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United Nations
Interregional Crime and Justice
Research Institute

Food Insecurity and Violent Extremism

UNICRI's Strategic Response

UNICRI PUBLICATIONS

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Food insecurity and violent extremism, in some contexts, can reinforce one another through multiple pathways, including the provision of relief and services as a recruitment tool, coercive taxation of markets, the deliberate sabotage of supply chains, and the weaponization of hunger. Acute food insecurity and price volatility serve as powerful stress multipliers, particularly in contexts where governance is weak, conflict persists, and youth unemployment remains high. Yet responses to these challenges are often siloed: humanitarian assistance tends to focus narrowly on caloric needs, security actors concentrate on kinetic disruption, and development programmes emphasize livelihoods. Rarely are these efforts brought together in a holistic way that systematically addresses the complex interplay that can arise between food insecurity and violent extremism.

Hunger¹ and food insecurity² are large-scale phenomena negatively affecting significant portions of the global population.³ According to the report on *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025*, in 2024, an estimated 638 million to 720 million people faced hunger, while 2.3 billion were confronted with moderate or severe food insecurity, roughly 28% of the global population, with rural areas heavily impacted and women being significantly exposed.⁴ Furthermore, a variety of multifaceted issues influence food insecurity, with the *2026 Global Report on Food Crises* (GRFC)

1 Hunger is defined by the 2025 report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (p. 178) as: "An uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy. In this report, the term hunger is synonymous with chronic undernourishment and is measured by the prevalence of undernourishment."

2 Food insecurity is defined by the 2025 report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World in the following manner (p. 157): "Food insecurity as measured by this indicator refers to limited access to food, at the level of individuals or households, due to lack of money or other resources."

3 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025 – Addressing High Food Price Inflation for Food Security and Nutrition](#) (Rome: FAO, 2025).

4 Ibid.



listing conflict and insecurity, followed by weather extremes and economic shocks, as the primary drivers of food insecurity.⁵

The relationship between food insecurity and conflict is of particular concern for international security and raises questions surrounding food insecurity leading to increased societal grievances and the precipitation of further forms of violence. Building upon knowledge of the complex, reciprocal, and often cyclical relationship between food insecurity and conflict – which is already well documented – attention turns to whether nuanced, context-dependent factors can potentially facilitate a range of violence typologies, particularly violent extremism. There is no documented straightforward causal relationship between food insecurity and an increase in violent extremism, or, conversely, food security and a decrease in violent extremism. However, investigating the connections between these issues can shed light on both how extremism can take root in food-insecure societies and how food security can contribute to alleviating sources of conflict, ensuring social cohesion, and reducing opportunities for extremist groups to gain a foothold.

Within this context, UNICRI's role is not to deliver food assistance, but to support national, regional, and international partners in understanding and addressing the crime, justice, and security-related risks that can emerge when food systems are disrupted or exploited by violent extremist actors. Furthermore, UNICRI's approach emphasizes the importance of understanding local dynamics and addressing interconnected issue areas in order to effectively prevent and counter violent extremism over the medium to long term. The paper therefore aims to provide an evidence-informed framework for integrating food security considerations into tailored strategies to prevent violent extremism, while preserving humanitarian principles and avoiding the securitization of aid.

⁵ FAO, WFP and GNAFC, [2026 Global Report on Food Crises – Joint Analysis for Better Decisions](#) (Rome: FAO and WFP, 2026).

What is Food Security?

Food security, as defined at the 1996 World Food Summit, exists when “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. This definition encompasses four dimensions: food availability, access, utilization, and stability, which involve having quality food available, adequate resources to acquire it, using quality food for nutritional well-being, and ensuring consistent availability and access.

The lack of food security in regions across the globe is an issue of paramount importance, impacting the lives of millions. According to the 2026 GRFC, 266 million people across 47 countries and territories analyzed by the GRFC faced acute food insecurity. East Africa remains the region faced with the largest food crises, while at the country level, this designation applies to Afghanistan, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. Moreover, Catastrophe/Famine – the Phase 5 label of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification – was confirmed in areas of the Gaza Strip and Sudan.

Food security is a critical aspect of development, which is a multifaceted process extending beyond traditional economic metrics of Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product. For example, the Human Development Index includes factors such as life expectancy and education. Some scholars present an even broader perspective, emphasizing five types of freedoms that include political freedom, social facilities, economic opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security.⁶ These fundamental pillars work collaboratively to prevent hunger and human indignity.

The contribution and commitment of organizations to global food security – such as the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, the World Health Organization, and the International Food Policy Research Institute – underscores its importance. The World Food Summit in 1996 and the First Millennium Development Goal in 2000 aimed to halve the number of undernourished and hungry people by 2015. Despite significant progress, this goal was narrowly missed, with the 2015 State of Food Insecurity in the World reporting that, “hunger remains an everyday challenge for almost 795 million people worldwide, including 780 million in the developing regions”.⁷ This issue is also highlighted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes Zero Hunger as one of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

