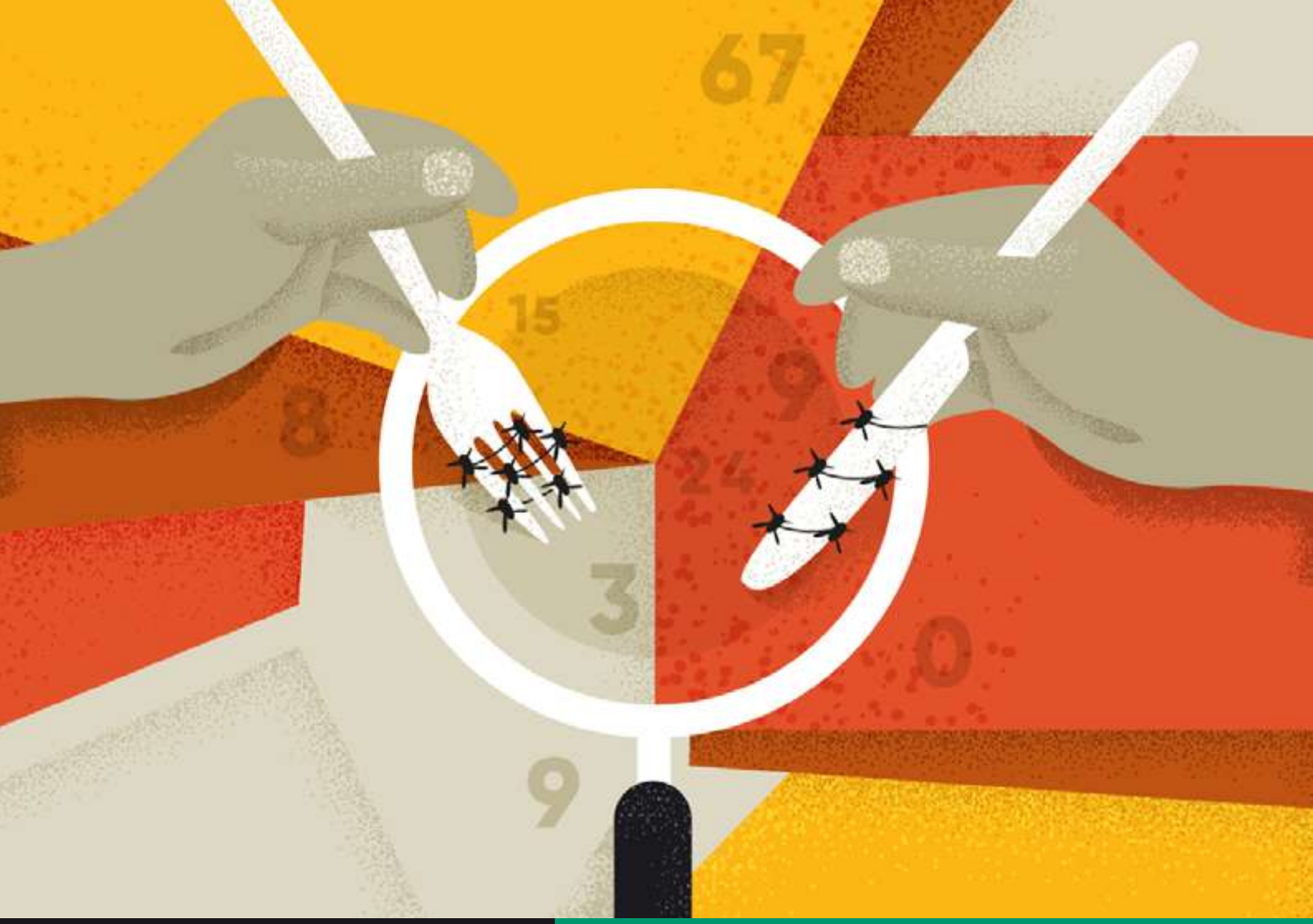

January **2025**

BEYOND NUMBERS: RETHINKING FOOD SECURITY MONITORING IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS

FIAN INTERNATIONAL

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks to Chafik Ben Rouin, Alex De Waal, Michael Fakhri, Kira Fischer, Sarah Fuhrman,Manuel Gysler, Lys Kulamadayil, Silvia Mancini, Kibrom Mehari, and Monica Minardi for their time in speaking with us and sharing their experiences, and particularly to Sarah for also reviewing initial drafts.

We would also like to thank FIAN International colleagues Angélica Castañeda Flores, Charlotte Dreger, Sofia Monsalve, Philip Seufert, and Ana María Suárez Franco for their comments and inputs.

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SUPPORTED BY

HEKS EPER Bread for all.

This publication has been produced with financial support from HEKS/EPER and the content is the sole responsibility of the publishers.

PUBLISHED BY

FIAN INTERNATIONAL

FIAN INTERNATIONAL
WILLY-BRANDT-PLATZ 5,
69115 HEIDELBERG, GERMANY

JANUARY **2025**

INTRODUCTION

The situation of hunger and malnutrition in the world continues to worsen. It is estimated that between 713 and 757 million people, or 8.9-9.4 % of the global population, experienced hunger in 2023.[1] With war, climate chaos, and a cost-of-living crisis – combined with inadequate action – almost 300 million people faced an acute food crisis in 2023.[2]

