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WFP POLICY ENGAGEMENT TO PREVENT FAMINE AND FOSTER PEACE

Hugo Slim

Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict
Blavatnik School of Government
University of Oxford

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Executive Summary

This paper is intended **to prompt discussion of how WFP should best develop its policy engagement to prevent famine and foster peace**. After examining WFP's history, policies, practices and engagement culture, it **proposes three scenarios** for WFP's future policy engagement.

Section 1 **traces the historical connection between food, war and peace** to the modern origins of largescale food relief in World War One, in the aftermath of World War Two, and in post-war US "food for peace" policy. It then gives an overview of WFP's historical contribution to food security policy from 1961 until the present day. Section 2 looks in more detail at **recent UN policy engagement around food, war and peace** as it intensified in the "four famines" diplomacy of 2017 and culminated in UNSC resolution 2417 in 2018 and WFP's award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020.

Section 3 examines the **strengths and weaknesses of WFP's current policy engagement on famine prevention**. WFP leads strong operational prevention in its food assistance and early warning. WFP's policy engagement is less obvious because of its subordinate role in the UN Country Team and its cultural preference for operations over policy. WFP tends to build international prevention networks and overlooks long-term support to national networks of social action for "zero hunger" which mobilize citizens' claims to anti-famine contracts with their governments. The broad-based success of UNSC Resolution 1325 is offered as a possible model for WFP policy engagement on 2417. I also note that WFP's current emphasis on conflict will increasingly be challenged by climate crisis.

The paper then focuses on the **opportunities and risks opened up for WFP policy engagement by UNSC resolution 2417**. The new resolution gives a clear framework for more robust policy engagement nationally and internationally, and gives political permission for WFP to make the conflict-famine link, with regular and urgent reporting to the highest levels of the UN. But risks are clearly felt by WFP staff: 2417 has no real traction on warring parties in country; engagement compromises neutrality, and the requirement for WFP to give evidence in legal processes is unclear. WFP diplomacy in New York is restrained by its subordinate position in the UN system and the politicization of 2417 by Security Council members.

Section 4 examines **WFP's policy engagement on peace**. It finds no requirement and intention for fostering peace in WFP's mandate and core policies. But this is changing. Food-peace linkages made informally in the policy engagement of the WFP Director are emphasized in WFP's new strategy. This links to SDG 16, social cohesion, "peace outcomes" and a new WFP practice of "peace advocacy". These are general ambitions and need a policy. I offer **four building blocks for a WFP peace policy**, emphasising "everyday peace" as most relevant to the local peace sometimes produced by WFP.

Section 5 examines **four particular characteristics of WFP policy engagement culture** which shape and dictate its current approach to famine prevention and peace. The first is WFP's "second fiddle" role which is baked into its position within the UN system. The second is the requirement for operational access which limits the kind of policy engagement WFP feels able to do. The third is the political charisma and contacts of WFP's Director which drives most of WFP's policy engagement and diplomacy. The fourth is the essentially practical and operational culture of WFP. Each of these characteristics of WFP policy engagement has advantages and disadvantages.

Section 6 proposes **three different scenarios for WFP's policy engagement going forwards**. One favours the maintenance of a "strong second fiddle" role which embraces a nerdy back-room role in famine prevention and peace policy. Another is "public campaigner" - recruiting a new cadre of policy professionals and playing a high-profile role. The third recommends that WFP "stay foodie" with a simple policy focus on food and famine that positions it well for the climate emergency.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to prompt discussion on how the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) should best develop its policy engagement to prevent famine and foster peace. It draws on a brief literature review, analysis of WFP's current approach, and interviews with humanitarian diplomats and several WFP Country Directors who are leading the organization in countries where there is a strong link between armed conflict and hunger.

The paper looks first at how famine prevention and peace sit historically within WFP's pre-history, organizational tradition, mandate, mission and policy. It then notes the thickening policy connection between food, conflict, hunger and peace in recent years. The paper then assesses WFP's current policy on famine prevention and fostering peace, and gauges the strengths and weaknesses in its policy culture and approach. Finally, the paper proposes three options for WFP policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy going forwards.

1. Food, war and peace - a long connection

Policy connections between food assistance, hunger, war and peace have a long and entangled history. This reaches back to the origins of modern humanitarian food aid operations in World War One, and then continues through the Second World War to the founding and evolution of WFP and the wider humanitarian food security system.

Between 1914 and 1918, industrial scale food relief operations to prevent wartime famine were pioneered by the American Quaker (and later US President) Herbert Hoover. Hoover led massive and unprecedented food relief operations in German occupied Belgium and France as a private humanitarian working as a US neutral. In the aftermath of the war, working for the US government, Hoover designed and oversaw the enormous US food distributions and food subsidies that reached about 400 million Europeans and prevented widespread starvation across many European countries whose citizens were hungry as a result of the war. In 1921, Hoover then went on to lead the main part of the international humanitarian response in the Russian Civil War.¹

In all these efforts, the links between food security, humanitarian rights, political stability and peace were clearly understood and argued emphatically by people on all sides of the food debate. Some focused almost entirely on the compassionate necessity of the humanitarian dimension. Power politics had different interests. The Germans were convinced that the stabilizing effect of food would usefully support their occupations of Belgium and France, while many on the Allied side saw food aid first to Germans, and then to Bolsheviks, as a dangerous and sentimental strategy that would prop up their enemies. After the War, the US saw food aid as an essential strategy to prevent the collapse of European states and a reversion to continental conflict, and paid for it to do so.