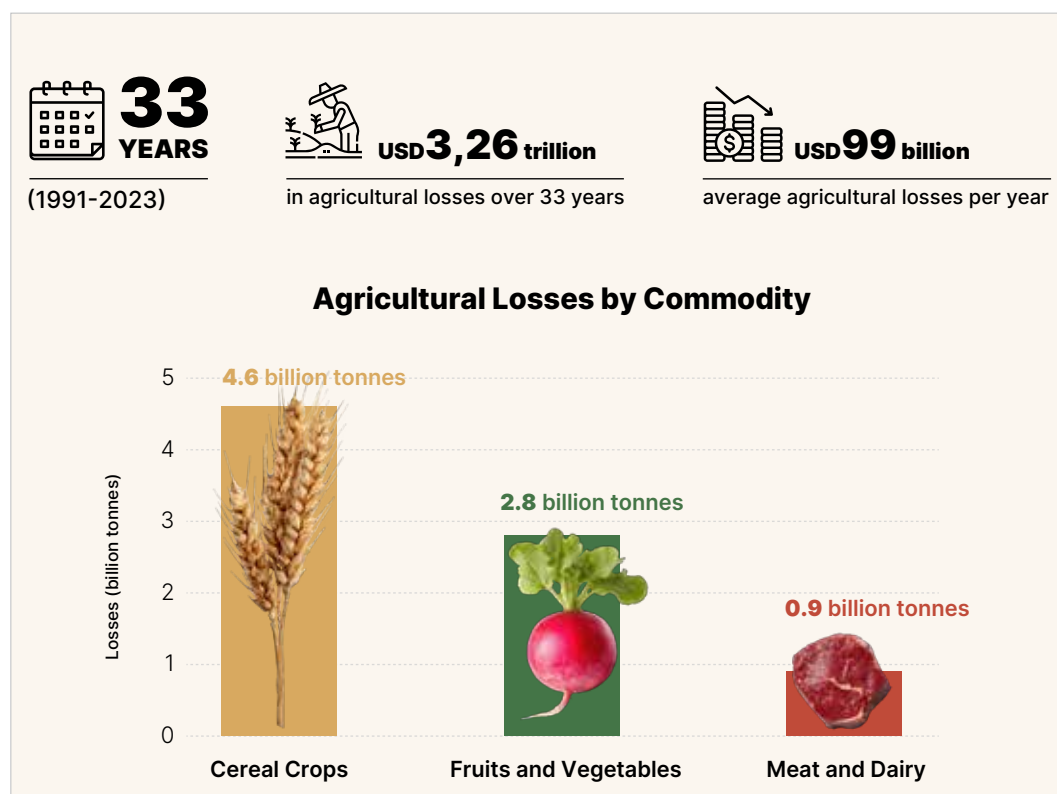
6 Sen, Amartya, Development as Freedom, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1999).

7 FAO, IFAD and WFP, [The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015. Meeting the 2015 International Hunger Targets: Taking Stock of Uneven Progress](#) (Rome: FAO, 2015).

Drivers and Contributing Factors to Food Insecurity

A myriad of factors, often occurring concurrently, contribute to food insecurity throughout the world, impeding achievement of the four dimensions of food security outlined earlier. These factors range from climate change, global population growth, governance and policy issues, and economic conditions to conflict and displacement, among others. When taking into account the total financial impact of certain disasters⁸ on agriculture, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that disasters have accounted for USD 3.26 trillion in agricultural losses between 1991 and 2023. This has in turn led to a decrease of 320 kcal in daily per capita availability.⁹

Figure 1. Disasters and Agricultural Losses (1991-2023)



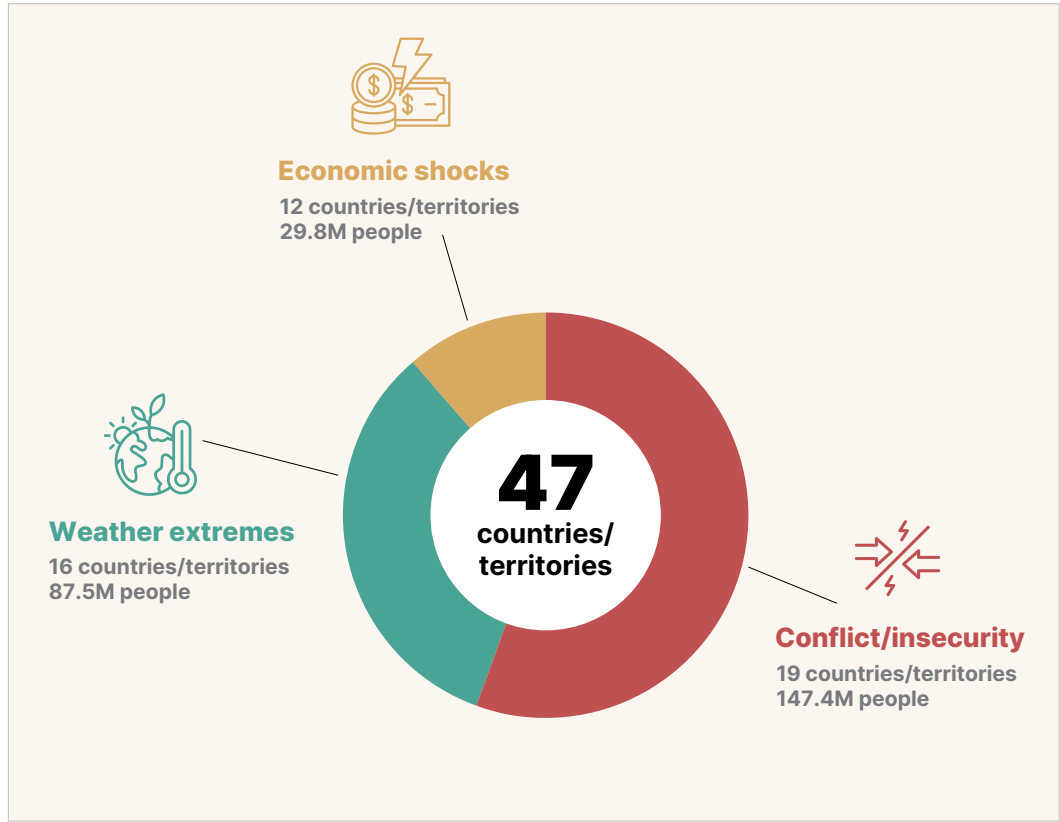
Source of data: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

⁸ According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, disaster hazard categories for the analysis include: "storm, flood, drought, extreme temperature, insect infestation, wildfire, earthquake, landslide, mass movement and volcanic activity", and encompass small, medium, and large-scale events.