Alongside the global increase of hunger, there has also been an increase in famine and 'near-famine situations' with the 2024 Global Report on Food Crises stating that the number of people on 'the brink of famine' rose to over 700,000, almost double the number from 2022. Areas that are often quoted in the media as 'teetering on the brink of famine' or being at 'the edge of starvation', already have several thousands of people dead or rapidly dying of starvation and of illnesses related to or exacerbated by a lack of adequate food. At the time of writing, available data states that 1.84 million people in Gaza are experiencing acute food insecurity[3] – numbers which have likely worsened – but Gaza is considered "at risk of famine," while in Sudan a total of 25.6 million people are facing acute food insecurity, 13 areas of the country are at risk of famine in the coming months, and famine has been "confirmed" in the Zamzam camp.[4]

Despite the severity of right to food and nutrition (RtFN) violations in crisis situations, there is a lack of coordination between the human rights and humanitarian regimes that govern such situations. The humanitarian system carries out the key function of providing life-saving assistance, all while abiding by humanitarian principles and interacting with State and non-state actors on the ground. On the normative level, cases of starvation and famine are often dealt with exclusively as issues of criminal law or humanitarian law, while a human rights approach offers the most expansive and preventive understanding of these situations. A fragmentation between humanitarian and human rights approaches seems to exist and it has perpetuated a divide in policy, practice, and advocacy.

We know that situations of RtFN violations in crisis situations, including famines, do not emerge in a vacuum. They are the result of long-term, systemic marginalization of communities, of their exclusion in monitoring efforts and decision-making, and of long-term violations of economic, social, and cultural rights.[5] Communities across the globe are experiencing increasing and more extreme violations of the RtFN. This dire situation highlights the limitations of addressing crises merely from a humanitarian perspective and reveals a severe systemic failure within the existing international systems to protect, respect and fulfill human rights.

The formal system of monitoring food insecurity and famines, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System (IPC), is usually used by donors and organizations to determine where to allocate resources during crises, and how to program them. However, it's not always clear how the IPC data is used and by whom. Most recently, IPC data has been used in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case[6] that South Africa brought against Israel to highlight the severe deprivation in Gaza. On the other hand, the same data has been used in Israeli media reports to argue that a "real famine" does

not exist there.[7] Meanwhile, people in Gaza continue to suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and health complications, including death and intergenerational harm due to lack of access to food, in large part due to a food system that has been systematically debilitated for several years by the Israeli occupation.

Damaged greenhouses in Khan Younis, Gaza, FAO Yousef Alrozzi

The rapid onset of extreme hunger and starvation in Gaza and the linked, and highly political debate over food security data and famine classification, have exposed the rather opaque nature of how food insecurity is measured and addressed in situations of crisis – in particular, in conflict, occupation, and war. Many questions have emerged: What exactly is a "famine"? How is it monitored and who decides? And furthermore, what are the implications for the food sovereignty and human rights community? Adding to the complexity, much of the data and analysis generated internationally around such crises lacks the participation of affected communities, as well as a clear intergovernmental platform for discussion and coordinated policy responses, further hindering effective action.

This paper will begin to explore these questions. This is FIAN's first major step towards understanding how monitoring tools and systems operate in crisis contexts, therefore this paper will not be exhaustive or have concrete recommendations, but rather seek to explore:

- THE WAY IN WHICH SYSTEMS OF FOOD SECURITY MONITORING, IN PARTICULAR THE IPC SYSTEM, ARE OPERATING IN CRISIS SITUATIONS; AND
- HOW THEY COULD BE STRENGTHENED IN RAPIDLY WORSENING CRISES, AS WELL AS TIMELY AND EFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE TO COMMUNITIES ENTRENCHED IN LONG-TERM HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES;
- WAYS TO DEMOCRATIZE FOOD SECURITY MONITORING AND FOSTER ACCOUNTABILITY, USING PLATFORMS LIKE THE UN COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY (CFS) TO CENTRALIZE THE VOICES OF AFFECTED COMMUNITIES AND INTEGRATE HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES.

Furthermore, this paper seeks to open dialogue between the right to food and humanitarian communities, in order to learn from each other while also imagining new ways of supporting affected communities and populations, creating effective human rights-based monitoring mechanisms and greater accountability around actions and structural conditions that result in right to food violations, including starvation and famine. It will also suggest that systemic reform requires coordination across multiple international bodies, including the UN Human Rights Office, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and the UN processes in New York, including within the Security Council. This paper will briefly address the humanitarian aid system and its connection to monitoring but will not explore it in depth. It will focus primarily on the technical dimensions of monitoring, while future work will examine these issues with a stronger focus on perspectives of affected communities.

RIGHT TO FOOD VIOLATIONS IN CRISES – UNPACKING TERMINOLOGY

The right to food is the inherent right of everyone to be free from hunger and to have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The right to food is not only about being provided with food, but about the right to have conditions that allow people and communities to access and produce nutritious food in a way that respects their dignity and cultural identity. States have an obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill this right, ensuring that food systems are sustainable, inclusive, and equitable for all.[8] A right to food perspective requires a comprehensive understanding of food systems, defined as the entire ecosystem of actors and processes involved in feeding people, which prioritizes the availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability of food.[9] This framework is crucial for addressing the root causes of hunger and for holding governments accountable for their human rights obligations both in and outside of their territories.

Many terms are used to describe right to food violations in crisis situations, and in particular when such situations are monitored and prosecuted. Crisis situations can take very different forms but, for the purposes of this piece, the focus will be on situations of conflict, occupation, war, and situations of complete State or governance failure. While being extreme in nature, crisis situations only expose and amplify existing structural inequalities. The extreme levels of deprivation that occur during crisis situations are only possible in contexts where food systems are already fragile, corporate control over food systems is high, and where structural inequalities and violations of human rights, including the right to food, are already taking place.[10] In some of these cases, levels of violence and deprivation are extreme and may manifest in the form of famine and starvation.

