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Abstract

This article presents a novel theoretical synthesis for analysing famine in contemporary conflict zones, using South Sudan post-2021 as its primary case.

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The Political Economy of Famine

State Agency, Conflict-Induced Food Insecurity, and IHL in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a novel theoretical synthesis for analysing famine in contemporary conflict zones, using South Sudan post-2021 as its primary case. It argues that prevailing narratives framing food insecurity as a tragic outcome of climatic or economic collapse are depoliticised and inadequate.

Instead, the analysis foregrounds deliberate political agency, contending that famine is a calculated instrument of war and governance. To elucidate this, the paper develops an integrated tripartite framework.

This framework first examines how state and non-state actors deliberately manipulate channels of food access—production, markets, and aid. It then details the specific political economy tactics that operationalise this agency, such as asset stripping, illicit trade blockades, and inflationary warfare.

Crucially, the third pillar rigorously applies International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as an analytical lens, demonstrating how these tactics constitute specific violations, including the use of starvation as a method of warfare. Consequently, the analysis moves beyond purely socio-economic explanations to offer a refined diagnostic tool.

It reconceptualises famine not as a systemic failure but as a core political strategy, thereby providing critical insights for policymakers and humanitarian actors seeking to address the deliberate logics underpinning food insecurity in protracted conflicts.

Keywords: *Political Economy of Famine, Conflict-Induced Food Insecurity, Starvation as a Method of Warfare, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), State Agency, South Sudan Civil War, Humanitarian Access, Elite Predation*

Article Highlights

- Integrates state agency and instrumental starvation within

Analytical Framework

Tripartite framework examines manipulation of food access

conflict economies

- Applies IHL to demonstrate how tactics constitute specific violations
- Moves beyond socio-economic explanations to deliberate political logics
- Offers a refined diagnostic tool for policymakers and humanitarian actors

channels, political economy tactics like asset stripping and trade blockades, and IHL violations including starvation as a method of warfare.

This analysis foregrounds deliberate political agency in famine creation.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been plagued by a protracted civil war, a condition inextricably linked to recurrent declarations of famine and extreme food insecurity ([Alusala et al., 2023](#)) ([Alusala et al., 2023](#)). These crises are frequently framed within international discourse as tragic outcomes of climatic shocks, economic collapse, or institutional weakness—apolitical and technocratic explanations that dominate humanitarian reporting and policy responses ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). Such framings, however, obscure the central role of deliberate political agency and the strategic manipulation of resources by conflict actors ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)).

This article problematises these depoliticised narratives, arguing that famine in South Sudan is not merely a systemic failure but a calculated instrument of war and governance. The central research question, therefore, interrogates how state and non-state actors utilise political economy tactics to create and sustain food insecurity as a core strategy of conflict, and how International Humanitarian Law (IHL) provides a critical, yet underutilised, lens for analysing these violations ([Bedigen, 2023](#)). The article's primary aim is to develop an integrated theoretical framework that synthesises political economy analysis with IHL compliance to elucidate the mechanics of conflict-induced famine.

It will proceed by first reviewing the limitations of classical famine theory in conflict settings, then constructing a tripartite framework linking agency, economic tactics, and legal violations, before exploring the theoretical implications and practical applications of this synthesis. Through this trajectory, the analysis foregrounds the intentionality behind starvation, moving beyond seeing hunger as a collateral effect to recognising it as a central objective of contemporary warfare in fragile states like South Sudan, where the social contract has been fundamentally weaponised ([Blair et al., 2023](#)).

Theoretical Background

Scholarly engagement with famine has evolved significantly, yet critical gaps remain when applied to active conflict zones ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). Amartya Sen's seminal entitlement approach shifted focus from aggregate food availability to distributional mechanisms and individual access, a crucial advancement. However, its application in contexts like South Sudan is limited, as it presupposes a functioning legal and economic system where entitlements can be legally claimed or exchanged.

