2021 Economic and Social Committee
Humanitarian Affairs Segment

(Virtual) Side Event
24 June 2021, 17:00 – 18:30 CET

Preventing Famine and Responding to Extreme Food Insecurity in the COVID-19 Era.
A Call to Action: The disproportionate impact of COVID-19, Conflict and Climate Change on women and girls

Sponsors: USA, Switzerland, Ireland, and the Dominican Republic

UN Organizers: World Food Programme (WFP), UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).


Objective:
Call for urgent high-level action and funding to prevent wide-spread famine for the rest of 2021 and beyond; as well as seek solutions, and encourage discourse, on how local and community action - through women’s leadership in particular - can improve early warning and build resilience to climate and conflict related shocks to avoid hunger.

Panel Members:

Moderator: Ambassador Manuel Bessler, Deputy Director General, Head of Humanitarian Aid Department and Head of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA)

Opening Remarks: Ambassador Michael Gaffey, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations in Geneva

Keynote Address: Sarah Charles, Assistant to the Administrator of USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)

Panelists

- Dominic MacSorley, Chief Executive Officer of Concern Worldwide
- Maclean Natugasha, Norwegian Refugee Council Cameroon Country Director
- Amadou Allahoury Diallo, Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of the Niger - Agriculture and Livestock Unit
- Susan Gamboripai, Youth Advocate and Refugee from South Sudan
- Reena Ghelani, Director, Operations and Advocacy Division, OCHA
Main points:

**Event moderator Ambassador Manuel Bessler, Deputy Director General, Head of Humanitarian Aid Department and Head of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit**
- Noted in his opening remarks that a “storm was coming” when referring to the figure of over 270 million people\(^1\) (the equivalent to the population of Indonesia) currently in acute food insecurity.
- He stressed that some 41 million people are at risk of falling into famine and more than half a million people are already in IPC 5 across Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Sudan, and Yemen.
- The Ambassador underlined the criticality of the situation, and thanked WFP and FAO for co-organising the event as well as Member States for their support.

**Ambassador Michael Gaffey, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the UN Office at Geneva**
- Reiterated the urgency of the situation, noting that Ireland is making conflict and hunger a priority at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).
- He added that Ireland as a nation has a historical memory of famine.
- Gaffey stressed that the international community has a collective responsibility to consign famine to history.
- The Ambassador emphasized that hunger is a product of wider fragility and the undeniability of the role that conflict plays as a key driver of food insecurity.
- He further highlighted that in addressing hunger and conflict the humanitarian community must ensure that relief assistance complements work on resilience building, early action and prevention and the safeguarding of child and maternal health.
- Gaffey called on all states to comply with IHL and condemned the use of hunger as a weapon of war.

**Ms. Sarah Charles, Assistant to the Administrator of USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)**
- Opened by thanking Ireland for their support with hunger and security-related issues currently before the UNSC.
- Charles stated, “I am very pleased to announce today, that through USAID, the US Government is providing over US$ 97 million in additional funding to respond to the impacts of the pandemic by providing food and nutrition assistance, healthcare and protection services for people across Africa. Nearly USD 83 million of which is dedicated specifically to COVID related food security and nutrition.”
- She underlined the urgency of the crisis in Tigray where USAID estimates that 700-900,000 people could be experiencing IPC 5. She noted the extreme impacts on women whose lives have been affected by this conflict and gave examples of two female beneficiaries who are experiencing extreme hunger. She further highlighted that the USA is the largest donor to the Tigray response - noting their total contribution as almost US$ 488 million this year.
- Charles also noted the USA’s aim to champion human dignity above all by working at the highest level to forward humanitarian action including protection. She urged all donors to increase funding for the Tigray response and address the economic fallout from the pandemic.

**Panelists**

**Mr. Dominic Mc Sorely, CEO, Concern Worldwide**
- Highlighted the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls quoting an affected person (from a survey that Concern conducted of 16,000 households) who said “if we don’t work today, we won’t eat tonight.”
- He noted that Global Humanitarian Appeals are only 5.4% funded and lamented the acceptance of the likelihood that only 50% of people in need will be reached. He also reiterated that the global humanitarian response plan for 2021 requires only US$ 35 billion and resourcing this should be entirely manageable.

\(^1\) This figure has been taken from the WFP Global Operational Response Plan, June 2021 - [https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-global-operational-response-plan-update-2-june-2021](https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-global-operational-response-plan-update-2-june-2021)
- He highlighted that IPC 3 is so widespread yet is no longer provoking a reaction – yet this is precisely the moment to act.
- The CEO cited the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) where 2.2 million need humanitarian assistance and yet due to underfunding, severe cuts have had to be made across programmes. He highlighted the Irish Aid initiative of five-year funding cycles in CAR, noting that this needs to become the norm.
- He called for direct and honest conversations to facilitate famine prevention, including a more active role for financing, the media and diplomatic leadership.

Ms. Maclean Natugasha, Country Director, Norwegian Refugee Council, Cameroon
- Called for additional funding for women farmers, greater access to credit to facilitate their economic empowerment, and generally a greater prioritization of the needs of women and girls in all humanitarian response operations.

Mr. Amadou Diallo, Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of Niger
- Noted that the world is entering a very complex situation of heightened food insecurity, and that over 1.8 million people in Niger are projected to face high acute food insecurity from June-September this year.
- He underlined the devastating impacts that climate change has had on agricultural land and the work of the government to support farmers in the Sahel.
- He also highlighted the need to take further action at the national level to prevent food crises and build resilience.
- Diallo concluded by calling for further investment in building local capacity as far as possible to tackle root causes of food insecurity.