While ‘famine’ describes the realities of community deterioration and destruction due to hunger, the term ‘starvation’ often describes the final stage of famine when emaciated bodies render the suffering visible; and underscores that famine is always the result of human choices and failures.[11] Famine represents a moment of social breakdown, often preceded or aggravated by forced displacement and distress migration.[12] Under international law, "starvation" refers not only to severe deprivation of food and water but also to a broader lack of essential resources necessary for survival. In the context of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international criminal law (ICL), it includes illnesses caused by insufficient food, medicine, and other vital supplies,[13] and is explicitly prohibited as a method of warfare. Furthermore, denying individuals access to essential resources for survival is a violation of international human rights law (IHRL), applicable regardless of whether there is an armed conflict or if the act constitutes a crime under ICL.[14]

Thus, famine refers to the conditions of widespread hunger, while “starvation,” considered both an outcome and a process,[15] implicates intentional actions taken to inflict such conditions, thereby underscoring a moral and legal responsibility.[16] Therefore, for the war crime of starvation in ICL (derived from IHL prohibitions), it is not the existence of starvation that establishes the violation, but the result that is actuated by the illicit (IHL) or criminal (ICL) *intent* to use starvation as a method of warfare. Intentionality, therefore, forms a key element in prosecuting starvation crimes. However, establishing

intent is very difficult.[17] Despite existing as different terms in the English language, “starvation” and “famine” are often also used interchangeably in the context of severe deprivation and acute food insecurity situations.

Situations of “famine”, however, have a mainstream technical definition developed by the IPC. Famine is said to exist when these three conditions are met:[18]

- AT LEAST 20% OF THE POPULATION IN THAT PARTICULAR AREA ARE FACING EXTREME LEVELS OF HUNGER;
- 30% OF THE CHILDREN ARE WASTED[19] (LOW WEIGHT-FOR-HEIGHT), A MANIFESTATION OF MALNUTRITION; AND
- THE MORTALITY RATE HAS DOUBLED, FROM THE AVERAGE, SURPASSING TWO DEATHS PER 10,000 PEOPLE PER DAY FOR ADULTS AND FOUR DEATHS PER 10,000 PEOPLE PER DAY FOR CHILDREN.

QUANTIFYING HUNGER: WHO MONITORS WHAT?

Several tools, reports and methodologies exist that attempt to provide estimates of people experiencing hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition around the world.[20] The annual *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* (SOFI) report, for instance, provides global, regional and country-level estimates of how many people are experiencing hunger and food insecurity globally. The annual *Global Report on Food Crises* provides an estimate of how many people face acute food insecurity in food-crisis countries. Another commonly cited report is the *Global Hunger Index Report*, that measures and tracks hunger and employs a composite score (GHI) based on statistics related to undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting, and child mortality. The GHI is calculated annually, and its results appear in a report issued in October each year. Many of these tools range from simple indicators that can be quickly collected and easily analyzed to more complex measures that require detailed, time-consuming data collection and more advanced technical analysis to produce results.

As for measuring acute food insecurity and famines, the most widely utilized system and key diagnostic tool, referred to earlier, is the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), which estimates acute food insecurity in crisis hotspots. It determines what level of food insecurity people in a locality are experiencing, ranging from Minimal to Catastrophe/Famine. The IPC does not use the term "starvation," though it may be said to have an implicit definition of starvation as the amalgam of its measures.[21] The IPC specifically focuses on classifying the severity of current food insecurity into phases to inform and guide humanitarian responses.

In addition to the IPC, FEWS NET (Famine Early Warning System Network), supported by USAID, provides early warning information for food insecurity, using a similar classification system but with a different methodology. FEWS NET also maintains an independent analysis, sometimes differing from IPC's conclusions. Both systems complement each other but serve different purposes in food security monitoring. The UN World Food Programme's (WFP) Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping Unit plays a critical role in both current-status assessments and early warning, contributing data for both IPC and FEWS NET analyses. Additionally, the Global Food Security and Nutrition Clusters have become important sources of famine-related information, with annual surveys, typically led by UNICEF, providing data on child and maternal health, nutrition, and mortality.[22]

It is important to note that the IPC was not designed to be a famine monitoring tool or function as an early warning system per se, but it has become the *de facto* definition for famine globally and is used as an early warning system in this capacity.[23] It now holds global significance in informing several global food monitoring reports and analyses, as well as guiding government and donor actions. As already mentioned, it has also become a key reference in many media outlets and political activism.

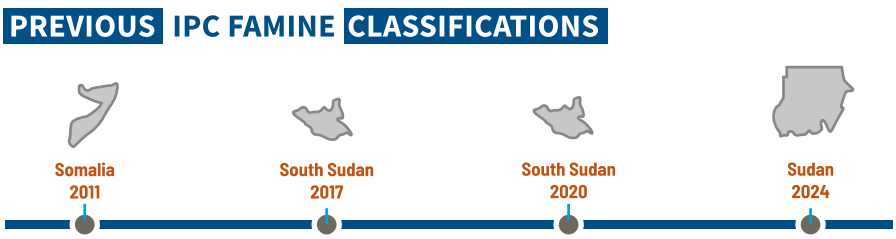
From a RtFN perspective, it is further important to emphasize that the IPC was not designed as a human rights tool or specifically for use in conflict settings. Instead, it was created to assess contexts of seasonal food insecurity caused by factors such as droughts, market disruptions, or crop failures. Its primary aim is to support decision-makers by enhancing understanding, coordination, and action in addressing food insecurity, thereby helping to improve responses to food crises.[24]

FAMINE DECLARATION PROCESS: WHO DECIDES?