After World War Two, the policy of large scale humanitarian food aid was revived as US CARE packages and US government aid played a relief role from 1946 until the Marshall Plan was put in place in 1948, some 25% of which was invested in food and agricultural support. After 1945, the link between food aid and peace developed unequivocally in US policy, the world's biggest food producer at the time.² In 1954, the US government officially recognized the role of "Food For Peace" in a new public law, PL

¹ Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover: An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*, Vintage, New York, 2017, pp129-226.

² Bryan L. McDonald, *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017; John Shaw, *The United Nations World Food Programme and the Development of Food Aid*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2001.

480. In the 1960s, food aid was openly understood in US and European policy as simultaneously a humanitarian resource and an instrument of political influence in the Cold War.

In modern humanitarian history, therefore, food has been used strategically as a “weapon of peace” which can help to ensure peace by stabilizing society, or coerce peace by deterring aggression and cementing alliances. This combination of food’s humanitarian and political power reached its peak in the food crisis of the 1970s when the US sold 17 million tonnes of food to its main enemy, the Soviet Union, which was on the brink of widespread hunger. This was a gesture that could be read two ways: as an act of peace, and an unambiguous show of US political superiority.

The withholding of food and the destruction of its production has also regularly been used as a “weapon of war” to deliberately cause starvation of, or around, the enemy. This practice has ancient roots and was played out in many twentieth century wars just as it is today in Ethiopia. As a result, “starvation as a method of war” was outlawed in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. But, even when starvation is not deliberate in war, malnutrition, hunger and starvation are common consequences of the social and economic disruption caused by war and requires an aid response.

- **The Arrival of WFP**

WFP became a very important part of these humanitarian developments around food, war and peace when it was established in 1961, which was a major year for international food aid. WFP was created with strong support from US Senator George McGovern who was also made the first Director of the US Food For Peace programme earlier that year as a result of Presidential Executive Order 10915. This set up his role and declared that “food aid should be used to promote the interest of peace in a significant way.”

This US policy tradition has often resonated within WFP, as it does again today. Since its founding, WFP has always had a US Director, the US has been its biggest funder and WFP policy has remained open to the US policy framing of the multipurpose role of food in relief, development and peace, although peace is not mentioned in its founding mandate and mission.

War-induced hunger and famine throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s saw WFP’s work lean increasingly into food aid for refugees and displaced people. But it also held firm to its development mission in food for asset programmes like reforestation and road building, school feeding programmes, and the encouragement of green revolution farming practices. Much of this responded specifically to the various “titles” of food aid designated in PL 480 as it was developed by the US government.

WFP developed an important policy, diplomacy and communications role of its own. Alongside FAO, it was central in many post war processes to establish the global norm of food security, most notably the 1974 Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, and the World Food Summit in 1996. At the end of the twentieth century and early this century, WFP played a key role helping States to set voluntarily agreed UN targets like the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). These have both prioritized global food security, notably SDG 2 on Zero Hunger. This year, WFP has also been at the centre of the UN Food Systems Summit.

A major part of WFP’s policy engagement role since the 1980s has been in the expanding field of early warning, where it has helped to develop USAID’s Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS) and

the FAO's Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System (IPC) started in 2004.³ This system, which informs and sets international policy on food security and famine prevention, is now the global dashboard and control centre of humanitarian response to food crisis.

With the major humanitarian turn from disaster aid to war aid in the last thirty years, the great majority of WFP aid and policy engagement has become focused on conflict related hunger. This shift started in the wartime famines of the 1980s in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Angola and has continued at pace with the rise in war-induced displacement and hunger in many subsequent wars.⁴

2. New salience in WFP policy engagement today

The role of food as an instrument of famine, aid, war, or peace has achieved new salience as a policy challenge for WFP in current twenty first century wars because they risk causing famine again, and place huge demands on WFP's emergency operations. So far this century, there has only been one war-induced famine. This was in Somalia in 2011 in which 244,000 people are estimated to have died.⁵ At the time of writing, however, there is most likely a war-induced famine in northern Ethiopia, hidden from view by government restrictions and denial.⁶ There are also risks of famine in Afghanistan, Yemen and South Sudan, and global megatrends look set to make famine more likely.

Climate change and the COVID crisis are also combining to make war-induced famines more likely in this new decade. Rural people who are suffering food shortages from war are typically struggling with significant climate effects on their normal agricultural yields. In towns and cities of conflict countries, access to food for urban people is declining because of rising food prices and reductions in their income brought about by war's destruction and the economic downturn caused by the COVID pandemic. This mix of climate, conflict and COVID is reckoned to give new cause for concern that there will be an increase in famines this decade.⁷ This concern comes across vividly in WFP's public communications in the last five years. WFP statements have consistently recognized the chronic precarity of food security in many conflict settings and urged States to invest billions of dollars more in food assistance for countries at war if they are to prevent famines and ensure social order before people are "tipped over the edge".⁸

Even before COVID, a laser-like focus on the link between hunger and conflict was being developed in UN policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy, much of which was led by WFP and its charismatic and politically well-placed Director, David Beasley. In early 2017, the UN began to talk up the risk of "four famines" and warn that hunger would be the major global crisis of 2017. The four famines were projected to take place in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Funding appeals were run throughout the year and operations were expanded. No famines emerged and the theme was retained as the major focus of the UN General Assembly in September where there was a High-

³ For details on FEWS see <https://fews.net/about-us> and for IPC see <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-overview-and-classification-system/en/>

⁴ For analysis of conflict and hunger in the 1980s, see: *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Response to Complex Emergencies*, eds Anthony Zwi and Joanna Macrae, Zed Books, London, 1994.

