

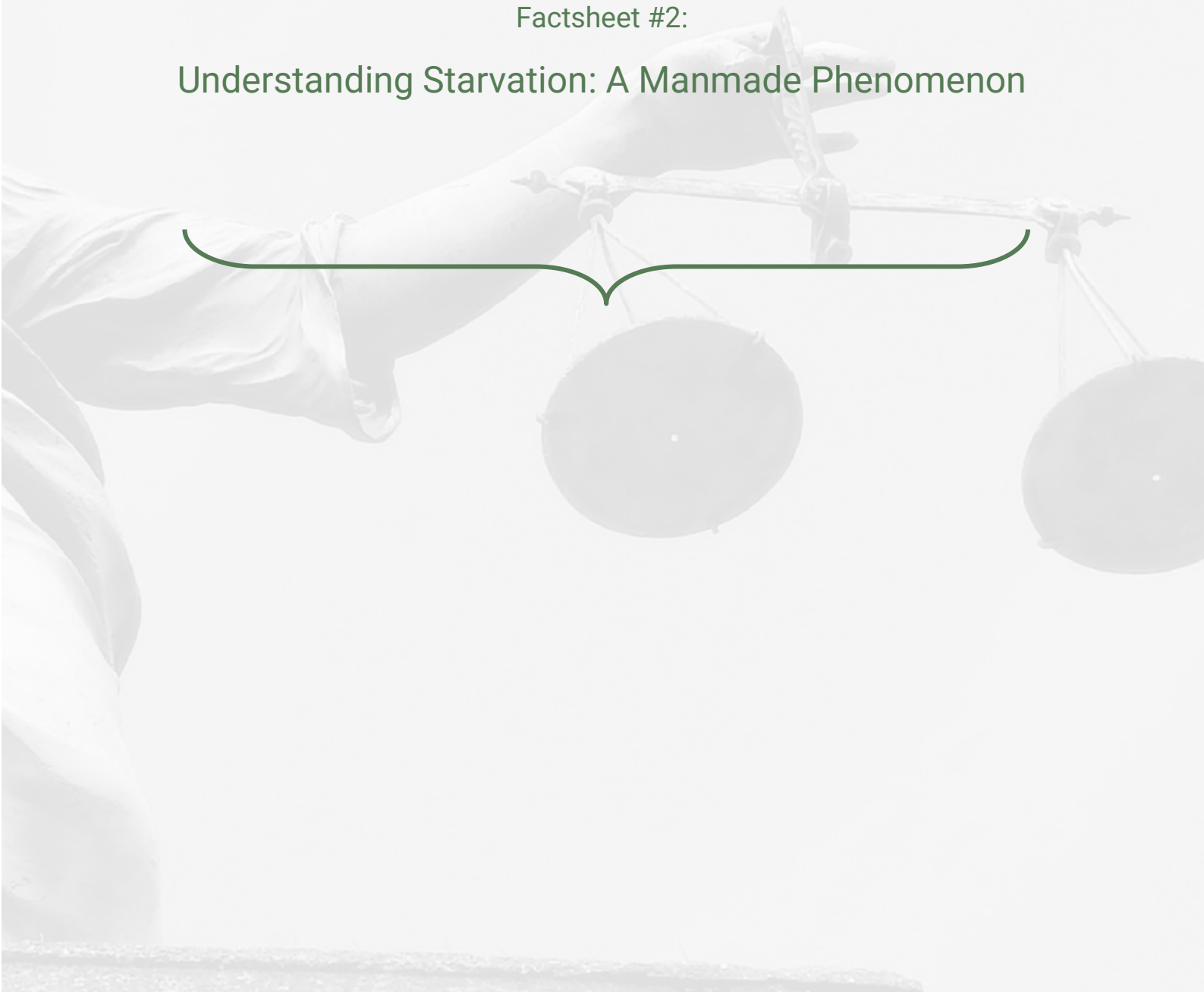


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Factsheet #2:

Understanding Starvation: A Manmade Phenomenon



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Starvation as a consequence of manmade actions

Today, every instance of famine or acute food insecurity is, at its core, man-made. Moreover, the current scale of consequential suffering and death resulting from food insecurity is unprecedented in recent history.

Global means of agricultural production exceed the amount necessary to ensure no one goes hungry. Yet, in a stark reversal of the trend realised in the latter part of the twentieth century, incidents of starvation are on the rise. When starvation occurs today, it is the result of human behaviour, action or inaction. In the twenty-first century, therefore, starvation is a manmade phenomenon.

The term '**starvation**' is used across the fields of relief operations, early warning responses, political analysis, and international law. Under international law, it denotes deprivation of nourishment as well as a more general deprivation or insufficient supply of some essential commodity or something necessary to live. In the English language, the term can imply death resulting from inadequate food. The prohibition on starvation of civilians under international humanitarian law (IHL) and International Criminal Law (ICL), however, encompasses the range of suffering, illness, disease and waste occasioned by starvation-related conduct. It focusses on depriving civilians of **objects indispensable to their survival (OIS)**.

Climate change, poverty and natural disasters can contribute to acute food insecurity, but the biggest cause of starvation is conflict. In violation of international law, depriving civilians of OIS, such as food, medicines and other essential commodities is an increasingly apparent method of warfare. Evidence of this tactic can be seen across a range of recent and contemporary conflicts in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Ukraine, to name a few.

The prevalence of starvation events today is a failure of morality. But ending starvation is not an impossible demand. Eliminating starvation and eradicating hunger requires coordinated efforts to ensure international law is disseminated, respected and enforced.