⁹ FAO, [The Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security 2025 – Digital Solutions for Reducing Risks and Impacts](#) (Rome: FAO, 2025).

Furthermore, the 2026 GRFC analyzed 47 countries and territories that met GFRC data requirements for the 2025 reporting period. Despite GFRC efforts to assess food insecurity in 65 countries and territories, a lack of available data in 18 of them led to the lowest number of areas analyzed in the last 10 years. The GRFC found that 22.9% of the overall population of the 47 countries and territories (266 million people) suffer from high levels of acute food insecurity, a slight increase of 0.2% from the previous year. The primary drivers of acute food insecurity in 2025 were identified as conflict and insecurity, followed by weather extremes and economic shocks.¹⁰

Figure 2. Primary drivers of acute food insecurity in countries/territories with food crises with data meeting GRFC technical requirements, 2025 (number of countries/territories, millions of people in acute food insecurity)



Note: Where a different primary driver applied to separately assessed displaced populations, this group has been excluded to avoid double counting. Source: GRFC CTG, 2026

10 FAO, WFP and GNAFC, [2026 Global Report on Food Crises – Joint Analysis for Better Decisions](#) (Rome: FAO and WFP, 2026).

Conflict massively affects food security around the world and has served as a main driver of food insecurity in recent years. For 2025, the GRFC estimated that conflict and insecurity was the main driver leading to acute food insecurity for 147.4 million people. Conflict can have multiple adverse impacts on food security, such as the physical destruction of agricultural infrastructure: crops, processing facilities, wells, livestock, equipment, and irrigation systems. Access can also be impeded due to a variety of circumstances, such as the destruction of transportation infrastructure, agricultural infrastructure being located in active conflict zones, blockades on aid and access to agricultural areas restricted by armed actors, and the presence of landmines, explosive remnants of war, or other unexploded ordnance. Furthermore, these disruptions, combined with population displacement, can create agricultural labour shortages, collapse supply chains, and precipitate health crises, leading to food scarcity, rising costs, and severe hardships throughout entire societies.¹¹

For 2025, the GRFC noted that weather extremes are the second highest driver of acute food insecurity, affecting 87.5 million people. Climate change and climate-related phenomena, such as rising temperatures, shifting weather patterns, storms, droughts and flooding, have a profound effect on food security. Droughts, for example, can negatively affect the environment, agriculture, water supply, health and the economy. They vary in severity and duration and are the most potent threat to crops and livestock in almost every region, affecting 55 million people annually.¹² Droughts jeopardize people's livelihoods, raise the possibility of illness and death, and can result in population displacement. Approximately 40% of the world's population is affected by water scarcity, and by 2030, up to 700 million people could face displacement due to drought.¹³

11 FAO, [The Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security 2025 – Digital Solutions for Reducing Risks and Impacts](#) (Rome: FAO, 2025). World Food Programme, [Conflict and Hunger](#). FAO, WFP and GNAFC, [2026 Global Report on Food Crises – Joint Analysis for Better Decisions](#) (Rome: FAO & WFP, 2026).

12 World Health Organization, [Drought](#).

13 Ibid.



Climate Change as a Cross-cutting Issue

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a risk multiplier. By intensifying resource scarcity, eroding livelihoods, displacing populations, and widening governance gaps, it can deepen the socio-economic grievances and institutional fragilities that violent extremist groups exploit. In fragile and climate-vulnerable contexts, both sudden-onset shocks, such as floods and storms, and slow-onset processes, including desertification and prolonged drought, can heighten the risk of violent extremism, undermining peace, security, and sustainable development.¹⁴

UNICRI's work in this area particularly lends focus to West Africa and the Sahel, describing the impact of climate disasters in the region as follows:

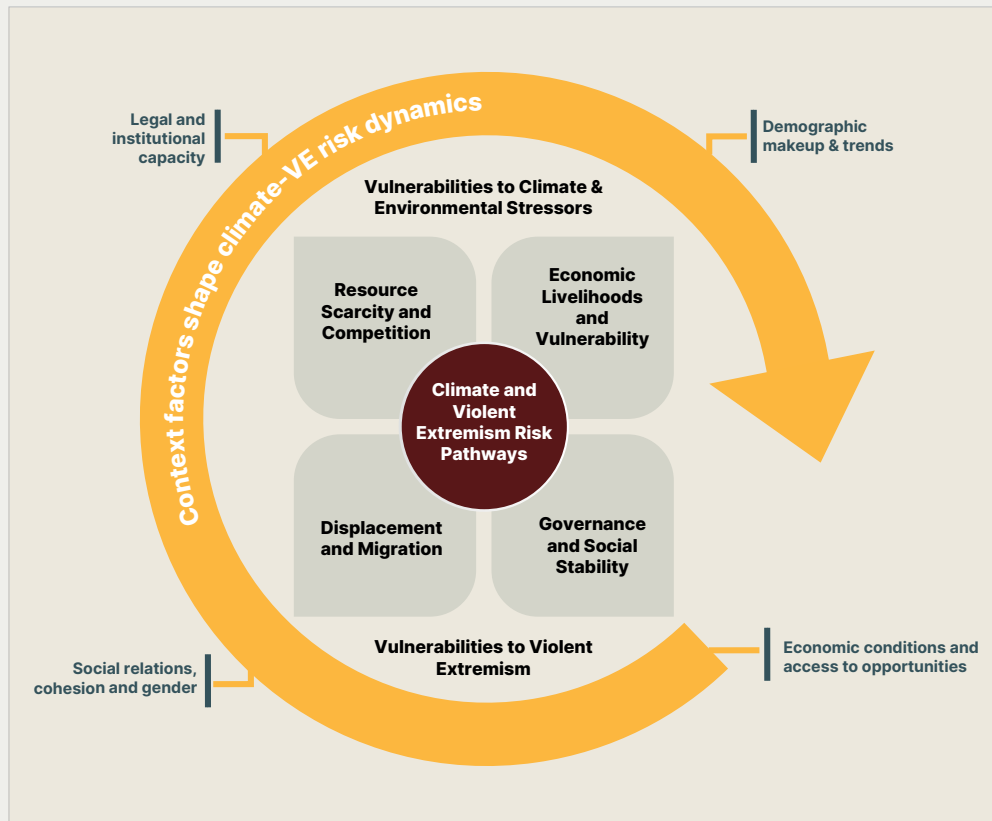
The livelihoods of individuals and communities are often severely disrupted by recurrent disasters, such as the destruction of homes and infrastructure, loss of property and income, forced displacement, deteriorating health, and food insecurity. These impacts are felt unevenly across genders and social groups, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities. (UNICRI, 2025, p. 13)¹⁵

In its Analysis of the Interconnected Risks of Climate Security and Violent Extremism: A Practical Guide for Mauritania, UNICRI identifies four context-specific pathways through which climate change and violent extremism intersect and reinforce existing vulnerabilities across the region. These include: increased competition over scarce natural resources that can fuel intercommunal tensions and exploitation by extremist groups; displacement and migration that may heighten vulnerability to recruitment; growing economic insecurity linked to declining livelihoods that can create openings for extremist influence; and weakened governance and social stability that can erode institutional trust and enable armed groups to expand their presence and operations.

14 UNICRI, [Perceptions of Climate Change and Violent Extremism: Listening to Local Communities in Chad](#) (Turin, 2022).

15 UNICRI, [Analysis of Interconnected Climate Security and Violent Extremism Risks: A Practical Guide for Mauritania](#) (Turin, 2025).

Figure 3. Four Pathways of Interaction Between Climate and Violent Extremism Risks*



*For a full analysis and description of each risk pathway, see UNICRI's Analysis of the Interconnected Risks of Climate Security and Violent Extremism: A Practical Guide for Mauritania.

Food Insecurity and Violent Extremism: A Complex Relationship

Just as conflict serves as a contributing factor to food insecurity, the inverse is also true. Food insecurity acts as a determinant of conflict and generates a range of potential negative outcomes for affected societies. This includes the creation of conditions conducive to the emergence or expansion of violent extremism. The relationship between food insecurity and violent extremism is complex; it exists within the larger association between food insecurity and violence and is highly context dependent. Rather than a linear causal link, it may form part of a cyclical dynamic in some settings where food insecurity can generate grievances that increase susceptibility to violence and the possible emergence or strengthening of violent extremist groups.¹⁶

Research on the relationship between food insecurity and conflict has explored a range of conflict types, including civil wars, intrastate communal conflict, urban unrest, and, more recently, terrorism and violent extremism. Although no single factor is sufficient to explain the onset of violence, there is a consensus in the literature that certain elements, such as food and fuel prices, drought, and their interaction with state institutions, are associated with some forms of political violence.¹⁷

Despite extensive research on the relationship between food security and conflict, relatively few studies have directly examined its link with violent extremism. Those that do generally find that food insecurity, particularly limited access to food, can heighten grievances among individuals, which violent extremist organizations may exploit for recruitment: by providing resources the state is unable to deliver, or by leveraging food price volatility to facilitate collective action and, in some cases, escalate violence.¹⁸

In terms of relative deprivation, it is crucial to appreciate that poverty on its own is not enough to trigger violent extremism.¹⁹ Instead, it is the relative aspect – the disparity between the standards a group believes they should have and their actual living

16 UNDP, [Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment](#) (New York, 2017) ; Brinkman, Henk-Jan, and Cullen S. Hendrix, [Food Insecurity and Violent Conflict: Causes, Consequences, and Addressing the Challenges](#), WFP Occasional Paper, no. 24 (2011).

17 Arezki, Rabah, and Markus Brückner, [Food Prices and Political Instability](#), IMF Working Papers WP/11/62 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2011); Drabo, A., Eklou, K. M., Imam, P. A., & Kpodar, K. R., [Social Unrests and Fuel Prices: The Role of Macroeconomic, Social and Institutional Factors](#), IMF Working Papers, 2023 (228); Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, and Ernest Sergenti, [Economic Shocks and Civil Conflict: An Instrumental Variables Approach](#), *Journal of Political Economy* 112, no. 4 (2004): 725–753. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, Agrifood Systems Transformation and Healthy Diets across the Rural-Urban Continuum](#). (Rome: FAO, 2023).

