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Transactional Politics and Humanitarian Crisis: Lessons for Policy from the Political Marketplace Framework

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I. Overview

This memo summarizes observations and conclusions from the Conflict Research Programme/World Peace Foundation research on the political marketplace framework and humanitarian crises. It draws upon seven country-specific case studies (Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) and on theoretical and cross-cutting analysis. Its primary focus is on food insecurity and famine, though other forms of humanitarian crisis (for instance, displacement) are also considered.

The political marketplace framework (hereafter: PM and PMF) is a theory of elite politics. It is applicable in places where transactional politics (the day-to-day use of coercion/violence or material incentive) trumps institutional politics (the longer-term functioning of formal rules and institutions, and the norms and principles that underpin such institutions).² In these political systems, elites aim to gain and maintain political power using a combination of ‘cash’ or access to resources, and violence. The logic of the PM does not apply where formal institutions or societal norm institutions are strong. The PMF also doesn’t apply where there is extreme violence such as genocide. The utility of the PMF lies in providing a template of ‘political business as usual’ against which the prospects for other forms of political conduct or process—institutional state-building, civic or democratic transformation, ideological projects, war, and autocratic repression—can be assessed.

¹ Although this memo was prepared by Alex de Waal, Aditya Sarkar and Chris Newton, the substantive ideas stem from the collective reflections around the topic at a remote workshop involving Daniel Maxwell, Jared Miller, Abdulghani al-Iriyani, Amal Nasser, Patrick Maxwell, Merry Fitzpatrick, Susanne Jaspars, Nisar Majid, Mohammad Kanfash, Agustino Ting Mayai, Eddie Thomas, the authors, and a number of discussants.

² For an extended discussion, please see: Alex de Waal, “Introduction to the Political Marketplace for Policymakers,” *JSRP Policy Brief 1*, March 2016, available at <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/policy-reports/JSRP-Brief-1.pdf>. See also Benjamin Spatz, Aditya Sarkar and Alex de Waal, *The Political Marketplace: A Framework and Toolkit for Analyzing Transactional Politics in Conflict Affected Countries*, March 2021, Medford, MA: Tufts University.

All the countries in which there is severe and widespread food insecurity today are countries in which there is a dominant PM or trend towards a PM. All countries which are at risk of famine, are also countries at war, and although the logic of violence and war overlap with the PM, these logics are not coterminous. Conflict and war can also be undertaken for other reasons, for instance, ideology, revenge, survival, and power.

Our 'headline' findings can be divided into two parts: the overarching analytical conclusions from the case studies and their more practical implications. We provide illustrations throughout the remainder of the memo.

1. Broad Analytical Conclusions

Our first major finding is that it is *the combination of the PM and war that is crucial to the genesis of humanitarian crisis*. A corollary is that a humanitarian crisis is not necessarily a crisis for a PM, but instead, represents a change in opportunities, sources of finance, and the price of loyalty which elites have to negotiate. Regardless of the cause of the humanitarian crisis, PMs (and their underlying logic of transactional politics) can adapt themselves to the changes wrought by these crises and outlast them.

The second takeaway is that *political business as usual* (i.e. the PM) *tends to raise the risk of, or in some cases deliberately cause, severe and extreme food insecurity or forced displacement. At the very least, the PM is an entrenched obstacle to providing public goods including basic welfare and humanitarian action*. Where public goods do exist in PMs, elites either dismantle these goods, or attempt to coopt and extract resources from them. The key point is that the priority for those at the helm of a PM is the acquisition and retention of power – not the welfare of people. Acquiring and retaining power requires politicians to obtain political funds and secure political allegiances through payment, threat, or by licencing extractive practices. In PMs, we therefore tend to see situations of severely increased vulnerability to food insecurity and mismanaged or inhibited humanitarian response (often in ways that humanitarians struggle to come to terms with). In rare cases, elite compacts may prevent famine in PMs, but this is usually because famine prevention allows for more efficient extraction of political funds.

Our third major finding is that *humanitarian operations are routinely caught up in the calculus of transactional politics deployed by the belligerents in a specific PM*. This is especially the case where other sources of political funding, such as oil or minerals, are not readily available to PM actors.