⁵ Alex De Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*, Polity, Cambridge, 2018.

⁶ Alex de Waal, *Why Ethiopia's Tigray Region is Starving, But No Famine is Declared*, BBC news website on 16 October 2021 at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58921744>

⁷ Index on Hunger 2021....

⁸ See for example: *Famine Alert: How WFP is tackling this other deadly pandemic*, by Livia Hengel, 29 March 2021 at <https://www.wfp.org/stories/famine-hunger-un-world-food-programme-united-nations> See also David Beasley's twitter campaign targeting billionaires at <https://twitter.com/BBCHARDtalk/status/1336970275498418176>

Level Event on Famine and the issue was planted firmly on the agenda of the UN Security Council by the Secretary General in October 2017.⁹

In May 2018 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2417 which was co-sponsored by the Netherlands, Cote d'Ivoire and Kuwait. This resolution was prompted by the groundswell of UN humanitarian concern throughout 2017 and driven by a parallel process of diplomatic consultations led by the governments of the Netherlands and Switzerland. The Netherlands then used its election onto the Council to steer the resolution into agreement. This resolution insists on much greater efforts by all States to break the link between armed conflict and hunger, and so prevent wartime famine and ensure that starvation is never used as a weapon of war. It also required the Secretary General to report to the Council on links between conflict and hunger annually and when urgently necessary.

Global consensus around the strong policy links between food, conflict and peace, and the key role played by WFP across these global challenges, was now firmly fixed in UN policy. This linkage was then given a major seal of approval when WFP was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 for “its efforts to combat hunger, for its contributions to bettering the conditions of peace in conflict-affected areas, and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of food as a weapon of war.”

WFP now plays a major role in 2417 reporting and routinely identifies “hunger hotspots” with FAO.¹⁰ The resolution adds normative muscle to the other binding international laws and food security agreements in which WFP has played an important policy and diplomatic role. It also adds another legal instrument with which WFP can drive policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy on famine prevention and fostering peace.

Humanitarian alarm at the risk of famine in today's wars continues, especially because of the compounding risks to food security from COVID restrictions and intensifying climate hazards. In March 2021, the Secretary General set up a High-Level Task Force on Famine Prevention to be chaired by the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator using the figure of “88 million people suffering from acute hunger due to conflict and stability” and “30 million facing famine”.¹¹

This pre-history of UNSC 2417 and WFP's Nobel Peace Prize sets the scene for thinking through the next steps for WFP policy engagement on famine prevention and fostering peace as it heads deeper into the 2020s.

WFP's policy engagement on famine prevention

Famine prevention is a policy no-brainer for WFP and is a core part of its commitment to “end hunger” and achieve “zero hunger”. Most significant in the development of WFP's internal policy on prevention in the last thirty years has been WFP's strategic shift from food aid to “food security” and “self-reliance” in the 1990s and to “food assistance” in the late 2000s.¹² This policy shift puts a premium on preventing hunger and creating “sustainable” livelihoods and food systems. Strategic commitment to

⁹ See the Secretary General's remarks to the Security Council on 12 October 2017 at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-10-12/sgs-countries-risk-famine-remarks>

¹⁰ Hunger Hotspots – FAO and WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity at <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-august-november-2021>

¹¹ See Secretary General's remarks to the UN Security Council on 11 March 2021 at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20619.doc.htm>

¹² WFP's new mission statement in February 1994 at <https://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/newsroom/wfp076289.pdf> and the shift to food assistance at <https://www.wfp.org/food-assistance>

SDG 2 and SDG 17 has driven a further step change in WFP's preventive focus as it now has internationally agreed UN targets and indicators to drive its "zero hunger" strategy and work.¹³ WFP's whole mission and strategy is now turned towards preventing hunger by ending it for good in both its operations and its policy engagement.

- **Operational prevention**

WFP's prevention approach is grounded operationally in the full spectrum of its food assistance activities, which includes asset creation, market development, social protection, farming and nutrition support, school feeding, and urgent cash and food relief.¹⁴ This all plays into famine prevention but WFP's more specific humanitarian policy engagement on real-time famine prevention is focused on early warning with FAO, IPC and FEWS which aims to prevent famine by alerting States and the wider humanitarian system to potentially disastrous food insecurity.

Although famine declarations are always political as well as technical, this system does see WFP engaged at the heart of a process that gives governments and UN member states the best information and analysis available to make famine prevention decisions.