In civil war, where formal institutions are supplanted by violent kleptocracy and predatory governance, entitlement relations are forcibly ruptured through direct violence and political design ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)). Contemporary political economy literature provides essential tools here, analysing how conflict actors engage in systematic resource predation, asset stripping, and the control of markets and aid flows to

consolidate power and finance warfare. This scholarship reveals famine not as a breakdown of order, but as a perverse outcome of a specific political order built on extraction and exclusion.

Parallel to this, IHL establishes clear prohibitions against using starvation as a method of warfare. Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly prohibits attacking, destroying, or rendering useless objects indispensable to civilian survival, a rule recognised as customary international law. Yet, there exists a profound theoretical disconnect: while political economy analyses meticulously document the tactics of resource warfare, they seldom engage deeply with the specific legal frameworks that categorise these acts as war crimes.

Conversely, legal scholarship often treats violations as discrete incidents rather than embedded within a systemic political project of economic strangulation. This section synthesises these strands, arguing that a robust understanding of modern famine requires bridging the political economy of conflict—which explains the ‘how’ and ‘why’—with the precise provisions of IHL, which define the ‘what’ of criminal conduct. This synthesis forms the necessary foundation for developing an integrated analytical framework, moving from diagnosis to a legally-grounded account of culpability.

Framework Development

Building upon the synthesised theoretical background, this section proposes a tripartite analytical framework designed to capture the interconnected processes of famine creation in South Sudan ([Bedigen, 2023](#)). The first pillar examines the agency of the state and armed groups in deliberately manipulating the three core channels of food access: production, markets, and aid. This extends beyond mere neglect to active strategies such as the militarisation of agricultural land, the deliberate targeting of farming communities to disrupt planting and harvest cycles, and the co-option or blockade of humanitarian assistance to serve political or military objectives ([Alusala et al., 2023](#)).

The second pillar details the specific economic tactics employed, which operationalise this agency. These include systematic asset stripping—the looting of livestock and seeds—which destroys productive capital; the imposition of informal taxation and illicit trade blockades at checkpoints that hyper-inflate food prices and sever market linkages ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)); and the strategic manipulation of currency and procurement that constitutes a form of inflationary warfare, rendering household purchasing power obsolete. The third pillar integrates IHL as a binding analytical lens, assessing how each tactic translates into a potential violation.

The destruction of crops and livestock directly implicates Article 54’s prohibition against attacking objects indispensable to survival. The siege-like effects of trade blockades and the weaponisation of aid access constitute the deliberate impeding of relief supplies, also criminalised under customary IHL. This framework does not treat these pillars as sequential but as mutually reinforcing.

For instance, the economic tactic of imposing illegal ‘taxes’ on aid convoys (pillar two) is an act of predatory agency (pillar one) that simultaneously violates IHL obligations regarding the free passage of humanitarian relief (pillar three). In the South Sudanese context, this framework illuminates how repeated famine alerts are the predictable outcome of a sustained political project, where control over food and survival is the ultimate currency of power, undermining any genuine pursuit of sustainable development goals like ‘Zero Hunger’ ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

