forces operating in places affected by food shortages, migration and severe climate events that had exacerbated the food security. The conversation focused on two questions:

1. Should the U.S. Armed Forces be involved in food security assistance and resilience-building?
   1. If so, in what contexts and to what extent should the U.S. military be engaged?
   2. What role should the U.S. Armed Forces play relative to USAID and the interagency process?
2. What types of trainings (climate, food, and/or conflict related) are needed to equip members of the Armed Forces to provide food security assistance and resilience-building?
   1. What types of trainings are needed to build a common and actionable understanding of food insecurity within the interagency process?

The conversation followed Chatham House rules. The goal of the roundtable was to foster an open discussion between representatives of the various sectors—humanitarian, development, trade, and military—working on food security issues to develop innovative ideas and solutions to shared challenges. The participants gathered agreed that while the U.S. military has been supportive of civilian humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, a clear assessment of departmental capabilities, a common set of terminology among government agencies and civil society, and a specific, measurable course of action must be identified by the development community before greater interagency collaboration and coordination can be achieved.

Challenges to Collaboration

Differing Goals and Strategies

Differing strategies is one major limitation to the effectiveness of Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) collaboration with humanitarian organizations. Security and stability, primary military goals, many times interferes with the immediate assistance and resource allocation other organizations seek to provide. Additionally, development initiatives require a long-term commitment. For sustainable outcomes 5 to 15 year strategies are typically implemented. The Department of Defense’s objectives are typically short-term and focus on gaining access and engagement. Furthermore, the appearance of the military alone, “boots on the ground,” may appear oppressive despite the military’s aims. NGO’s spend a lot of time and resources within local communities, assessing the extent of aid needed; the mere presence of the military often disrupts this process. The Department of Defense needs to measure intentionality versus affect in their approaches to food security when working with civilian agencies and organizations.

Lacking a Common Lexicon and Defining the Aid Space

A significant lack of common definitions was identified among government agencies and independent organizations surrounding terms such as development, resilience, and stabilization. Meanwhile, members of the government represented at the roundtable suggested humanitarian organizations provide a more comprehensive outline of food assistance in specific areas by clearly defining their own term limits and objectives. Moving forward, creating and utilizing a common lexicon of language may improve inter-organizational cooperation. Such a lexicon would provide the necessary base for establishing similar goals and complementing, not competing, strategies for food aid globally.

Additionally, the development community is increasingly operating in a world where the lines delineating peace and conflict are all too often blurred. Global food security, much like conflict, occurs in phases, requiring different levels of government action and intervention. Current assessments abide by terminology such as pre-conflict, post-conflict, relief, recovery, and emergency assistance. However, participants voiced concerns surrounding the implementation of development regimes, particularly the difficulty in labeling an area, “post-conflict,” which may in fact be at odds not only with military action, but also with the experience of populations in need. The current definitions are too broad, and promote generalized procedure without context specific knowledge.

Participants also suggested that the development community needs to incorporate a more inclusive and interdisciplinary analysis for assessing stages of food insecurity in relation to conflict, in order to produce a more appropriate and coordinated response. For example, the term “stability” may have a different meaning for military, food security, and development practitioners, thus a common language and comprehensive set of mandates could go a long way towards a more efficient and effective aid regime.

Inaccessible Funding Streams

Another challenge to interagency collaboration and coordination to elevate global food security to a national security issue is funding streams, as noted by a USAID official present at the roundtable. Funding streams, which are determined by Congress, dictate how the U.S. government operates. These funding allocations often limit the level of collaboration that can take place between agencies to respond to a particular issue. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), managed by U.S. Department of State's Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy, brings together seven government agencies towards mitigating the HIV/AIDS epidemic under one funding stream. The PEPFAR program may provide a model of interagency collaboration to address global food security. Moreover, there needs to be greater transparency and understanding of funding streams to leverage opportunities for collaboration. Many non-government participants expressed the need to be included in these conversations as well. The roundtable seemed to agree that the most productive allocation of available funds would consider the expertise, knowledge and efforts of other aid organizations outside the U.S. government.

Innovations, Suggestions, and Solutions

Developing a Unified Needs Matrix

One practical solution was discussed in relation to the challenge presented by the distance between agencies and their strategies; a needs matrix. Government and civil society alike agreed a major limiting factor was the inability to recognize common needs, and collaborate between organizations to achieve necessary goals. A needs matrix accessible to the food security community would be a significant step towards more transparent operations and more effective synergies. Incorporating agency capabilities and tools into these charts or matrixes will help determine what form of agency collaboration would be most helpful to meeting development goals. The unified recognition of these food aid needs between the U.S. government and independent aid regimes will only improve the efforts of local organizations while minimizing disruptive interference and wasteful overlap. Furthermore, a cross-organization needs matrix will only improve military training when it comes to working with development organizations as the government will be able to identify for what and for whom their training is being applied.