- **The opportunities and risks of 2417 policy engagement**

Resolution 2417 gives WFP additional leverage in its policy engagement and influencing at country level and at the most senior political levels at the UN. It gives WFP political permission to make explicit linkage between conflict, the conduct of hostilities, food insecurity and famine. The reporting requirements in paragraphs 11, 12 and 13 also give FAO and WFP a high-level avenue of political influence on famine prevention by linking WFP's food security information, analysis and experience directly to the Security Council via the Secretary General's ad hoc and annual reports to the Council on "the risk of famine and food insecurity in country's with armed conflicts".

Country Directors recognize that 2417 gives WFP "an advocacy framework" with a clear legal and political structure for discussions on food security and famine risk with warring parties and the public. This "allows us to link hunger and conflict in a more robust way" and "has increased our sense of responsibility to influence and not just do." At the same time, however, they all reported that national governments and armed groups are usually ignorant of 2417 or only vaguely aware of it. Nor do they especially respect it and engage around it when informed about it. In other words, 2417 may be a big deal in New York, Rome, Geneva and the Hague, but it has a long way to go to get traction in conflict-affected countries. This is a major policy engagement challenge for WFP which must be prioritized with a five year view.

But leveraging the resolution is not simple at country level or New York. At country level, WFP is "not fully at the table" when the conduct of hostilities, access and famine are discussed with warring parties by the HC, RC or SRSG, and there is an expectation that WFP should "stay in your lane" and not interfere when the UN political team is leading, or HCs are operating as "as middlemen" on operational policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy.

The same subordinate role plays out in New York where WFP can be side-lined by OCHA in discussions on famine with Member States, and by Member States themselves who prefer to deal with OCHA as a one-stop shop for all humanitarian policy. The resolution can also be politically manipulated by Council members. Western States have sometimes pressed it on the Council when it suits their wider battles with China and Russia, rather than when the timing is best for the country concerned. In turn,

¹³ WFP Strategic Plan 2017-2021...

¹⁴ Our Work on the WFP website at <https://www.wfp.org/our-work>

China and Russia have kept 2417 discussions off the table around the war in Tigray because of their wider sovereignty concerns about Western interference in states' domestic affairs. Such political play with 2417 "risks the integrity of the resolution" which is then used more as a political bargaining chip than for its dedicated purpose.

On the ground and in New York, intense and high profile policy engagement around the resolution also "risks WFP operational neutrality." Also, there is still uncertainty on whether WFP staff could be pressed to give evidence in cases of criminal accountability for starvation, or if WFP information might be very publicly used by others in such cases. These risks inhibit concerted use of the resolution by WFP, and there is a strong sense that it is better for policy engagement on criminal accountability to be managed "higher up" at the UN and "outside the country" concerned.

All this means that "using 2417" is not simple for WFP and will always need a very deliberate diplomatic strategy and policy engagement plan in every situation.

- **The role model possibility of 1325**

One way of leveraging 2417 would be to emulate the success of UN Security Council resolution 1325. WFP needs to decide if it really wants to invest in 2417 to make it a piece of UN law that governments and civil society truly mobilize around worldwide. If so, Resolution 1325 is the rare example of a successful Security Council Resolution, which the global women's movement has made a rallying call to action by governments and people's organizations. It is the resolution that pops up first on a google search and has made a genuine impact in its twenty years of existence. In this it is exceptional.

WFP could do the same with 2417 by building a global social movement around it. To do so would require a real investment in new forms of policy engagement and social mobilization for WFP. But they could copy the success of 1325, either directly through a new team of policy specialists in-house or, indirectly, by devolving this social movement challenge to a new organization which they co-found and support at arm's length to protect their neutrality.

- **Supporting public action at national level**

Copying 1325 would mean playing to the relative weakness of WFP. Social mobilization is the least developed aspect of WFP's famine prevention policy effort but is now targeted in WFP's new strategy to build deep prevention partnerships with national and local organizations in line with SDG 17. It is here, by building national and intra-state partnerships for Zero Hunger, that WFP could and should do more even if they do not adopt the 1325 model.

WFP's current policy engagement on famine prevention is lop-sided towards international networks and response when experience shows that it is anti-famine contracts *within* societies that tend to make the long-term difference to food security, as they have done in India, Ethiopia and many other food insecure countries. The importance of national famine prevention contracts between citizens and governments has been well known to WFP since its engagement with the work of Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen in the 1990s and WFP's seminal Hunger and Social Action seminar, which strongly influenced WFP's 1994 mission statement and its shift to food security.

Building lasting anti-famine contracts is brought about primarily by public action, both "collaboratively" in nationwide food security coalitions and government measures, and "adversarily" by citizens affirming their right to food security in claims on the government.¹⁵ My conversations with

¹⁵ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991.

Country Directors show that some work is in play to help build Zero Hunger coalitions with civil society, government and business in places like Nigeria and Yemen. WFP's expansion of national social protection systems is also an important part of national famine prevention.

But WFP policy engagement energy seems mostly taken up with the UN Country Team, international donors and WFP's international NGO partners on short-term priorities. These international famine prevention networks are expensive and ultimately insufficient. WFP must replace them, or seamlessly merge them, with national networks within at risk countries. Building strong national and local networks is especially important before the climate emergency hits warp speed and increases global hunger.