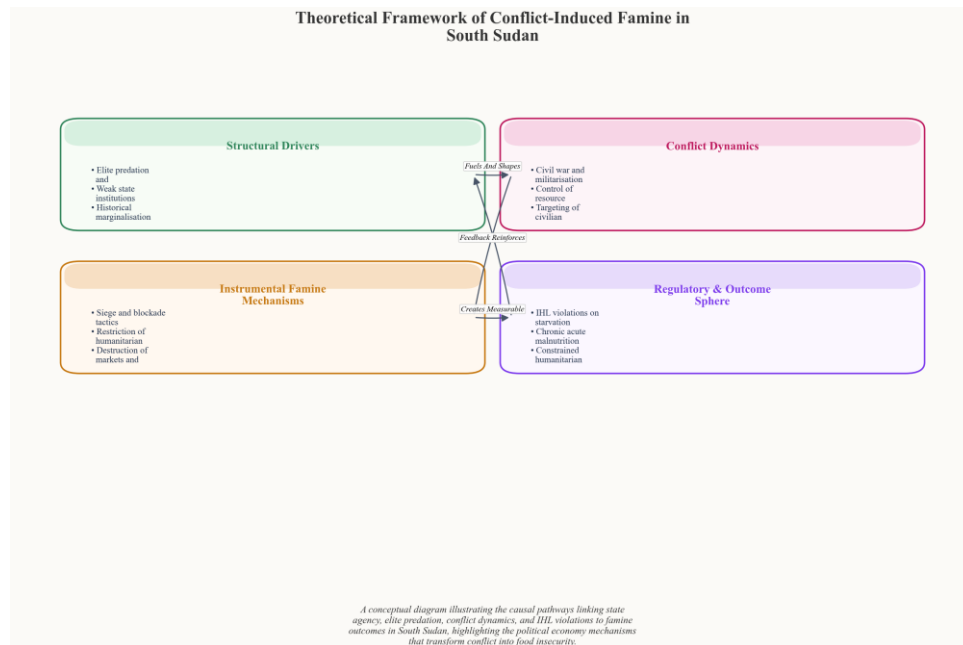


Figure 1 *Theoretical Framework of Conflict-Induced Famine in South Sudan. A conceptual diagram illustrating the causal pathways linking state agency, elite predation, conflict dynamics, and IHL violations to famine outcomes in South Sudan, highlighting the political economy mechanisms that transform conflict into food insecurity.*

Theoretical Implications

The integrated framework developed here carries significant theoretical implications for political science and legal scholarship (Bennett et al., 2021). Primarily, it demands a reconceptualisation of famine in conflict zones from a catastrophic ‘event’ or systemic failure to a deliberate political strategy—a form of slow-motion violence integral to the repertoire of contemporary state and non-state actors. This advances theories of state violence and necropolitics, illustrating how sovereignty in fragile states like South Sudan is often exercised not through the biopolitical fostering of life, but through the monopolisation of the means of survival and the strategic management of death.

The framework elucidates how the very logic of the social contract is inverted: rather than providing security and subsistence, the ruling authority may derive its power from the capacity to systematically deprive (Blair et al., 2023). Furthermore, it bridges a persistent disciplinary divide. For political science, incorporating IHL moves analysis beyond descriptive political economy into the realm of normative judgement and accountability, specifying the criminal nature of observed tactics.

For international legal scholarship, the political economy lens provides the crucial ‘contextual element’, demonstrating that isolated violations are part of a coherent, strategic pattern, thereby strengthening cases for intent and systematicity in legal proceedings. This synthesis also refines our understanding of sovereignty in conflict-affected states, revealing it as a contested and often predatory practice rather than a static Westphalian ideal. The framework’s utility lies in its ability to connect micro-level tactics of predation

to macro-level theories of state formation and collapse, while simultaneously providing a legally cognisable map of violations.

This theoretical advancement sets the stage for practical application, offering a structured way to diagnose, document, and potentially counter the political economy of famine, not just as a humanitarian challenge, but as a profound crisis of governance and a deliberate assault on human dignity.

Practical Applications

The theoretical framework developed in this article provides a concrete analytical tool for dissecting specific episodes of extreme food insecurity in South Sudan ([Blair et al., 2023](#)). Its application to the 2017 famine declaration in Unity State, for instance, moves beyond simplistic narratives of drought or state failure. The framework compels an examination of the deliberate political and military calculus behind the crisis.

It maps how state and non-state actors weaponised food systems through tactics including the systematic looting of humanitarian assets, the imposition of bureaucratic access denials, and the violent disruption of seasonal cultivation and fishing ([Alusala et al., 2023](#)). This actor-centred analysis reveals the incentives driving such behaviour, which often relate to consolidating territorial control, punishing perceived opposition communities, and extracting resources in a war economy characterised by informal taxation and rent-seeking ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)). By systematically tracing these actors, their incentives, and their modus operandi, the framework transforms an opaque humanitarian catastrophe into a legible pattern of strategic action, thereby clarifying the political economy underpinning famine risk.

