

Back to the root causes of war: food shortages

Per Frankelius

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In their brilliant Article, Zachary Wagner and colleagues (Sept 8, 2018, p 857)¹ estimated that, between 1995 and 2015, about 5 million children younger than 5 years died in Africa because of armed conflict.

This kind of research is important for understanding the magnitude of war effects. However, studies like this do not contribute much to the understanding of the root causes of wars. Various theories have been presented.² One common explanation is religion. Others say war is caused by crazy rulers. It can be triggered by an error that is responded to with disproportionate retaliation, which escalates in a violent circle (such as the security failure preceding the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg in Sarajevo in 1914, which sparked World War 1). Some analysts argue that access to weapons, or material for producing weapons, is an important factor. Others reason that man is evil by nature or that misunderstanding in communication or lack of understanding can lead to war.

War is often preceded by tensions, of which there are many potential sources. Tensions can arise from shortages of water, energy, and, not least, food. For example, as Torreon Creekmore,³ of the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity in the USA, reflected: “When crops fail and prices rise, people don’t have the money to purchase food, which can lead to stealing, then riots, social unrest, and mass migrations.”

Agricultural production in relation to need is a security factor, and future forecasts indicate challenges. The world’s population is expected to increase to 9.6 billion by 2050,⁴ and many people will also change their diet.



Food shortage is one of the root causes of war victims. Increased food needs in the future can be met by for example innovation in agriculture.

Photo: Per Frankelius.

According to the UN,⁵ society needs to increase food production radically until 2050; this at a time when increasing food production will become more difficult. Soil degradation and climate change are two reasons. Therefore, to reduce the number of victims of conflict, society must ensure food production and the supply of water and energy. Innovation in agricultural methods is one approach that could be taken.

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I declare no competing interests.

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Authors' reply

We appreciate the comment by Per Frankelius, in which he notes the role of agriculture in the origins of conflict.¹ We focus on the consequences of conflict, not its causes. Both are important issues worthy of investigation. We agree that evidence suggests that variations in the economy and climate, including those related to food production, could be important drivers of conflict.^{2,3} Given the major consequences of conflict for child health documented in our work,¹ further inquiries into the causes of war, into understanding how to intervene to reduce conflict risk, and how to deliver health services in conflict situations are all urgent areas for future research.

We declare no competing interests.

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