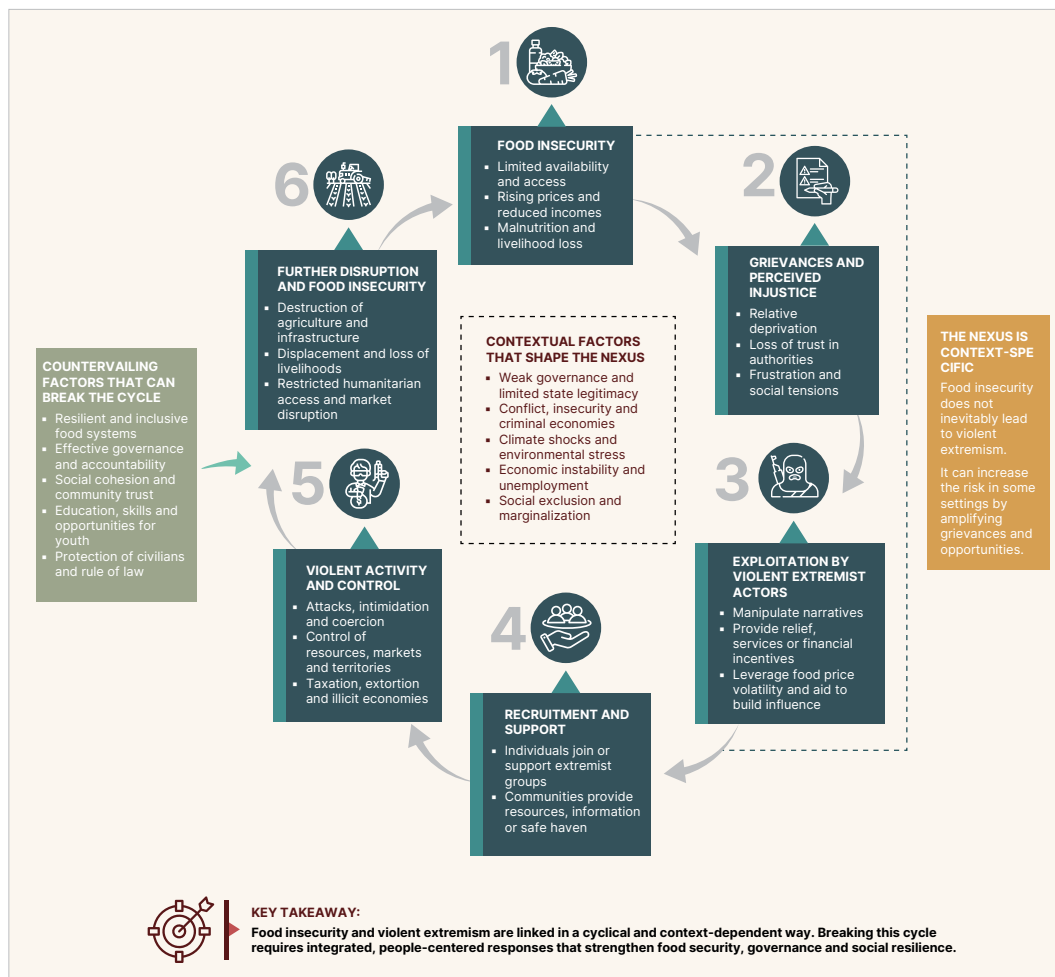
18 Adelaja, Adesoji, Justin George, Takashi Miyahara, and Eva Penar, [Food Insecurity and Terrorism](#), *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 41, no. 3 (2019): 475–97; James A. Piazza, [The Cost of Living and Terror: Does Consumer Price Volatility Fuel Terrorism?](#), *Southern Economic Journal* 79 (2013): 812–831.

19 Crenshaw, Martha, [The Causes of Terrorism](#), *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–399.

conditions – that matters. When this gap reaches a critical threshold, the likelihood of political violence may increase.²⁰

The impact of food insecurity on violent extremism varies across regions and is context specific.²¹ Factors such as the underutilization of available resources, overregulation, weak governance, conflict, drought, and the impacts of climate change contribute to food insecurity, which in turn may influence patterns of violent extremism across different contexts.²²

Figure 4. The Nexus Between Food Insecurity and Violent Extremism. A Complex, Two-Way Relationship



20 Huntington, Samuel P., *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); James A. Piazza, [Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages](#), *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159–177.

21 Rocca, Camilla, and Ines Schultes, [Food Insecurity in Africa: Deadlier than COVID-19?](#) (London: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

22 Adelaja, Adesoji, Justin George, Takashi Miyahara, and Eva Penar, [Food Insecurity and Terrorism](#), *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 41, no. 3 (2019): 475–97.