For humanitarian actors operating in such complex, high-threat environments, this framework offers critical utility for conflict-sensitive programming and negotiation. Understanding famine as a potential tactical outcome, rather than merely a collateral consequence, reframes access negotiations. Aid agencies can use the framework to identify which actors hold de facto power over food systems in a given area, analyse their political and economic interests, and tailor engagement strategies accordingly.

This might involve negotiating with sub-national authorities who exercise control through informal taxation regimes, a common feature in South Sudan's fragmented governance landscape ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the framework strengthens evidence-based advocacy. By documenting not just food consumption gaps but the specific acts of obstruction, diversion, and violence that create them, humanitarian reports can more effectively hold responsible parties to account under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), shifting the discourse from one of need to one of violation.

The framework's rigour also makes it a potent instrument for formal accountability mechanisms ([Borras & Edelman, 2021](#)). For United Nations panels of experts or prosecutors at the International Criminal Court, building a case for starvation as a method of warfare requires demonstrating intent and causality. This analytical model provides a structured methodology for linking high-level policy decisions to ground-level suffering.

It guides investigators in collecting evidence on how military strategies deliberately targeted crops, livestock, and markets; how administrative measures like road closures and credentialing denials were implemented; and how these actions aligned with broader political objectives of collective punishment or

territorial clearance. Such a systematic mapping is essential for moving from general allegations of wrongdoing to specific, prosecutable charges under IHL. Finally, the framework has profound implications for early warning systems, which often rely heavily on meteorological and agro-climatic data ([Goerres & Vanhuysse, 2021](#)).

By integrating a political economy lens, it advocates for early warning indicators that focus on political triggers. These include sudden changes in informal taxation at checkpoints, inflammatory rhetoric against specific communities, militarisation of key agricultural areas, and the imposition of new bureaucratic hurdles for aid agencies ([Blair et al., 2023](#)). Monitoring these ‘soft’ signals of weaponisation, alongside traditional famine risk metrics, could allow for earlier diplomatic intervention and more proactive humanitarian contingency planning.

In essence, applying this framework across these diverse domains—from ground-level analysis to international courts—bridges the gap between understanding famine as a political act and mobilising the tools to prevent, mitigate, and adjudicate it.

Discussion

The framework presented herein offers a significant advance by providing a holistic, actor-centred analysis of famine causation, foregrounding political agency and IHL violations ([Gu et al., 2021](#)). Its primary strength lies in synthesising the often-disparate realms of political economy, conflict studies, and humanitarian law into a coherent explanatory model. This allows for a nuanced understanding of events like those in Unity State, where famine was not a singular event but the culmination of a sustained, multi-faceted assault on food security by networked actors with clear objectives.

By focusing on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of food system weaponisation, it counters deterministic or environmentally reductionist narratives that still permeate some discourse on African food crises ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). The framework’s emphasis on informal governance and revenue generation, drawing on parallels from contexts like Somalia, effectively captures the decentralised yet systematic nature of predation in South Sudan ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)). However, several limitations must be acknowledged ([John, 2024](#)).

The opacity of data in active conflict zones presents a formidable challenge. Proving the specific intent of state actors, a requisite for certain IHL violations, often relies on inaccessible military orders or clandestine political deliberations. Furthermore, the framework risks over-attributing coherence and strategic planning to actions that may also be driven by factional indiscipline, localised greed, or sheer chaos.

While it adeptly contrasts with apolitical explanations, it must contend with alternative political explanations that emphasise institutional weakness and predatory kleptocracy rather than deliberate famine engineering. Here, the framework’s value is in demonstrating how even weak or fragmented state agency is channelled through specific, identifiable tactics that have famine-inducing effects, thereby bridging the gap between structural and intentionalist accounts. A critical tension illuminated by this analysis is that between humanitarian principles and operational engagement ([Jyalita, 2023](#)).

The framework reveals that the very state entities humanitarian actors must negotiate with for access are often complicit in creating the need for aid. This creates a profound ethical and practical dilemma.

Engagement can risk legitimising or even fuelling predatory systems through the diversion of resources, yet disengagement abandons vulnerable populations.