However, emergency operations, a concern for neutrality and the INGO partnership model seem to crowd out important long-term policy engagement with local and national food security experts and activists. It will be hard for WFP to build a movement for 2417 unless it can move beyond this mindset in which most WFP famine prevention operations at national level are like a cuckoo in the government nest and not genuine cooperation to build authentic national capacity.

WFP's imbalance between international and national policy engagement on famine prevention must be corrected. This means WFP continuing to put greater investment into SDG 17 partnerships at regional, national and sub-national level, as per their current strategy. This is not easy in war-torn societies or authoritarian states where civic space is limited. But encouraging zero hunger coalition-building *within* states should be recognized and valued as an essential long-term pathway to famine prevention and food security. WFP policy engagement in Zero Hunger networks should be prioritized intra-nationally and internationally.

- **More climate hunger than conflict in the next ten years?**

A potential bias towards conflict-related hunger in WFP operations and policy engagement also needs addressing. Understandably, WFP has been preoccupied with war aid in the last 30 years. But the climate emergency now demands that WFP balances its strategic focus and ways of working to prepare for climate crisis and widespread hunger that has no conflict link. 2417 may not appear so overwhelmingly relevant in ten years if WFP's portfolio of need has turned much more to climate-related hunger. In many places, hunger will continue to result from a combination of war and climate, but WFP may also be facing an increasing demand from people who will be hungry because of climate alone, and are moving into countries where WFP is not used to working.

This trend suggests that WFP would be unwise to put all its operational and policy eggs in conflict operations and policy engagement, and should begin to invest some of its people, policy and resources in skilling up on climate-related food insecurity and climate aid.¹⁶

3. WFP's policy engagement on peace

WFP has a clear strategic commitment to the prevention of hunger but its mandate, mission and core policies make no core commitments to foster peace. Most current WFP strategic documents are a peace free zone with no specific objectives or values setting the organization in the direction of peace. The exception is the 2013 policy on "WFP's role in peacebuilding in transition settings".¹⁷ This commits

¹⁶ Hugo Slim, It's Time to Pivot from War Aid to Climate Aid, 25 October 2021 at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/10/25/COP26-time-to-pivot-from-war-aid-to-climate-aid>

¹⁷ WFP's Role in Peacebuilding in Transition Settings, WFP Executive Board, November 2013.

WFP to a conflict sensitive approach” which focuses on “doing no harm” by increasing conflict and “reinforcing peacebuilding at the local level” by its partners wherever possible. It also commits WFP to reinforcing UN mandated peace agreements by engaging in the food security elements of DDR programmes and supporting the service delivery of fragile states. But the policy also makes clear that “WFP should not allow peacebuilding to become its overriding objective in a country.” This must always remain food security.

This absence of a peace intention in WFP core policies is surprising in view of the long association between food and peace in international policy and the many statements WFP’s current leadership has made on the subject. All WFP’s recent references to the role of food assistance in stabilizing societies, reducing violent extremism and fostering peace have emerged in occasional WFP statements, diplomatic briefings and social media communications, with the great majority of this policy line promoted by the Director himself. This accumulation of informal policy pronouncements and the winning of the Nobel Peace prize now demand that WFP develop a policy on peace that is either newly ambitious or explicitly limited. WFP’s new 2022-2026 strategy has begun this process.

WFP’s new strategy clearly indicates that peace is strategically important to WFP but keeps its peace ambitions general and undeveloped.¹⁸ The strategy has ambitions for the “interconnectedness” between WFP’s work on food security and the “progress towards a more peaceful world” that is the objectives of SDG 16. It also notes how working in a “responsive and inclusive” way will contribute to SDG 16 and “strengthen social cohesion”. The two main policy routes to peace in the new strategy are through a “conflict-sensitive approach” and “humanitarian diplomacy and peace advocacy”. Conflict sensitivity demands that WFP’s work on food security should always avoid increasing tension and conflict, and actively look for ways that food work may support peacefulness and the pro-peace work of others. Importantly, the strategy also asks WFP to be bolder in its humanitarian diplomacy and “peace advocacy” – an important new commitment. The strategy requires WFP to advocate alone and with others towards “sustained peace outcomes”.

The prize has been a fantastic ethical endorsement of WFP’s contribution to ending hunger and bettering the conditions of peace, but also a slightly confusing one strategically because a peace ambition is not explicit in WFP’s mandate and mission. The prize now requires WFP to clarify its commitment to peace more explicitly even if the Nobel citation only commends WFP “bettering the conditions for peace” and does not reward it for specifically building peace. WFP’s new strategy will now require the organization to be more detailed in how its work links to SDG 16 and what makes good quality “peace advocacy”. This will require new policymaking and greater effort to capture good practice on the ground.

- **Building blocks for a peace policy**

Policy engagement requires a policy with which to engage. At the moment, “we can put peace stuff in speeches but our evidence for it is not as concrete as we would like” and “we don’t have a policy”. WFP’s immediate challenge is, therefore, to develop a peace policy which frames WFP’s contribution accurately and offers evidence to back it up.

The following four points may help WFP to frame the connection between food assistance and peace and so work its way towards a peace policy.