Several studies suggest that strengthening functional and sustainable food systems is an important component of building more stable and secure environments.²³ Supporting local production, for example, can enhance employment opportunities, improve food availability, and strengthen storage and distribution systems, thereby helping to mitigate the cascading effects of food insecurity.²⁴



Food Insecurity and Violent Extremism in Practice

In some contexts, violent extremist groups have been observed to exploit food insecurity and related vulnerabilities to facilitate recruitment and expand their influence. There have been documented instances of organizations such as Al-Shabaab, ISIL, and Boko Haram using food assistance, meals, loans, and financial incentives as part of broader recruitment strategies. Such approaches may be particularly effective in contexts characterized by economic hardship, food insecurity, and limited state service provision.²⁵

As demonstrated in a variety of contexts, violent extremist groups offer a channel for grievances by addressing collective action challenges and mobilizing citizens. Furthermore, ideological affiliation can also play a role by providing explanations, identity, or a sense of empowerment for those affected by socio-economic challenges. As an example of the multifaceted dynamics at play in high-risk environments, UNICRI and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism's joint report, titled *Dynamics of Support and Engagement: Understanding Malian Youths' Attitudes towards Violent Extremism*, noted that:

The discourse promoted by both al-Qaeda affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Mali responds to context-specific needs and socio-economic and political frustrations, such as a widespread sense of insecurity and neglect coupled with existing intercommunal tensions, many of which—such as that between semi-nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers—have been exacerbated by climate changes.²⁶

23 Busby, Joshua and Nina von Uexkull, [Climate Shocks and Humanitarian Crises: Which Countries are Most at Risk?](#), Foreign Affairs (November 2018).

24 Rocca, Camilla, and Ines Schultes, [Food Insecurity in Africa: Deadlier than COVID-19?](#) (London: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

25 Sova, Chase, and Eilish Zembilci, [Dangerously Hungry: The Link between Food Insecurity and Conflict](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 21 April 2023.

26 UNICRI and ICCT, [Dynamics of Support and Engagement: Understanding Malian Youths' Attitudes towards Violent Extremism](#) (Turin and The Hague, 2021), p. 2.

Other examples include Pakistan, where rapid population growth and rural-to-urban migration has left many economically vulnerable people susceptible to extremist groups that seek to capitalize on their grievances.²⁷

Akin to rebel groups that use financial incentives and the promise of better governance to recruit supporters, deprivations affecting physical security, such as food insecurity, can be exploited by terrorist organizations to harness and rally local support.²⁸ These violent extremist groups reduce the opportunity costs of collective action by serving as focal points for individual grievances, offering goods and opportunities that the state does not provide. This is especially true for food availability and access, a core human need. Thus, food scarcity can provoke grievances that violent extremists exploit for their own purposes.

Furthermore, violent extremist groups and other non-state actors have also been known to capitalize on conflict and weak governance, exploiting food systems for financial gain and control over local populations. For example, in the Somalia–Kenya borderlands, Al-Shabaab and its affiliates have employed protection rackets, cross-border taxation of sugar and food staples, and engaged in intimidation of traders and truckers along key corridors.

In Syria and Iraq, periods of political instability, civil war, and state collapse created conditions in which armed actors were able to exert significant control over food systems. This was particularly evident in post-2003 Iraq and in Syria following the outbreak of civil war in 2011. Insurgent groups, militias, warlords, and other non-state actors captured grain producing regions, taxed agricultural production and milling activities, and controlled bakery supply chains in order to consolidate authority and exert influence over civilian populations.

As a final example, in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, drought and conflict degrade pastoral and farming systems, with militants taking advantage of the situation by extorting livestock markets and impeding seasonal movements. Furthermore, the Islamic State West Africa Province has infiltrated the fishing sector in the Basin, an essential livelihood, by introducing a complex taxation system that is strictly connected to economic dependence and local governance.²⁹

27 Khan, Muhammad M., and Afshan Azam, [Root Causes of Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis](#), *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 20, no. 1/2 (2008): 65–86.

28 Gates, Scott, [Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Rebellion](#), *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111–130; Weinstein, Jeremy M., *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

29 UNICRI, [Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus Between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa](#) (Turin: UNICRI: 2026).