Best Practices and Specialized Training

The second half of the round table focused upon the specific improvements humanitarian aid organizations would like to see from the Department of Defense moving forward. Participants were committed to developing concrete solutions to the gaps existing between government and civil society aid regimes. Recognizing the important role the Department of Defense plays in establishing security in at-risk regions, it was widely agreed the military needs to improve its capabilities and flexibility as areas transition towards development. One solution presented was the development of guidelines for the Department of Defense to abide by, establishing both a set of best practices as well as a form of accountability. To begin, training modules need to be reformed to better prepare soldiers for the realities they will witness in former conflict zones while distributing aid.

The roundtable identified a major shortcoming in existing military training, a lack of programs for providing aid and food security. The most relevant training widely available to the military is focused upon short-term humanitarian intervention, which once again, is less and less applicable the longer the humanitarian crisis and the nature of today’s ongoing conflicts

Participants agreed that the adoption of best practices for the Department of Defense must build off successful implementation of humanitarian operations and field based efforts. One area where there has been demonstrative success with Department of Defense has been in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and their involvement in the Global Health Security Agenda. To gain a better understanding of how the U.S. military forces can support global food security and resilience efforts an evaluation of successful practices that have arisen from the military’s involvement in HADR operations should be conducted.

Additionally, the Global Health Security Agenda was also discussed as a model where the DOD was very involved in an area that is secondary to their primary mission by providing extensive medical and health training in the partner countries. Building off successful training programs, such as joint humanitarian operations, can help establish a macro-level program capable of teaching armed forces to abide by principles such as, “Do no harm,” while maximizing the incredible intelligence, resources, and manpower offered by the Department of Defense. Furthermore, increased education and training will only improve the U.S. government responses to humanitarian food crises that also have development implications. Such training can facilitate a better understanding of the extent of available government aid from all sources.

Moving Forward

Recognizing the incredible potential possible in the successful collaboration between the government, the military and humanitarian organizations, participants in the roundtable continue to search for recommendations ensuring more effective food security. Between the variety of actors and organizations operating in the food security system, collective and integrated action has the potential for massive good in places where there are ongoing humanitarian emergencies and also development activities occurring.

Despite the positive interagency engagement in areas of humanitarian assistance, prolonged U.S. military engagement ensuring sustainable gains in global food security will remain unfeasible if a common set of terminology is not utilized, if roles and capabilities between agencies are not clearly assessed, if government funding streams are not restructured to allow flexibility. Most importantly, link between global food security and national security should be made more explicit within the U.S. government’s strategy and military training. Moving forward, the implementation of an efficient, collaborative food security regime is of the utmost importance, combining the best of practices, resources, and local knowledge towards re-establishing secure, productive and sustainable communities wherever needs arise.

Key takeaways from the second round table on Food Security include:

* The incorporation of food security into the conversation surrounding national security in a way that recognizes what is at stake and what each organization brings to discussion.
* The necessity for common language and shared end goals among aid partners.
* The development of a comprehensive and collaborative needs matrix able to match imminent needs and development programs with available resources.
* A need for more transparent, inclusive and flexible funding streams and mechanisms.
* The establishment of best practices that inform military training to include food aid agendas and how to cooperate and collaborate as needed.

Next Steps

This roundtable and the one held in July raised many important questions about the extent to which there is a greater need for communication and understanding about the roles and missions of the U.S. military in supporting the work of civilian agencies and NGOs engaged in food security and food assistance. One reflection of the growing interest in this subject has been a request for a study about the role of the military in global food security that was included in House Defense Appropriation Bill for 2018 that specifically tasks the Department of Defense to report back on this matter. While it is very early in the process for this report, there is interest in what some have referred to as the military’s growing role in the “space in between” conflict and early development activities.

On November 15th, we will follow-up these discussions with a Global Food Security Summit that will feature panels and experts to provide some recommendations for moving forward on this subject. The one day event will examine the intersection of national security and food security issues. It will take place at George Mason University’s Arlington, Virginia Campus. The Summit is sponsored by the Stimson Center, George Mason University’s Schar School of Policy and Government, and RTI International.

This event will build upon observations made at our July 13 and September 28 roundtables. We are asking panelists to help to summarize and evaluate efforts to integrate food security and national security, noting the risks and opportunities that arise when the military takes on more than a supporting role in the food assistance sector. Our goal is to develop a way forward on this critically important issue. Speakers from government, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, academia, and public policy and research institutions will engage in an interactive discussion. The observations of the Global Food Summit and the two previous roundtables will be integrated into a separate report to be issued in early 2018. That report will offer some key findings including ways to enhance a clearer understanding about the interrelationship between national security requirements related to food security in post-conflict environments. It will also include a way forward on how civilian agencies who work in support of food security may help train and inform the military on respective roles so that each contribute to a more stable and secure environment for development.

1. Emmy Simmons, *Recurring Storms: Food Insecurity, Political Instability and Conflict,* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. National Intelligence Council, “Global Food Security: Intelligence Community Assessment,” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2015), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)