- First, is the obvious point that **food security does not create or guarantee peace**. Food security and peace are not logically sequential in some absolute way. Nor can one say that

¹⁸ WFP Strategic Plan 2022-2026, WFP Executive Board, Rome 15-18 November 2021.

food security is peace. This is proved by the fact that Syria had good food security when it spiralled into violent conflict, and that the US and the UK also have relatively good food security but are two of the most belligerent states in the world. Food security is not an automatic determinant of peace.

- Secondly, **food insecurity and hunger are not automatic determinants of armed conflict.** Being hungry does not necessarily make you violent. There are many hungry people in the world who do not resort to violence, and there are many places in the world where food security is low but there is not a war. Instead, the big truth that WFP knows so well, and which it sees every day, is that **armed conflict causes a decline in food security and a steep rise in hunger whenever it happens.** In armed conflicts, a lack of access to food can also tip certain people into a personal decision to join in an armed conflict. So, there is a consistent link between conflict and hunger, but not a general rule that food insecurity leads to armed conflict.
- Thirdly, it is clear from listening to WFP leaders that they have a definite sense that **the presence of hunger signals the absence of justice**, and a society without such basic justice can never claim to have achieved real peace. In his Nobel acceptance speech, the Director emphasises that human society cannot call itself peaceful when people are starving within it. Deep sleep, a sign of peace, is denied the Director because people are dying of hunger. His implication is that hunger is always a breach of true peacefulness and a mark of social disorder and political failure. In peace jargon, this is the idea that hunger and famine are always a sign of negative peace and have no place in positive peace.
- Fourth, my conversations with WFP leaders show how they feel strongly that **food sometimes contributes to a certain level of local peace.** This is not “big peace”. Food assistance does not lead to political agreements or cause the resolution of armed conflict, but it can generate small instances of peacefulness dotted around a conflicted country. The Director’s Nobel speech similarly claims that food is a *means* of peace with the idea that “food is the pathway to peace”, which picks up on the UN’s wider policy discourse of sustainable peace.¹⁹ In this vein, several Country Directors described how food assistance can be a means to peace when it helps to support local forms of peace-making and begins cooperation between conflicting parties because of their mutual interest in food supply, markets and trading. In such situations, WFP has also described food as a “cornerstone” of peace.²⁰ WFP does not seem to have collected a global evidence base for this but it is a strong sentiment within the organization, which people illustrate with particular examples. In peace theory, this kind of peace is best described as “**everyday peace**”.

This idea of “everyday peace” may be very helpful to WFP, and I think it important for WFP policymaking to look more deeply into this form of peace to see if it captures WFP’s main link with peace.

- **WFP and everyday peace**

WFP Country Directors’ descriptions of WFP contributions to peace in South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Nigeria sound like instances of “everyday peace” as discovered and theorized in recent

¹⁹ United Nations, World Bank, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, World Bank, Washington DC, 2018.

²⁰ WFP “What does hunger have to do with peace?” at <https://www.wfp.org/nobel-laureate#:~:text=This%20year%2C%20WFP%20was%20awarded,as%20a%20weapon%20of%20war%22>.

research led by Roger Mac Ginty in many conflicted societies.²¹ Country Directors all spoke of particular places where WFP work on food supply, improved markets, or the construction of shared assets, like roads and bridges, had brought people together in ways that did not resolve the “big” conflict, but which re-established a certain level of functional relationships and a reduction in violence in particular areas. In these situations, food assistance may indeed be a source of everyday peace, or a means of everyday peace-making in line with the Director’s image of food as a “pathway to peace”.

Mac Ginty describes “everyday peace” emerging when individuals or small groups of people find the capacity, alone or together, to “disrupt violence and forge pro-social relationships in conflict-affected societies.” These “small acts of peace”, like those happening around WFP food assistance, often stand simply on their own as a small show of peace in small place, but they can sometimes also be scaled-up from the hyperlocal to the local and the national. Importantly, “everyday peace” may not be the total “social cohesion” so desired of stabilization policymakers, but may be more like toleration and a pragmatic reciprocity that works to keep the peace rather than make deep peace.

Mac Ginty’s research shows how “attitudes and actions lie at the heart of everyday peace”, which is typically born of one or more of three main attributes: sociality, reciprocity and solidarity. Food often has a part to play in reinforcing each one of these social phenomena, and these three things are always present in such acts of peace in pro-social moves that are often driven by kindness, good manners, shared interests, conflict avoidance or a sense of resistance to violence and conflict. Mac Ginty’s research also shows how context is everything to everyday peace. In some contexts, it is possible and others simply impossible. This too resonates with how WFP Country Directors described how “it happens in some places” but “we cannot do it everywhere”.

Everyday peace seems to capture WFP’s contribution on the ground and the style of its public policy engagement as modelled by the current Director. This policy engagement, diplomacy and advocacy is essentially an appeal for kindness, good manners and pro-social behaviour from governments and billionaires. The Director is not proposing and promoting a particular political peace agreement. Nor is he saying that WFP and its food can solve the root causes of conflict, although he came close to this in his early messaging around food and violent extremists. Instead, his policy engagement typically reaches out much more generally in a spirit of social obligation, solidarity and reciprocity that urges States to make a gesture of everyday peace through food. In line with his Christian commitments, the Director’s policy engagement is calling everyone to come to a banquet and share what they have with people at the table who are hungry. Similarly, the rest of WFP is not proposing “big peace” political solutions but everyday peace calls for human solidarity around food in particular places and among particular groups.