Most IPC processes begin with the formation of an in-country working group, which is generally established upon a government's request, hosted by that government and usually includes their representatives.[25] Multi-sectoral technical experts from the government, UN agencies, NGOs, and civil society make up the in-country working group and evaluate a broad range of data from a variety of sources following a set protocol.[26] The process is consensus-based and requires that a minimum level of evidence is available to make a determination. The outcome of this analysis process is a determination of food insecurity along a scale from 1 to 5, with Famine and Catastrophe being Level 5.

When a country's IPC analysis indicates a potential or confirmed famine, a specific procedure is initiated to verify the classification. This review can be prompted by various factors, such as a conclusion from the country's Technical Working Group, disagreements about the classification, concerns from the IPC Global Support Unit, or an official request from a Global Partner. The Famine Review Committee (FRC), composed of independent experts in food security, mortality and nutrition, conducts a thorough and neutral assessment of the evidence before confirming and communicating the findings on famine classification.[27] The FRC reports are then communicated back to the country working group and made publicly available.

In this context, the IPC does not make "famine declarations" per se; instead, it supports the analysis that enables governments, international and regional organizations, and humanitarian agencies to issue more significant statements or declarations regarding famine. In the last 15 years, famine (as IPC Level 5- famine) has officially only been confirmed by the IPC four times—in Somalia in 2011, in South Sudan in 2017 and 2020, and most recently in North Darfur, Sudan, in July 2024[28] — with official declarations having only been made for the former two occasions.[29] Although famine declarations and IPC rankings do not necessarily translate into concrete actions or trigger specific funds, humanitarian actors have indicated their importance in soliciting funds from donors (i.e. States) for their interventions.[30] There is still no clear evidence showing a correlation between famine declarations or warnings and increased flows of (financial) aid to date.[31] The exception to this might be the declaration of famine in Somalia in 2011, but this has not been the case in other contexts.



IPC Factsheet: https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Factsheet.pdf

Beyond funding, declarations can still be an important tool for advocacy and fundraising. Having a Famine declaration can also give States valuable leverage to use against the parties to a conflict who are obstructing humanitarian access and can help build political pressure that results in gains for humanitarian organizations and the communities they're working to serve.[32]

THE LIMITS OF TECHNICAL DEFINITIONS: A "HUMAN RIGHTS" DEFINITION?

From a human rights lens, a purely technical definition of "famine" —and the high global reliance on this definition—poses difficulties. Famine, technically, requires that deprivation be so severe that it results in high numbers of deaths. Starvation requires deprivation, but death need not occur. From recent cases, it seems that the international community has become so concerned with measuring "famine" that it appears less concerned when people are "merely" starving or facing hunger and undernutrition that does not amount to those categories. From a human rights perspective, however, there is not a meaningful distinction between these terms. Whether it's called "famine" or "starvation," at the root of both are violations of RtFN and other human rights, which have devastating, long-term consequences for individuals and communities, affecting their human dignity and their capacity to enjoy other human rights.

The understanding of the term "famine" should therefore not just be a numerical threshold of deaths, but should rather be understood as the most extreme manifestation of a violation of the RtFN. It is an indication and admission of a "collective failure"[33] to protect populations in crises, let alone to prevent such crises in the first place. Famine expert Alex de Waal tells us that famine is also marked by devastating impoverishment and the complete loss of livelihood.[34] It is not a passive state of being for a community, but an outcome of political actions that deny individuals and/or communities access to food, often as a result often of intentional actions to systematically attack the relationship between a people and their land and natural resources. As put forward in the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Food's report entitled "*Starvation and the right to food, with an emphasis on the Palestinian people's food sovereignty*", starvation reflects a State's failure to uphold its obligations to ensure the right to food, which encompasses freedom from hunger and oppression.[35] Furthermore, key indicators that can indicate impending famine from a human rights perspective, such as the first death from malnutrition in a crisis situation, reveal critical failures in social support structures, disproportionately affecting the most marginalized, including children, women and displaced communities.

The use of starvation as a tactic of control or warfare further underscores the intersection of human rights and humanitarian crises, positioning starvation as a deliberate act that not only devastates immediate victims but also inflicts long-lasting inter-generational physical, psychological, and social trauma on entire communities. Therefore, addressing famine, and particularly preventing it, requires a robust commitment to human rights, emphasizing food sovereignty, accountability, and the participation of affected populations.

International focus on a technical, high numerical-threshold definition for famine, and the lack of systemic approaches to right-to-food analysis means that many starvation deaths evade global attention, as the broader political, structural and man-made causes of famine and starvation are often overlooked. This can be clearly seen in Indigenous communities around the world, who have long borne the brunt of colonization, dispossession, and historical injustices which contributes to the severe food insecurity and RtFN violations they currently experience. The Wayuu children in Colombia's La Guajira region,

for instance, have a mortality rate for malnutrition that is over six times the national average. In recent years, plundering by multinationals, which exploit their resources in exchange for low-quality jobs, pollution, and mismanagement of public funds, has only added to these historical debts.[36] Similarly, in the Guarani-Kaiowá community in Brazil, which has faced massacres, forced evictions, and territorial expropriation while being consistently denied access to traditionally occupied land, 80 children died of malnutrition or related diseases from 2004-2008.[37] Such contexts of long drawn human rights violations and historical injustices may never produce enough numbers of "deaths" to meet famine thresholds but are characterized by extremely fragile food systems, a lack of food sovereignty and other human rights violations that enable starvation and extreme deprivation to continue and go unnoticed.