The overarching theme that emerges from across the case studies is that the most important, immediate and long-term causes of the humanitarian crisis are economic policies, longer term economic deprivation, war and external shocks. For the most part, these form part of the broader political economy and shape the PM, but the marketization of politics can both amplify shocks and make it harder for countries to overcome them. Across all our case-study sites we see a growth of economic precarity, with large populations being pushed to the edge as a consequence of war and political business-as-usual. We also see the disassembly of institutionalized states (akin to what we used to call state fragility). Of course, when the political system in a country has become locked into the PM logic, it is extremely difficult to reform it in the direction of welfare/development and democracy. Those who are content with the PM logic can benefit from, or at least can live with precarity and state disassembly, and continue to conduct their political business as usual even when violent conflict, natural disaster or economic shocks plunge populations into humanitarian crisis.

2. Practical Implications

The most important practical conclusion from the case studies is that conflict sensitive program-

ming requires humanitarians and policymakers to be sensitive to the basic logic of the PMF.

The PMF *can help humanitarians reset some of their basic operating assumptions* – including notions of good faith actors (operating under political economic constraints), distinctions between ‘political’ and other forms of organized violence and thinking of war and peace as distinct operational phases, rather than as closely interlinked manifestations of underlying political turbulence. In short, analyzing their operating environment through a PMF lens can help humanitarians assess events more realistically and correct some of the biases which a ‘typical’ aid worker might carry. Conducting a political marketplace analysis requires humanitarians to go beyond a political economy analysis³ and focus on the actors in the country, the types of deal-making which characterizes politics at different levels, as well as the types of resources and the nature of coercion being used by elites to retain power.

Second, the PMF must be seen as a critical tool for achieving the full spectrum of conflict sensitive programming within a humanitarian crisis. Minimizing harm and maximizing contributions to peace across humanitarian programming fundamentally requires understanding power in all its forms within a given context over time, from the highest political level to the village politics of community-based targeting. The PMF can be utilized by humanitarians to understand the most extreme humanitarian crises and how their programming does and will likely interact with a PM. Identifying risks and opportunities in a PM is also essential to the operationalization of the humanitarian-development-peace ‘triple nexus’.

Third, using the *PMF can help humanitarians improve their forecasting*. For instance, a nuanced PMF analysis can help generate insights into some of the likely humanitarian impacts of political crises. Thus, it can inform both strategic-level planning, such as annual system-wide outputs like the Humanitarian Response Plan and the Humanitarian Needs Overview, as well as more discrete uses, like shorter-term forecasting for operational planning, like pre-positioning food assistance. Applying the PMF can also help improve the ability of famine early warning systems to consider the likely impacts of conflict on food security.

In any situation, a humanitarian is always likely to be confronted by questions of who the relevant actors are, what are their interests, and what their reactions are likely to be to different events – applying the PMF can help answer these questions.

II. The relationship between humanitarian crises and the PMF

In general, the fact that a political system is marketized has no necessary implications for humanitarian crises or food insecurity, beyond the humdrum but important observation that the welfare of the general population is ancillary to the logic of transactional elite politics. However, there are specific points of intersection between the PMF and humanitarian crises. These relate to:

- War and starvation crimes (point 1).
- Food: production, urban consumption, and large-scale food relief (points 2-4).
- Economic management, reform and reconstruction (points 5-7).
- Peripheral governance, local starvation operations, labour force management, war economies and peace agreements (points 8-12).
- Humanitarian, assistance, humanitarian spending, and humanitarian entrepreneurship (point 4).
- Information and labelling (point 13).

³ We understand a ‘political economy analysis’ to mean analysis of how political institutions, the political environment, and the economic system (allocation and control of resources) influence and shape each other while the political market refers to the day-to-day functioning of politics

- Norms and accountability (point 14).

1. War and Starvation Crimes

War is the most common cause of humanitarian emergency and famine in the contemporary world. All the ways in which war precipitates crises and causes starvation and famine are well-known and are beyond the scope of this memo, but they include deliberate starvation crimes, starvation as the consequence of specific political economic goals (such as moving people off their land to take control of it, appropriating assets, licensing pillage, etc.), the reckless pursuit of war strategies that cause deprivation and hunger, and knock-on economic effects.

