

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL  
HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS SEGMENT

# HUNGER AND THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Wednesday  
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08:30 - 09:45

**ECOSOC** GPC Panel | **SIDE  
EVENT** | **NOTES**

## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The criteria to determine when a famine is declared describe a dramatic scenario, which we see in pockets of South Sudan but also coming in Yemen, Somalia and Northern Nigeria, where 20 million people – of whom 5.4 million are children – are affected. Famine doesn't happen overnight but rather in a cumulative and multi-faceted way; people are at end of the tether in coping when we call something a famine, even though on-going and predicted.

There are three things we can do to address hunger:

- 1** Gain access to affected people, not just air-drop food
- 2** Act early and enable people to hold on to their assets, e.g. livestock, stores etc. and this implies being able to work with actors on the ground
- 3** Mobilise resources in order to help deliver what people need

### CHAIR:

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Deputy Director of International Protection, UNHCR

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Head of Protection, ICRC

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**Ms Caroline van Buren**

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**Michael Bowers**

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**Mr Tony Ojukwu**

Director, Nigerian Human Rights Commission

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Senior Liaison Officer,  
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**A situation of hunger can quickly slide into famine** when the root causes of the situation are not addressed in time. In conflict, a lack of precaution by belligerents or a lack of proactive measures to ensure access to markets can worsen hunger, even when it is not a deliberate tactic to cause hunger. While funding for operations is critical, no amount of money can mitigate the failure to abide by existing norms and states and others need to make a difference to their behaviour; we need to end impunity and break the cycle of conflict and hunger by restoring a better respect for the norms of international law and addressing the political failures behind conflict and the lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law.

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**There is a real issue about how to bring the centrality of protection to bear on pre-existing risks** - how to address the underlying vulnerabilities? A study on why young men join Boko Haram shows clear financial reasons, not ideological and this requires looking at tools to broaden livelihood inclusion schemes. In the context of long-standing situations the solutions set becomes very limited programmatically owing to access restrictions, conflict etc. Protection has to be central in developing any response to a tangled web which underlies all the crises. Protection strategies are that hidden tool, which multi-mandate organisations are just beginning to realise are important. But solutions cannot be drive by sectors and need to be comprehensive in order to counter violence and extremism. We need to develop our capacity on front-line negotiations for the staff in the field. Capacity is key in situations of restricted access. Once you understand the risks how do you broker assistance to affected people? How to negotiate with Boko Haram, al-Shabab and other groups?

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**Women and girls face differential risks in situations of hunger.** Women are responsible for household-related activities, e.g. fetching water, cultivating gardens, tending livestock, and these activities are directly affected by drought and consequential hunger. Women have to make agonising decisions about how much their children can eat, go to school or how much water they can drink. These stressors expose women to physical violence, which is perpetrated most often by an intimate partner. But there is also a marked increase in sexual violence outside of relationships, even only in reported cases. The number of cases of sexual violence is not well known owing to stigma- being subject to sexual violence can make a woman unmarriageable. There are overlapping protection concerns, e.g. in increased rates of early marriage, and concomitant increased rates of female genital mutilation. Many parents see this from a protection and economic aspect- families cannot protect their girls so it is a better scenario to have girls married off to sometimes very old men, and bride prices are often a factor in causing early marriage. We know from discussions with women that women and girls have to travel very long distances to fetch water, often in insecure areas, up to 60km. Protection in hunger emergencies is not getting the funding required because donors do not see our activities as “life-saving” so we need to take opportunities in working with other clusters and integrating GBV concerns in food security, nutrition etc.

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**Looking to the future, we need to recall Amartya Sen’s wise words** that there has never been a famine in a democracy. Addressing the root causes of governance is therefore key to ending hunger. Disasters are not natural but man-made and hunger is used as a weapon of war.

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**Protection should be more to the fore in famine response.** None of the four countries at risk of famine achieve more than 20% funding for protection activities. Why is there a funding shortfall? There is a lack of awareness of the protection needs in famine. It is difficult to prioritise protection in funding applications and this underlines the need to develop easy-to-understand narratives in the context of famine- protection should also be prioritised in pooled funds. We need to challenge humanitarian structures that present prioritisation of technical delivery over protection outcomes- there should be no competition between food and protection but do demand how many more lives can be saved if programmes are better integrated with protection, e.g. by addressing the needs of invisible minority groups.