Sticking to a technical definition of "famine" also obscures the intentionality behind starvation as a weapon of warfare, framing it, at least implicitly, as a misfortunate event, without any attribution to conduct, rather than an act of oppression or genocide.[38] As stated earlier, intentionality is an important element in prosecuting the crime of starvation and is not adequately incorporated into assessment or monitoring systems.[39] There are many recent cases globally where, during conflicts, wars, and genocide, state actors have implemented full or partial blockades of food and humanitarian aid, targeted the destruction of agricultural stores, land, and infrastructure, and used food as a weapon of war, deliberately starving populations, such as in Yemen,[40] Syria,[41] South Sudan,[42] and the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, which is documented to involve deliberate starvation.[43]

'Guarani-Kaiowá, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil 2016

IPC PROCESS AND USING IPC DATA: WHAT DOES THE DATA (NOT) TELL US?

The IPC approach has its challenges and political considerations. The FRC is convened when the data indicates the possibility of famine, and to assess a specific context at the request of an IPC in-country working group or the country in question and with their participation in the process, which is consensus-based. In most situations of acute food insecurity, communities most impacted are those who suffer from structural conditions of inequalities and human rights abuses perpetuated directly or indirectly by state actors. Having the government of the affected country as part of the consensus building process can be important in some contexts, while in others it can pose a significant conflict of interest, especially where the State has committed human rights violations leading and/or contributing to starvation and famine.

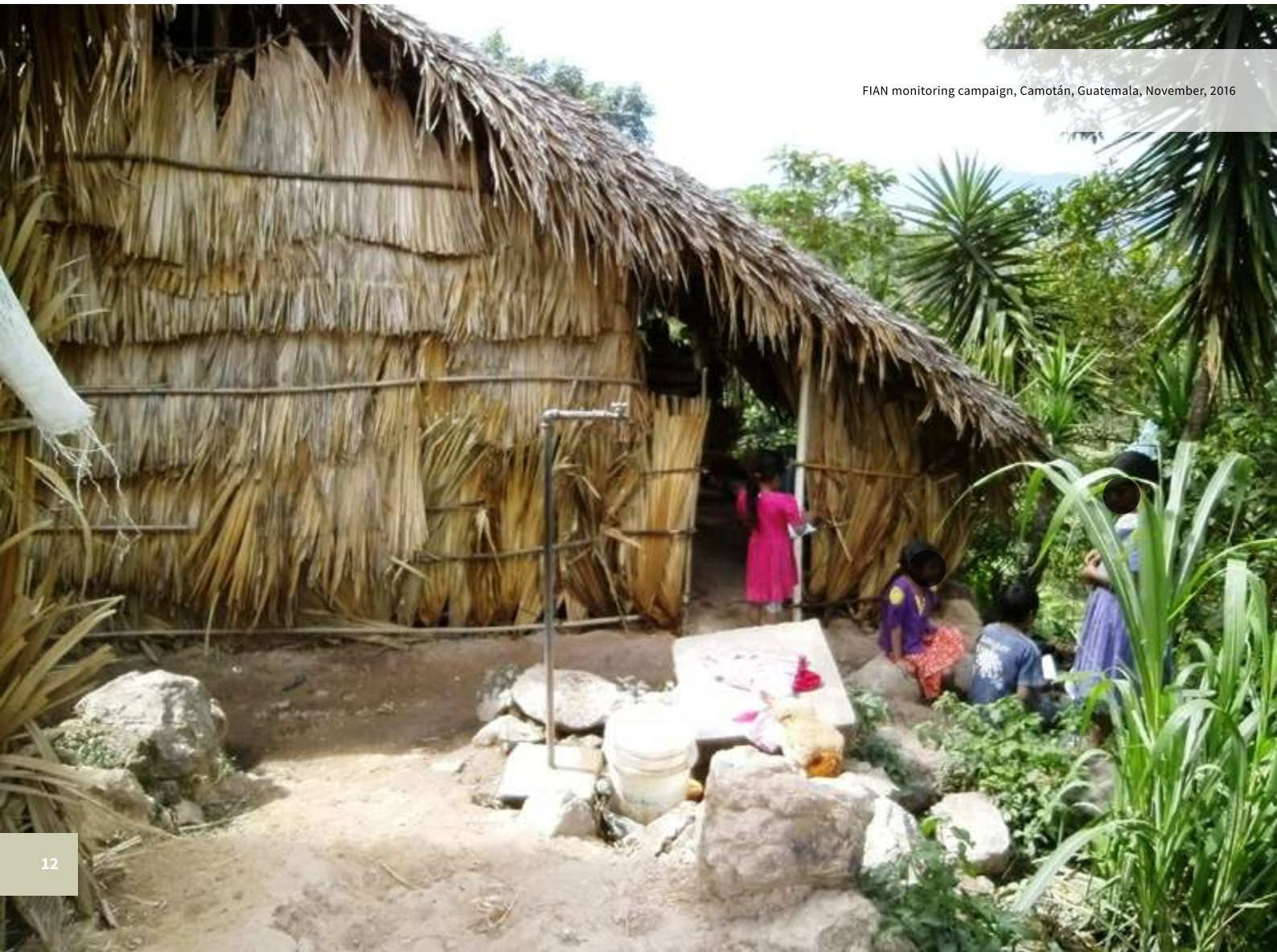
Furthermore, participation in the FRC has historically been unpaid, which means members must already have secure and well-resourced/supported positions in order to dedicate time to participate in such processes. This may create a dynamic of technical experts from the global north, deliberating and making important reflections about communities and countries in the global majority, which can reinforce inequalities and colonial dynamics, as well as missed opportunities to have more nuanced local, cultural perspectives and experiences at the table. However, there has been a recent move in November 2024 to change the selection process by, for the first time, creating an open call for experts,[44] with a specific focus on obtaining more diverse backgrounds, as well as offering paid support.