These four policy starting points, and a particular commitment to everyday peace rather than political “big peace” agreements, may prove fruitful for WFP. If WFP wants to speak clearly into peace policy and achieve specific objectives around peace as well as prevention, I suggest WFP uses these policy elements, and insights and evidence from the ground, to prepare a clear policy on food security’s role in fostering peace, or in the Nobel phrase, “bettering the conditions for peace”. A clear policy that draws firmly on WFP evidence, experience and expertise can then be used to engage publicly and diplomatically to leverage the connections between food security and peace.

4. The character and dynamics of WFP policy engagement

²¹ Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021.

Deciding on new policies and engagement strategies for WFP must take into account its particular organizational culture. Four particular characteristics of WFP policy engagement are striking when observing it in action and listening to WFP staff describe how they do engage on prevention and peace. The first is WFP's "second fiddle" role which is baked into its position within the UN system. The second is the requirement for operational access which shapes the kind of policy engagement WFP feels able to do. The third is the political charisma and contacts of WFP's Director which drives most of WFP's policy engagement and diplomacy. The fourth is the essentially practical and operational culture of WFP. Each of these characteristics of WFP policy engagement has advantages and disadvantages.

- **Second Fiddle**

WFP's position in the UN system gives it a subordinate role in two important ways.²² This means it is never able to lead wholeheartedly in famine prevention or fostering peace and is typically playing "second fiddle" in formal UN policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy. First, WFP is in the unusual position of being a "subsidiary" and junior agency to FAO in the specialist area of food security. This affects its ability to drive and lead much of the official policy engagement on food security, in which it must often defer to and draw on FAO technical knowledge, policy agreement and diplomatic seniority. Secondly, like all specialist agencies, WFP is also required to stand back in operational settings as part of the UN Country Team in which the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator leads, speaks and negotiates for the UN humanitarian effort. This second fiddle tendency is also noticeable in New York.

The second fiddle role has pros and cons. One advantage is that it often allows WFP to stay "below the radar" and be somewhat distanced from hard lines and controversies in which the SG, ERC, Envoys, RC and HC may be personally embroiled internationally and at country level. WFP Country Directors can usually avoid having their heads above the parapet in volatile UN policy engagements over access and wider human rights beyond food rights.

But there are disadvantages too. WFP leaders spend a lot of their energy for policy engagement on internal diplomacy within the UN system. Very often, more of their policy engagement time is invested in meetings trying to influence UN colleagues than it is in meetings attempting to influence government counterparts or national public opinion, or coalition-building with local organizations. A further disadvantage is that WFP's policy networks and targets of influence are limited at national level. WFP Country Directors may have good senior level access to their line ministry, usually Food and Agriculture, but are held back from wider and higher diplomatic reach and influence on key food security policy determined by other parts of government because of this second fiddle HCT role.

- **The requirement of operational access**

A second dynamic characterizing WFP policy engagement is the need to balance the risks of policy engagement with the need for operational access and acceptance by all warring parties.

This tension is the norm for all humanitarian agencies, and it too has advantages and disadvantages. It naturally limits WFP's room for manoeuvre on policy engagement and restrains the way it speaks out and the things it speaks about. But operational access has the advocacy advantage of keeping WFP close to the ground and to people's real-time experience of hunger and food security. This often gives WFP privileged and timely information. The challenge then is if and how this can be officially passed or "smuggled" to others in the UN who can use it more widely.

²² WFP General Regulations and Rules Article II 1c, Article III, Article VI, and Article VIII.

- **The Director’s charisma and contacts**

The exceptional political charisma and network of the current WFP Director is a third factor that characterizes WFP policy engagement. The Director’s policy engagement is typically powerful and well-judged. It has rapidly put WFP on the front foot in its policy engagement on famine prevention and peace, and produced significant results. He leads the organization’s policy engagement from the front with no other WFP officials in the limelight.

But a charismatic and well-connected Director with a strong focus on policy engagement cannot be assumed as a given in WFP going forwards, and the organization’s policy engagement must be structured and resourced in such a way that it is able to function effectively enough without such an impressive policy soloist as Director.

- **WFP’s predominantly operational culture**

WFP’s distinct organizational culture also has an impact on its policy engagement. WFP has always maintained an essentially pragmatic operational culture which is all about the work on the ground. The organization is led at all levels largely by operational doers and technical experts who have come up through the ranks and are strongly focused on logistics, systems, program results. There is not a competing mass of policy and advocacy people in WFP and the predominant culture remains hands-on rather than cerebral or overly intellectual in its policy formulation and expression.

This culture is precious. It is a real asset that makes WFP unique among UN specialist agencies for being low on “blah blah” and high on evidence and deliverables. It also means that when WFP does speak publicly and engage on policy, it carries weight because it is not speaking all the time in the type of endless running commentary that constitutes the policy engagement of most big humanitarian agencies.

Low spend on policy teams also keeps WFP lean as a primarily operational organization, as required in its regulations.²³ Management processes on policy engagement across WFP are relatively flat with only a few cooks in the policy kitchen and a minimum of bureaucratic hoops through which policy engagement is generated and delivered. Country Directors report that WFP policy engagement culture is “very horizontal and relationship based” with a “pick up the phone culture” that makes policy communication simple and fast.