In Summary: Why Food Security Matters in Understanding Violent Extremism

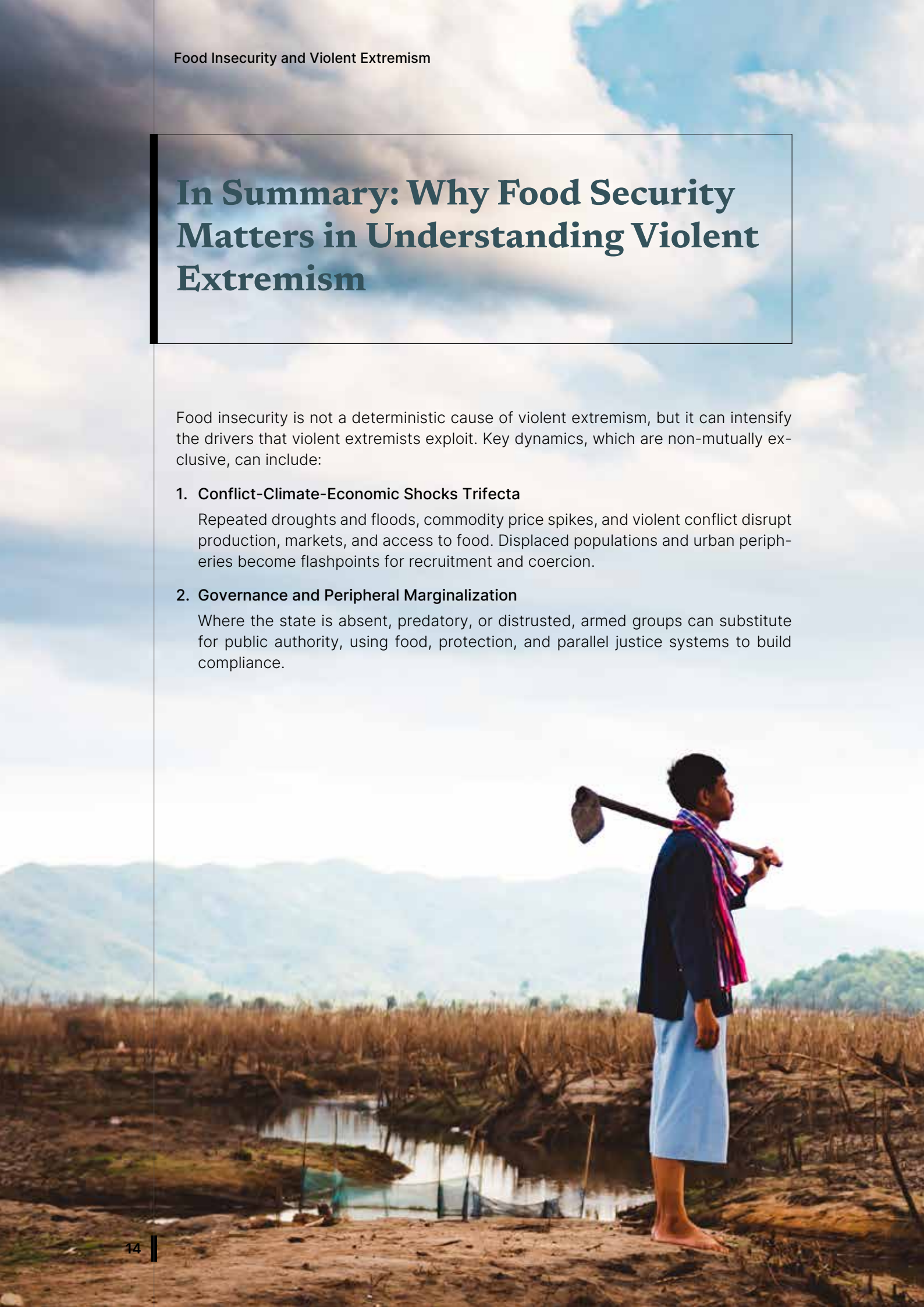
Food insecurity is not a deterministic cause of violent extremism, but it can intensify the drivers that violent extremists exploit. Key dynamics, which are non-mutually exclusive, can include:

1. Conflict-Climate-Economic Shocks Trifecta

Repeated droughts and floods, commodity price spikes, and violent conflict disrupt production, markets, and access to food. Displaced populations and urban peripheries become flashpoints for recruitment and coercion.

2. Governance and Peripheral Marginalization

Where the state is absent, predatory, or distrusted, armed groups can substitute for public authority, using food, protection, and parallel justice systems to build compliance.



3. Market and Supply-Chain Control

Extremist groups monetize checkpoints, tax trade corridors and ports, and capture key nodes (mills, storage and trucking). Control of staple foods translates into social leverage.

4. Information Environment

Disinformation about aid eligibility, diversion, or favouritism can inflame grievances. Extremist groups frame themselves as fair distributors and frame the state and international non-governmental organizations as corrupt or exclusionary.

5. Demographics and Opportunity Costs

Large youth cohorts face barriers to land, finance and markets. When agriculture collapses, the relative economic return from illicit activity or alignment with violent extremist groups can rise.

Tactics Used by Violent Extremist Actors and Geographies of Heightened Risk

Violent extremist actors can employ a variety of tactics to exploit vulnerabilities within food systems, exacerbate existing food insecurity, or contribute to its emergence in unstable environments. These tactics include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Coercive Service Provision and Recruitment

Extremist actors engage in the distribution of food, seeds, or cash in exchange for loyalty; the enrolment of families into ostensibly charitable networks tied to indoctrination; and the exploitation of food insecurity and related grievances to reinforce extremist narratives, expand influence, and facilitate recruitment.

2. Taxation, Extortion, and Racketeering

Extremist actors engage in the collection of levies at checkpoints and ports; the imposition of sham licences for traders and millers; and the forced collection of zakat, treated as a tribute.

3. Supply-Chain Sabotage and Strategic Starvation

Extremist actors undertake the destruction or seizure of crops, storage facilities, irrigation systems, and market infrastructure; and the initiation of blockades and looting to induce displacement and dependence.

4. Aid Manipulation and Diversion

Extremist actors engage in the infiltration of beneficiary lists; intimidation of community committees; theft from warehouses; and the sale of diverted rations on secondary markets.

5. Price Manipulation and Market Capture

Extremist actors engage in the hoarding of staples to trigger price spikes; collusion with wholesalers; and control of trucking routes.

6. Targeted Violence Against Market and Service Providers

Extremist actors perpetrate attacks on traders, extension agents, humanitarian staff, and local administrators to deter normal market and service functions.

7. Gendered Harms

Extremist actors engage in the predatory exchange of food for sex; forced marriage tied to food and financial dependency; and the exclusion of women from aid committees.



Geographies of Heightened Risk for these Tactics

► Urban Peripheries

Urban peripheries are areas that often host large and displaced populations who depend heavily on fragile market systems. Armed actors can exploit pressure points by monopolizing staples like bread and fuel, or by taxing informal trade networks. Populations in these areas are also susceptible to recruitment efforts by violent extremist actors.

► Dryland Pastoral Corridors

Mobile herding communities must cross checkpoints, contested grazing lands, and seasonal migration routes. These choke-points create recurring opportunities for extortion, resource capture and recruitment.

► River Valleys and Irrigated Schemes

As breadbasket regions, river valleys and irrigated schemes are strategic targets. Control over water, irrigation systems, and crop cycles allows armed actors to exert influence over entire communities and food supplies.