While an "official famine" is rare, famine-like conditions persist in many communities globally, and starvation deaths are not an exceptional event. From a right to food perspective, the focus on measuring food insecurity, as a technical concept of food access or a biometric indicator, provides a very specific quantitative analysis, removed from the broader context of socio-economic conditions, discrimination, as well as patterns of land and resource governance, which have an enormous impact not only on food insecurity realities, but also reflect the broader climate of human rights and the state of food sovereignty in a community. This is even more worrisome in the case of famine monitoring, as famine is a social, political phenomenon and an indicator of complete state failure and its abandonment of its human rights obligations markers of which are not evident in narrow technical analyses. The IPC measurement did represent an advancement in systematizing and tracking famine and acute food insecurity globally at the time it was developed. However, monitoring the way famines and large-scale right to food violations currently occur, and are increasing, does not align with the IPC methodology or its intended purpose. In essence, it was not designed to address the issues it is being used to monitor.

The IPC relies on quantitative data collected during complex, and in many cases dangerous contexts of crises, often through rapid assessments. A significant challenge in conducting analysis is gaining access to areas or populations. Access is typically controlled by authorities in these regions, which means there must be compromises between the thoroughness of the analysis and the ability to conduct at least a limited assessment.[45]

Furthermore, the scope of IPC data coverage is unclear, particularly regarding which countries are included and which are not. Many regions which are likely experiencing severe right to food and nutrition violations are overlooked, meaning that the global situation is likely worse and more widespread than reported on the IPC map. In countries such as Syria, Venezuela, Papua New Guinea, and Iraq, the lack of data does not indicate that there is not a crisis level situation, or even "famine-like" conditions for some communities, but simply that the data is not collected. This may stem from different reasons, such as political interests and tensions with powerful governments, as well as issues of transparency and access.

While most of these countries are monitored through mainstream food security assessments, the findings often fail to provide a comprehensive global picture of real-time crises, and the needed resource allocation towards areas of urgent concern. For example, in Guatemala, half of the children experience chronic undernourishment despite national laws guaranteeing their right to adequate food and protection, including a national court ruling for the state to guarantee RtFN.[46] Poor access to essentials like food, shelter, and sanitation, compounded by systemic discrimination against indigenous and rural populations, exacerbates the crisis. Furthermore, in 2017, when an 8-year-old girl from the municipality of the Camotán died due to malnutrition,[47] some parts of Guatemala were only marked as IPC 2 (stressed). And more recently in New Delhi, 3 small children died due to starvation,[48] despite living in a country with a national protections and programs aimed at ensuring access to food. This raises the need to understand why certain contexts are missing from the IPC's assessments and to consider how this gap affects our understanding of food crises globally.



FIAN monitoring campaign, Camotán, Guatemala, November, 2016

THE BIGGER PICTURE: POLITICS OF DATA AND EARLY ACTION

As mentioned before, the IPC has become an important tool that states and other donors use to determine when and how to finance aid efforts, and it has evolved into use as an early warning system that is meant to be triggered at IPC Level 3.[49] In addition to the IPC, there are several other datasets used as early warning systems to alert about ongoing and upcoming acute food crises, including famine warning. However, are these systems truly effective in triggering swift action? Does the international community respond adequately to early warnings?

The early warning systems that exist, including the IPC, are rooted in methods based on the assumption that hunger is an apolitical and seasonal phenomenon, primarily caused by environmental and economic factors, like rainfall/drought and market prices, which can be somewhat predictable with statistical data.[50] However, conflict and crisis-driven hunger usually does not follow predictable seasonal patterns, it is geo-politically motivated and is often under-analyzed.

The current ways of monitoring food crisis and famine, and of issuing early warnings, tell the story of what has already happened with very little focus on what is likely to happen. While the IPC does issue country projections which, for example, warn of a possible impending famine, these projections create a sense of "wait and see" by many government actors and do not seem to elicit the urgently needed actions. This is, per se, not a problem inherent to the IPC system, which is fulfilling its intended purpose. Rather, it lies within the larger international and donor system, which places sole and absolute reliance on IPC data and lacks a broader RtFN approach. Large-scale interventions and diplomatic pressure often occur only when mortality rates increase and conditions significantly worsen. Though life-saving and needed, interventions at this stage are often far too late and fail to help support communities become truly food sovereign.

Focusing on a purely numerical and technical lens also renders invisible the long-drawn nature of crises that exist due to structural injustices and the persistent state of hunger and malnutrition in many communities. Fakhri, in his report, emphasizes the "slow violence" of hunger, malnutrition, and famine on communities.[51] Severe food insecurity and malnutrition cause health impacts, where early death is not the result of bombs or gunfire, but a slow and brutal death linked to the body's gradual deterioration. Furthermore, the environmental impact, economic losses, and damage to infrastructure take generations to rebuild, resulting in significant financial and livelihood losses for affected communities. Intervening only after the situation has deteriorated to this extent is not just inadequate, it is a profound disservice to communities enduring unimaginable suffering and deprivation.

Many communities face a range of intersecting issues that weaken food system resilience and violate the RtFN and other human rights. These issues include impacts from climate change, biodiversity loss, trade disruptions and blockades, occupation, prolonged periods of colonial exploitation, resource grabbing and limited community control over land and natural resources, as well as high levels of corporate control over land and the food systems. Instances of communities experiencing starvation deaths—on a

smaller scale or different contexts—are not "statistically significant" to include in the broader IPC crisis level analysis and are often missed in global food security reporting. However, it is precisely in these cases where existing food systems fragility, systemic human rights abuses and deep colonial exploitation create the conditions for severe food crises. It takes very little for such contexts to deteriorate rapidly, as we are currently witnessing in Gaza, where we have never seen a population made to go hungry so quickly.[52] In many of these contexts we also see political shifts towards authoritarianism, increased rates of discrimination and violence—including gender-based violence—and other factors that strongly indicate impending extreme violations of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. Looking at the bigger picture, particularly with a human rights lens, in conjunction with the food security data, provides a more holistic understanding and identifies early solutions for preventing famine and starvation.