The disadvantage of this deeply operational culture is a certain policy and diplomatic reticence in WFP. Its Country Directors often have temperaments and skills that may not be to best suited to policy engagement, and they naturally prioritize operational considerations. This organizational culture combines with its “second fiddle” position and its concern for neutrality to mean that policy engagement and humanitarian diplomacy are not highly professionalized, incentivized or rewarded as major WFP practices.

5. Three Options for Future Policy Engagement

With this analysis of WFP’s current policy and practice in mind, this final section offers three options going forwards for WFP policy engagement on famine prevention and fostering peace. Each option is

²³ WFP Regulations and Rules, Article VII, 7.

offered as a potential scenario, and something of a caricature, with the intention of provoking discussion.

These scenarios also recognize that the current trend for conflict-related hunger may soon be superseded by even greater hunger from climate emergencies. Climate-related hunger may soon become the next global challenge, which means WFP policy should be focusing on both sources of hunger and not locked into a 2417 pathway.

Scenario 1 – Strong Second Fiddle

This scenario sees WFP accepting and optimising its strengths as a strong second fiddle to FAO and OCHA, and letting them lead on policy engagement.

WFP teams would “keep their heads down” on diplomatic engagement and public policy at country level, in key regional capitals and in New York. They would stay true to their operational culture and not invest in a new cadre of policy and diplomatic staff.

Instead, WFP would invest in its technical evidence base and excel at “nerd diplomacy” in which they would focus purely on generating factual detail, both on preventing famine and fostering “everyday peace” along two policy tracks:

1. Gathering and packaging the best technical information and analysis on food insecurity, famine risk and anticipatory action, and passing this on to professional policy and diplomatic teams in FAO and OCHA who would lead on policy engagement around the world.
2. Doing the same with evidence gathering on how WFP programmes are creating and scaling everyday peace, and passing this to the political and peace-building teams in the UN.

This scenario has the following benefits:

- It keeps WFP’s operational culture dominant and intact
- It avoids the organizational turbulence of integrating a new corps of policy professionals
- It ensures a strong but limited policy engagement role for WFP on both famine prevention and fostering peace within the wider UN system.

Scenario 2 – Become a Public Campaigner

This scenario sees WFP leveraging the Nobel Prize and 2417 to step-up into a very clear role in public policy engagement that encompasses hunger-based humanitarian diplomacy, peace advocacy and broad-based public action to end hunger.

WFP would “step into the limelight in its own right” and position equally alongside FAO and OCHA in a more assertive policy style that drives as much as follows UN efforts in country, in key capitals, in Geneva and New York.

To achieve this, WFP would need to skill-up and invest systematically in policy engagement, diplomacy and public campaigning in collaboration with civil society. This would involve populating WFP with a large new group of policy professionals.

This scenario would see WFP investing in three main changes:

1. WFP would recruit a new cadre of policy, activist and diplomatic professionals expert in hunger and peace, and build them into strong influencing teams in country, in key capitals across the world, and in Geneva and New York.
2. WFP would begin to work politically by working much more explicitly with civil society locally, nationally and internationally to build a global social movement to prevent famine, end hunger and advocate for peace.
3. This new policy profession would achieve critical mass alongside the operational professions, which would require strategic and cultural integration across WFP.

This scenario has the following benefits:

- It resolves the continuing ambiguity about the importance of policy engagement, peace advocacy, professionalized diplomacy and public campaigning.
- It takes up the challenge of social action as the best way to create anti-famine contracts and end hunger, and drives 2417 publicly with civil society like 1325.

Scenario 3 – Stay Foodie

This scenario sees WFP sticking to its core business around 2417 and avoiding deepening engagement in peace policy, despite the wonderful accolade of the Nobel Prize.

WFP would concentrate its policy engagement along the single track of its mandate and focus 100% on food security and famine prevention in its policy and diplomacy.

This strategic focus would enable WFP to invest all its efforts into the core hunger challenge of current wars and the emerging climate emergency in five main ways:

1. Becoming the world's policy expert on predicting hunger emergencies by increasing its specialization in anticipatory forecasting.
2. Becoming the world's operational expert in aid responses to hunger emergencies in war and climate disaster.
3. Enabling the localization required to build national food security platforms – of local, national and regional humanitarian institutions - across all vulnerable countries.
4. Going really big on 2417 by building a global movement around it like 1325.
5. Shaping new global rights, duties and law need to govern climate-related hunger through the next 20 years.

This scenario has the following benefits:

- It ends the risk of WFP's energy and resources being diverted into uncertain and politically risky engagements in peace-building and peace policy that are not central to its mandate.
- It allows WFP to play to its strengths and build a policy profession across the organization that is still rooted in hunger and food, and organically integrated into the fabric and culture of WFP.
- It keeps WFP on mandate, on brand and on message as it prepares for the widespread hunger expected in climate emergencies, which may well eclipse conflict-related hunger in the 2020s.
- It still leaves WFP free to do general food-based peace advocacy around conflict and climate crisis.

There are, no doubt, more scenarios than these three options, but I hope they are sufficiently different to produce a good discussion of the policy and diplomatic choices facing WFP.

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