► Border Markets

Cross-border trade hubs function as critical points for taxation, smuggling, and financing. Their strategic location makes them attractive nodes for armed actors seeking both revenue and control over population flows. Furthermore, women are often exploited in market spaces and in the smuggling of goods as they are less subject to controls at borders.

► Fishing Hubs

These sites combine food and income generation, often tied to high-value commodities. Competition for access to lakes, rivers, and coastal waters can be exploited by armed actors seeking to monopolize resources and impose taxes on small-scale fishers.

Urban Peripheries



Dryland Pastoral Corridors



River Valleys and Irrigated Schemes



Border Markets



Fishing Hubs





Common Gaps in Current Responses

Multiple factors can contribute to gaps in current responses in contexts where violent extremist groups exploit or exacerbate food insecurity. Some common issues include:

1. Siloed Mandates

Humanitarian, development, and security actors plan and fund interventions separately. Preventing and countering violent extremism rarely uses food-security indicators, and food-security actors underinvest in protection and anti-coercion measures.

2. Thin Conflict Sensitivity

Aid can unintentionally fuel diversion, empower gatekeepers, or exclude marginalized clans and castes – feeding narratives of injustice.

3. Data Fragmentation

Early warning systems track prices, weather, and malnutrition but are weakly linked to violent extremism risk monitoring and localized incident data.

4. Short Funding Cycles

Relief surges during crises but collapses before livelihoods recover; little bridging is carried out to market systems development and climate adaptation.

5. Youth and Gender-Blind Spots

Investment is limited in youth-led small and medium-sized enterprises in agriculture and in women's producer groups. Barriers to land and finance persist.

6. Limited Private-Sector Engagement

Digital payments, warehouse receipts, index insurance, cold chains, and small and medium-sized enterprises finance are underused to keep food economies running under stress.

UNICRI's Strategic Response Framework – Six Actionable Pillars

UNICRI recognizes the complex interplay between food insecurity and violent extremism, and acknowledges the importance of bridging the gaps outlined in the preceding section by embedding food security risk analytics into global collective efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. The approach includes implementing strategies rooted in addressing this nexus and scaling locally led, dignified livelihood pathways – especially for youth and women. To achieve this, the framework sets out six actionable pillars and accompanying indicators, which national partners can adapt and operationalize within existing prevention and food-security strategies.

This framework has been undertaken by UNICRI to explore how targeted, evidence-based interventions can help address this convergence. Through localized fieldwork, community dialogue and policy analysis, this framework aims to support national and regional actors in integrating food security into the design and implementation of strategies preventing and countering violent extremism.

UNICRI's strategic response framework, anchored in six pillars, is as follows:

1. Action-oriented research

- a. Investigate the relationship between food security and violent extremism in specific state and regional contexts.
- b. Identify tailored good practices for addressing the challenges of food insecurity and violent extremism.
- c. Support the development of policies and actions that consider the complex interplay between food security and violent extremism in specific contexts.

2. Evidence and Risk Analytics for the nexus

- a. Build integrated dashboards that fuse:
 - i. Food-security indicators (prices, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification and Cadre Harmonisé phases, crop and market access, and displacement)
 - ii. Violent extremism risk signals (incident data, extortion reports, and checkpoint mapping).

- b. Pilot subnational risk scoring to prioritize prevention hot spots and track programme effects.
- c. Establish data-sharing protocols with national bureaux, early warning systems, and vetted civil-society observatories.

3. Protect Food Systems in Conflict (safeguards and access)

- a. Support humanitarian deconfliction for food corridors; market-days security arrangements with community oversight; and route-level incident reporting by trader associations.
- b. Embed anti-diversion and do-no-harm measures in all food assistance: transparent targeting, post-distribution monitoring, beneficiary feedback hotlines, and third-party verification.
- c. Promote cash and voucher assistance where feasible to reduce looting risks and stimulate local markets; and pair with Gender-Based Violence risk mitigation.

4. Locally Led Resilience and Livelihoods (youth and women forward)

- a. Scale climate-smart agriculture (drought-tolerant seeds, water harvesting, and soil regeneration) through producer cooperatives and women's groups.
- b. Launch youth agri-enterprise pathways: vocational training, starter capital, digital market access, and light-asset models (aggregation, last-mile logistics, and processing).
- c. Expand risk-transfer tools (index insurance and savings groups), and shock responsive social protection to keep households out of negative coping.

5. Early Warning for Prevention

- a. Integrate food-security triggers (price spikes, crop failure, market closures, and atypical livestock movements) into national preventing and countering violent extremism early warning.
- b. Formalize community ground-truthing networks (traders, transporters, elders, women and youth representatives) to validate alerts and flag coercion, extortion, and rumour campaigns in real time.

6. Policy Alignment, Law and Finance

- a. Mainstream the nexus in national preventing and countering violent extremism strategies, food-security plans, and climate adaptation frameworks; and include explicit safeguards for food systems.
- b. Support legal accountability for starvation and attacks on food objects; and promote safe humanitarian access and protection of markets.
- c. Mobilize anticipatory and crisis-modifier financing to bridge relief and recovery; and align with national social protection systems and private capital for small and medium-sized enterprises.

UNICRI's strategic response framework is a call to action. It underscores the importance of recognizing the interdependence of food security and violence prevention and urges national and international actors to adopt an integrated approach that bridges humanitarian, development, and security domains.

Figure 5. UNICRI's Strategic Response Framework