Lack of timely action is not only a result of ineffective early warning systems and narrowly defined technical approaches, but also an inconsistent donor community. It is well known and documented that aid efforts in food crises are often held hostage by geo-political interests. Moreover, many interventions are not appropriate in the long term, and the system is chronically underfunded.[53] News articles, institutional appeals, and discussions with those in the humanitarian community have made it clear that "donors" (States) are not easily convinced to resource aid efforts. Counterintuitively, donors are, in fact, reducing their funding for humanitarian responses, including protracted crises, leaving these communities without the essential support they need and making them more vulnerable to even more severe impacts in future crises.[54]

States bear the responsibility to uphold human rights both domestically and internationally (extraterritorial obligations). This entails obligations that go beyond humanitarian assistance. Many countries—particularly in the Global North—are involved in the weakening of territorial food systems and territorial markets worldwide.[55] Moreover, many of these same states that arm and perpetuate conflicts while simultaneously funding humanitarian efforts are not only contributing to human rights violations extraterritorially, and, in many cases, war crimes, but are also fostering unstable environments. These environments include violence or blocked access, creating conditions that prevent the effective delivery of life-saving aid and support to affected communities. Therefore, it is important to note that national crises often cannot be separated from international ones, as all crises have global dimensions and involvement.[56]

HUMAN RIGHTS-HUMANITARIAN DISCONNECT: WHY SHOULD THEY COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER?

The human rights and humanitarian regimes working on famines and starvation seem to operate in silos, both in their normative understanding of these concepts and, consequently, in practice. Despite a wide array of large-scale aid programs with humanitarian, development, climate, and private sector actors in famine risk countries, the response to famine is constrained to short-term humanitarian action and assistance that often only scales up once conditions worsen, and large amounts of deaths have already taken place. This dynamic incentivizes national governments to delay famine declarations out of concern that all resources will be redirected to emergency aid.[57] Such a response to famines only acts as a band-aid to what is otherwise a structural collapse of food systems and long-drawn violations of several economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights, addressing which could have prevented such a dire escalation. While both the systems are needed and cannot substitute one another, it is crucial that they interact with and reinforce each other.

As explained before, the current normative understanding of starvation and famine puts forth these issues exclusively as issues of International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian response, as well International Criminal Law, thus invisibilizing the structural conditions of human rights violations being at the root. Fakhri in his report,[58] has emphasized the critical need to reframe the understanding of famine and situations of starvation through a RtFN and human rights lens.

Additionally, the diversity of food security measurement tools currently available provides a confusing array of options, and it is not always clear how the tools differ in their framing of food security, for what purpose are they being used, and by whom.[59] Furthermore, there is little information on how these scales, indexes, and reports feed or interact with each other, if at all. While some humanitarian organizations incorporate more social-economic analysis into their work and approaches- thus not relying solely on statistical data- there is still a clear gap between international actors, as well as the divide between humanitarian and development work. This current approach fails to leverage all the tools available for a collective response, to the detriment of affected people and communities.

All of this is not to dismiss possible negative consequences for humanitarian work on the ground if an all-encompassing human rights approach (for instance, including human rights concepts, indicators and assessments) are implemented. This can even result in the cessation of humanitarian assistance. This happened in Tigray where several humanitarian organizations spoke out about government abuses and the Government of Ethiopia suspended their operations and declared their heads of agency persona non grata.[60] However, the humanitarian system, as a whole, will continue to be overburdened and stretched if a coordinated and collective response to structural violations of famine and starvation at all levels is not seriously discussed.

Additionally, FRC members and some famine experts have called for early action in response to rapidly worsening food insecurity, advising against waiting for IPC data, which typically confirms the extent of the crisis after it has already escalated. However, given the historical importance of this data and what is known from the experiences of some humanitarian organizations, it remains challenging to launch large-scale, concrete aid efforts without its release. This highlights another disconnect: data is perceived as both crucial and dispensable at the same time.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

1. RETHINK HOW WE MONITOR FOOD SECURITY AND HUNGER, PARTICULARLY IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT SITUATIONS

FIAN International has always engaged in critical dialogue with mainstream monitoring mechanisms for food security and nutrition and has consistently proposed methodologies to shift towards more community-centered, human rights monitoring.[61] Mainstream food security monitoring systems fail to address the critical question of the social control of food systems and instead create inferences and propose solutions based on the current industrial model of production that feeds an inherently unequal global economy.[62] Although numbers are important and depict part of the picture, sole reliance on statistical data—based on methodologies not designed for conflict situations and not addressing the different elements of the right to food— obscures the bigger reality, power structures, and the interconnectedness of crises, particularly where they are cyclical and rooted in existing human rights violations. Important information about the structural and root causes of acute food crises—who creates them and how they develop— is often lost.

How mainstream monitoring data is collected, presented and interpreted, and who is behind these activities is not always clear or understood. However, grassroots analysis and media reports show that peoples' priorities and needs are not reflected, nor is the full extent of the systemic nature of human rights violations on the ground.

It is important to recognize that quantitative data is just one monitoring tool, which must be framed and interpreted within the context of the right to food. This should be complemented by disaggregated, human rights-based qualitative indicators and event-based information (such as case monitoring), all of which together help identify the structural causes of right to food violations and guide decision-makers in taking the necessary measures to prevent escalation into famine or starvation.