Identifying Starvation-Related Conduct

The intentional use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare can take a variety of forms. Common forms of intentional starvation-related conduct include:

- Depriving civilians impacted by conflict the resources they need to survive;
- Destroying, stealing or blocking humanitarian relief;
- Denying humanitarian workers access to vulnerable segments of the civilian population;
- Attacking means of agricultural production;
- Attacking water and food resources, sanitation, and electrical systems;
- Forcing people to relocate to areas with insufficient food or clean water to stay healthy; and
- Forcing people into areas lacking healthcare services for the sick and injured.

A broad-range of conduct can lead to starvation events. This is because OIS is an open-ended concept by design. OIS encompass essentials and necessities such as: foodstuff, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs (i.e., farmland), crops, livestock, drinking water, installation and supplies, irrigation works, medical supplies, means of shelter, fuel and electricity. It can also be circumstance-specific, accounting for climate and territorial variances, the characteristics of the victims (e.g., breast-fed children) as well as the public health situation.

Most Vulnerable to Starvation

- Young children
- Pregnant/nursing mothers
- Elderly individuals
- Disabled individuals
- Farmers
- Residents of rural areas
- The urban poor
- Minorities

Examples:

Periods of prolonged conflict are known to result in starvation that disproportionately affects children. Children and infants are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition, stunted growth, and various disorders affecting their day-to-day functioning—with potentially long-term health consequences. Children who are less or not at all self-sustaining are highly reliant on care, for which both the facilities and the caretaker are indispensable. As such, attacks on hospitals or severe and acute feeding centres would significantly affect children's wellbeing even when they themselves were not the primary victims.

Gender-specific considerations in a starvation situation must also be considered. Starvation and sexual and gender-based violence are mutually reinforcing crimes (Conley *et al.*, 2022). Issues faced could include mothers feeling guilty for not being able to breastfeed their children due to their own malnutrition or psycho-social suffering. Further, women and girls in many communities do not have equal access to the agricultural work, medical centres or humanitarian aid:

- **Gender preferencing** in certain communities in the distribution of food can leave women and girls with less or no food during periods of food scarcity.
- **Cultural restrictions** may impede or discourage a woman or a girl from travelling alone in the absence of a male relative. This restriction may tighten in wartime when the male members of the family are involved in combat or unavailable.
- **Secondary violence:** Checkpoints, curfews and closures of public roads can delay or altogether prevent women and girls from reaching local markets, pharmacies or hospitals. When this occurs, women and girls may be required to travel longer distances to conduct livelihood activities. Such journeys add additional safety concerns making them vulnerable to other crimes of sexual exploitation, rape, abduction etc.

Starvation Myths and Detangling a Multi-Causal Environment

Identifying causal relationships between the actions of warring parties and adverse impacts upon civilian populations poses considerable challenges. Manmade starvation can be the result of bad governance, war tactics, and opportunism, further exacerbated by pre-existing vulnerabilities. Starvation is often inflicted in countries where food insecurity, malnutrition and disease are either pre-existing or partly caused by economic crises occurring in parallel with conflict. The result is a layer of complex causality that can obfuscate efforts to understand root causes and identify culprits.

When warring parties have the intent to starve the civilian population, however, the law is clear. The conduct is not only in violation of IHL, it amounts to a war crime. Widespread ratification of the starvation amendment to Article 8 of the Rome Statute is therefore a critical step in deterring this illegal behaviour and ensuring perpetrators can be held to account.¹

The World Peace Foundation have identified five common myths that surround famine and starvation:

Myth #1: Starvation occurs when there is not enough food to go around.

Fact: Starvation results when some people do not have **access** to enough food. Incidents of starvation do not necessarily mean that there is not enough available food to be distributed to the civilian population. Starvation may not affect all people equally. Inequalities that existed prior to food insecurity become pronounced. Rural populations and people of lower economic standing generally experience more food insecurity than financially secure urban populations.

Myth #2: Starvation is the result of natural causes.

Fact: Some natural events such as drought and flooding may result in food shortages. However, they do not automatically cause starvation. Through good governance, acute food insecurity is avoidable. Starvation usually occurs because of actions of governments and armed groups, such as destroying, stealing or blocking humanitarian relief, or attacking and damaging water and food sources, sanitation and electrical systems, and agriculture and fisheries.

Myth #3: Starvation is caused by overpopulation.

Fact: Population growth does not lead to starvation. While many people face hunger, famines are actually rare. Globally, the population increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.8 billion in 2010. Yet over this time period, the number of deaths owing to famine steeply declined.

Myth #4: Climate change will inevitably lead to starvation.

Fact: Climate change poses huge risks such as drought, flood or other effects that may lead to food insecurity and increase global food prices. However, the threats posed by climate change can be constructively managed through humane political decisions.

¹ The starvation amendment inserts the new crime of intentional starvation of civilians in non-international armed conflict as a war crime as Article 8(2)(e)(ix) of the Rome Statute.

Myth #5: When starvation threatens, the only thing we can do is provide aid.

Fact: Providing food aid only addresses short-term emergency and immediate food crisis. Political decisions need to be made to prevent starvation in the long run. The perpetration of deliberate starvation should be universally and publicly vilified to encourage political and military leaders to defend against the practice.

Further Reading

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https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Food_Scarcity_and_Famine.html?id=QF11h_hMBbIC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

The GRC Starvation Accountability App is now available for download:

THE GRC STARVATION ACCOUNTABILITY APP
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