The work of Blair et al.(2023) on peacekeeping and democratisation suggests that external actors can sometimes reshape local political incentives, but this is a slow and uncertain process. The framework does not resolve this tension but provides a clearer map of the political terrain, enabling more informed and principled decision-making.

It underscores that humanitarian action in such contexts is unavoidably a political act, and neutrality may be an unattainable fiction when the state itself is a primary belligerent targeting civilian sustenance. Synthesising these points, the framework's core contribution is its re-politicisation of famine(Katete, 2023). It moves the debate firmly away from technical solutions centred solely on food delivery towards a recognition of famine as a potential atrocity crime.

It challenges the international community to view famine not just through a humanitarian lens but through the lenses of conflict resolution, legal accountability, and human rights. By integrating insights from indigenous peacebuilding, which often focuses on localised resource sharing and conflict mitigation(Bedigen, 2023), and linking them to macro-level political economy and IHL, the framework offers a multi-scalar understanding. It ultimately argues that preventing famine in South Sudan requires addressing the political and military strategies that make it a viable, if abhorrent, tool of war, a challenge as much about justice and governance as about seeds and sorghum.

Conclusion

This article has argued that famine in South Sudan is fundamentally a political phenomenon, orchestrated through the deliberate weaponisation of food systems by state and non-state actors(Melese, 2024). The developed theoretical framework centres political agency and violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as the critical explanatory variables, moving beyond narratives of environmental shock or mere state failure. It posits that famine risk is engineered through a repertoire of tactics—including siege, diversion, and the destruction of livelihoods—driven by incentives within a conflict political economy characterised by rent-seeking and informal taxation(Boogaard & Santoro, 2021).

This reconceptualisation frames famine not as a tragic natural disaster but as a potential man-made atrocity, a finding with profound implications for both scholarship and policy. The framework's key contribution is its integration of political economy analysis with IHL compliance, providing a structured tool to decode the actors, motives, and methods behind food insecurity in conflict(Mihai et al., 2021). It advances academic debates by offering a dynamic, actor-centred model that bridges macro-level governance failures with micro-level civilian suffering.

For policy, it shifts the imperative from purely technical humanitarian response towards targeted political, legal, and diplomatic interventions. It underscores that achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 ("Zero Hunger") in contexts like South Sudan is inextricably linked to conflict resolution and accountability, as technical agricultural solutions are rendered void by deliberate sabotage(Atukunda et al., 2021). Future research should apply this framework in comparative studies of other conflict settings to test its robustness and refine its components(Nguyễn et al., 2023).

Investigations into the political economy of famine in Yemen, Ethiopia, or Gaza would reveal common logics of weaponisation and distinct local variations. Furthermore, research should explore the intersection between international accountability mechanisms, such as the ICC, and community-based justice and peacebuilding processes (Bedigen, 2023; Alusala et al., 2023). How can top-down legal accountability for starvation crimes be pursued in tandem with, and support, indigenous efforts to rebuild social contracts around food and resource sharing?

In final reflection, the analysis presents a sobering yet necessary conclusion: famine in the 21st century remains a political choice (Paniagua & Vogler, 2021). Addressing it requires not just better early warning systems or more efficient aid delivery, but the courage to confront the political and military actors who instrumentalise hunger. It demands that the international community treat the deliberate creation of famine with the same seriousness as other mass atrocities.

The path to ‘zero hunger’ in South Sudan, therefore, is as much about forging a just peace and upholding international law as it is about cultivating crops. The framework offered here is a step towards making that political imperative analytically clear and, ultimately, actionable.

Contributions

This article makes a dual contribution to the political economy of famine literature. Firstly, it provides a novel theoretical synthesis, integrating the concepts of state agency and instrumental starvation within a framework of conflict economies to analyse the South Sudanese context post-2021.

Secondly, it advances a critical scholarly intervention by rigorously applying International Humanitarian Law (IHL) norms to contemporary state practices, moving beyond purely socio-economic explanations. Consequently, the analysis offers a refined diagnostic tool for policymakers and humanitarian actors seeking to address the deliberate political logics underpinning food insecurity in protracted conflicts.

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