It is important to also put into question whether current methodologies are the most appropriate measure for addressing food crisis situations. Perhaps it is time to rethink monitoring methodologies—not solely to strengthen international systems such as the IPC, which remains an important goal—but to understand and develop other methods to fill gaps and establish a standard modality of a human rights-based assessment.[63]

Communities lacking self-determination and sovereignty over their resources are usually more susceptible to crises, particularly in contexts of conflict, occupation, and war.[64] A human rights approach would ensure that the most impacted communities and groups are at the center of dialogue and decision-making, including participation in data collection that informs different levels and types of crises and response. Currently, much of the decision making and response around crises comes from "above"—high level and often external "experts." It's unclear how grassroots and community information feeds into the monitoring or response of food crises. Factors that must be considered include incorporating grassroots

information, improving data collection, and monitoring to ensure real-time and diverse information sources, particularly utilizing qualitative data from communities most affected.

Gaza Strip, Deir Al Balah city, community led solidarity marketing, GUPAP, September, 2024

2. DEMOCRATIZE THE MONITORING OF FOOD SECURITY AND FOSTER ACCOUNTABILITY AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Much of the data and analysis that is being generated internationally around crisis lacks a clear intergovernmental space for discussion and coordinated policy responses. It is important to assess where and how international convergence spaces can be better leveraged to address these gaps in food crisis coordination, prevention and interventions. For example, the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), as the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for addressing food security and nutrition, could be such a space. What is of particular importance in the CFS is the participation of the autonomous Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanisms (CSIPM), which serves as the largest international space for civil society and Indigenous Peoples focused on addressing food insecurity and malnutrition. This mechanism is led and coordinated by representatives from organizations representing groups most affected by global food insecurity.

The CFS could play a central role in creating a more nuanced dialogue and accountability function – through the CFS's monitoring mechanism of policy outcomes—with the possibility of centralizing the voices and experiences of people in affected contexts, which is currently missing from mainstream analysis. It could also serve as a space to build stronger multilateralism and UN convergence on crisis context, including and especially bridging the humanitarian and human rights communities.

The CFS has also been an essential space for the development of normative frameworks and operational tools related to the RtFN. For example, the *Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises* (CFS-FFA)[65] contributes towards more human rights understanding of food insecurity and crisis contexts. The CFS-FFA could help fill conceptual gaps in famine monitoring by offering a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to understanding crises, as well as recovery. The framework recognizes that "resilience-building" must enhance people's capacity to prevent crises, not merely to prepare for or absorb them. As communities affected by crises assert, they should not be left to cope with or adapt to crises but rather be supported to resist their recurrent rand achieve meaningful recovery and development.[66] Furthermore, the FFA emphasizes the importance of context-specific data, the involvement of affected communities, and the need for early warning systems that go beyond traditional thresholds to capture the complexity of famine dynamics.

In addition, the CFS science-policy interface via the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) is a body that provides independent, evidence-based policy advice to the CFS. It focuses on addressing global food security and nutrition challenges through expert reports and recommendations. The HLPE, a group of diverse food systems experts, can potentially play a role in developing a more holistic and systemic understanding of food security crises, incorporating diverse expertise and perspectives to enrich the decision-making process and support more inclusive, participatory, and transparent food security policies and interventions.[67]

The CFS provides a platform where international human rights mechanisms, such as the UN Human Rights Office and the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, can support stronger human rights-based approaches to monitoring and accountability in protracted crises. The UN Human Rights Office and the Special Procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, can act as a bridge by using insights from CFS dialogues to inform debates and resolutions at the Human Rights Council. Furthermore, these CFS outcomes should guide the work of Human Rights Treaty Bodies (CESCR, CEDAW, CRC, HRC), particularly in country reviews and recommendations, to promote coherence and reduce fragmentation in international human rights efforts.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food should also be better utilized and leveraged by other UN bodies, including the Security Council, to provide inputs and expertise that inform actions and analyses in situations related to famine and starvation. This would provide a human rights insight—with a more systemic lens—to the high-level political discussions on these issues. Bringing this expertise into the Security Council—and into broader UNGA discussion—would be consistent with the UN Security Council *Resolution* 2417 (2018),[68] which condemns the use of starvation as a weapon of war and urges all parties in conflict to ensure humanitarian access and comply with international law to prevent food insecurity. While technically the special rapporteur presents a formal report annually to ECOSOC, these reports often face resistance, in particular from powerful states, and the level of formal support varies across UN bodies and member states.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the current mainstream way of monitoring and assessing famine—and crisis-level food security in general—while important, is not working to provoke adequate early intervention, address the root causes of crises, or tackle the systemic human rights violations that often underlie them. This is not to dismiss the critical role of emergency interventions or the important work that humanitarian organizations do. Rather, it is about connecting humanitarian action more effectively with human rights to ensure that interventions are not only reactive but also preventive, addressing root causes and systemic violations in the long term. A shift towards more inclusive, human rights-based methodologies in monitoring and humanitarian efforts—incorporating both qualitative data and community-driven insights—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of food systems. It would also ensure that the voices of the most affected populations are central to the dialogue and early interventions. Strengthening human rights mechanisms and platforms like the CFS offers a possible pathway for direct dialogue with civil society organizations, as well as fostering more coordinated, accountable, and human rights-based approaches, bridging the gap between humanitarian action, human rights, and policy development. By rethinking the way we monitor and respond to food crises, we can create a system that enhances the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions while addressing the root causes and systemic violations, moving towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable food system that prioritizes the human dignity and rights of those most affected.

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January 2025

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