Ms. Susan Gamboripai, Senior High School student and a South Sudanese refugee in Uganda, World Vision youth advocate
- Spoke of her own experience being driven from South Sudan by conflict and her life as a peer educator in the refugee settlement Bidi Bidi in Uganda.
- Gamboripai discussed how food insecurity among young female refugees was leading to negative coping mechanisms, including sex for food and other basic needs.
- She further called for governments and member states to work on peaceful resolutions to conflict and to send more COVID-19 vaccines to refugee settlements so girls could go back to school.

Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division, OCHA
- Noted that 20 million additional people in 17 countries with a Humanitarian Response Plan are at risk of falling into poverty this year.
- She lamented the stark contrast already seen in the rollout of the vaccines – as less than 1.7 per cent of doses have been administered in countries where we work – and underlined the need to halt the progress of the pandemic or the secondary impacts of COVID-19 will be severely felt in the coming months on the most vulnerable.
- She further noted the devastating impacts of climate-related disasters – significantly causing mass forced displacement - but underlined that despite many challenges, the humanitarian system is not broken thanks to multisectoral coordination, innovative approaches, and early action, and that last year over 100 million people were reached globally.
- She highlighted that the operational environment was becoming more complex (due to bureaucratic impediments and direct attacks against aid workers among others). She called for support on: halting the progress of the pandemic (including through equitable access to COVID-19 vaccine); addressing the root causes of crises; re-committing to IHL; ensuring unimpeded access to affected populations; and mobilising additional, urgent, flexible, and multi-year funding.
Interventions from the floor

- Noted the grave urgency of the situation reiterating that famine is man-made.
- Applauded this event as a unique opportunity to further the famine prevention agenda and underlined her nation’s commitment to strengthen the triple nexus and the eradication of famine through peace and development.

Ms. Annalisa Conte, Director, WFP Geneva
- Echoed the messages of panelists and reiterated the need for urgent action to mitigate and possibly prevent famine for millions of people.
- She added that the current situation was not “business as usual” – that conflict, economic shocks, natural disasters, and the socio-economic fallout from COVID-19 are the underlying causes of food insecurity, and that 41 million people are already on the brink of famine, and more than 500,000 already face famine-like conditions in Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Sudan, and Yemen.
- She stressed this event was an opportunity to focus the global dialogue on the magnitude of the current global hunger crisis and raise our voices to prevent loss of life in 2021.

Dominique Bourgeon, Director FAO Geneva
- Noted that these crises are becoming the new normal and risk and uncertainty appear to be affecting everyone, everywhere.
- He stated that since October 2020, FAO and WFP have been sounding the alarm about deteriorating conditions in 20 countries and regions.
- He noted that as the core members of the Secretary-General’s High-Level Task Force for Preventing Famine, FAO, OCHA and WFP are advocating at the highest levels for significantly scaled up resources to avert famine as well as building consensus on quality food security data, analysis, and early warning to ensure that aid money is spent effectively, when and where it is needed most.
- He also added that FAO and WFP are calling for US$ 5.5 billion to expand life-saving assistance, combining emergency food and livelihoods assistance to maximise food availability for those most at risk.

Pablo Lubrano, Roving Country Director, International Rescue Committee, South Sudan
- Reiterated the need to prioritise the protection of girls and women.
- He further stressed the need for more investment in access negotiation to areas with the highest levels of famine risk as well as violence against aid workers.
- He noted the COVID-19 impacts on South Sudan where over 7 million people are now likely to face IPC 3 (including one million children).

Key messages of the side event:
1. Flexible funding and high-level political action are urgently needed to prevent famine and mitigate the protection impacts of acute hunger in 2021 and beyond.
2. Unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access is crucial to prevent famine.
3. The needs, perspectives and leadership, of communities and women and girls must be front and center.
4. The voices and leadership of frontline responders and local actors need to be amplified.
5. Preventing the secondary impacts of COVID-19 is critical.
6. A hunger crisis unfolding in Tigray and the humanitarian community need greater action, access, and funding.
Additional points raised during the discussion:

- The Irish Ambassador flagged that lessons from the Irish famine because of a drastically different context do not apply well to the current situation. However, he said that the primary lesson is that a famine has dramatic consequences and long-lasting scars on the social fabric. He mentioned demographic data of before and after the famine showing a drastic reduction of the population size in Ireland (attributable to death and forced migration).
- The CEO of Concern Worldwide noted that the global community needs to “get behind wider ambitions on localisation.” He also stressed that the humanitarian community needs to raise public awareness of the “obscenity of hunger”. He added that there is much evidence of what response methods work and those that do not – and should be working on what more could be done to better serve affected populations.

Outcomes of the side event:

- The side event was a key opportunity to further advocate for the famine prevention agenda and accelerate high-level advocacy and action.
- It facilitated the accentuation of the criticality of the global situation of acute food insecurity, called for flexible funding and unimpeded humanitarian access, and in particular enabled Member States to condemn starvation as being used as a weapon of war. It also highlighted the devastating effects of famine, climate change and COVID-19 on women and girls and called for greater action to be taken to support and empower them.
- The USA committed to address the situation and announced additional funding for their food security programmes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic while calling for other donors to increase their contributions.
- It also provided a platform for voices from frontline responders to share their insights and experiences on the topic of the impacts of hunger, conflict, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The preparations of the event created an opportunity for further collaboration between UN and NGO partners on this common goal of preventing famine.
- This event was extremely well received and had over 130 people virtually participating from a host of UN agencies, NGOs and INGOs as well as government representatives from almost 40 countries.