The logic of the PM does not cover all elements of politics and war. The twin manifestations of transactional politics (in the Liberian vernacular), may well be violence and ‘cash violence’, but wars may be triggered by, and may escalate for other reasons. Wars (especially extreme violence) can also be economically damaging for elite-efforts to extract political funds. Notwithstanding these caveats, organized violence is often a point of entry or intensification of marketized politics. The PM thrives in disruption, and gangsterism and kleptocracy go hand-in-hand in these systems. War is expensive and those who organize it need to make deals to purchase equipment, pay costs and salaries. The arms business is famously corrupt and other war financing can require deals made under pressure of need and secrecy. Further, sustained conflict leads to war economies (see point 11) which often consist of profiteering from sieges, pillage or illicit commerce. War economies may not always be initiated from the logic of a political marketplace, but they can sustain or intensify starvation crimes by restricting access to essential materials such as food and medicines. It is worth noting, however, that war economies can also create the conditions for some people to sustain themselves and avert famine in the face of siege warfare (as in Syria) – by permitting the entry of food and medication at much higher costs.

Using starvation as a weapon transgresses many social and ethical norms. It is made possible by the formal or informal suspension of laws and regulations (through a state of emergency, censorship and propaganda, etc.) and is usually exacerbated by the suspension of norms (including humanitarian ones). This can occur officially, (through a state of emergency) or informally (through wartime propaganda, the exploitation or manipulation of political identities, etc.), but the net effect is to reduce or even eliminates accountability for political actors. For instance, governments commonly use a suite of instruments of authoritarian rule to ensure that humanitarian operations bend to their political purposes. This begins with the suppression of information and control over diagnosis of the nature of the crisis (see point 15), and continues through diversion, extortion, selective provision and manipulation. Authoritarians will use threats of expulsion (or worse) to keep aid agencies in line, well aware that humanitarians will often compromise to serve those in need.

The suspension of norms, either officially or informally, reduces or even eliminates accountability for political actors.

2. Agrarian Economies

The PMF intersects with the political economy of agriculture and food in several ways. A commercial agricultural sector may provide the profits—from sale of crops and livestock, from sales of land leases, from using land as collateral to raise loans—that supports a section of the political class. This has historically been the case for Sudan’s political elite, and to a lesser extent in Somalia, South Sudan and elsewhere. However, where the agrarian sector is the single most important contributor to a country’s GDP, employment and livelihoods, it does not follow that it has comparable significance to its PM. Agriculture may be marginal to the PM because it simply doesn’t generate major funds for political budgets. This could be the case even if it is the major contributor to state tax revenue, as long as that tax revenue is handled by a state institution following

bureaucratic procedures and rules, while in parallel political budgets are financed by (say) mineral revenues, bribes from construction contracts, or security cooperation.

In Sudan, commercial agriculture has historically generated profits for an indigenous capitalist class that used that profit to control state power. Additionally, capitalists used loans available on the basis of possessing land leases for other purposes including politics (this also happened in Somalia in the 1980s). The initial marketization of Sudanese politics was, however, driven primarily by the financial sector and corrupt dealings around foreign direct investment (among which agriculture played a part) and subsequently by oil. The increased cost of politics attendant on the political marketization in turn increased the incentives for the hyper-exploitative character of the Sudanese commercial agricultural sector.

Extraction from the agrarian sector may become crucial for elites to obtain disposal funds if other, more accessible sources of political finance collapse. This can mean a shift from relatively benign taxation of farming communities to violent plunder and land seizure, which bring humanitarian crises in their wake. In South Sudan, for instance, after the drying up of/reduction in oil revenues, President Salva Kiir has licensed localized pillage as a way of maintaining his dominant position in the PM. This has led to localized but extreme violence, as well as mass displacement, and precipitated short-term food crisis while re-shaping the longer-term political economy of the country and increasing the precarity of large numbers. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the process has taken place non-violently and through legal processes (for the most part), but no less ruthlessly.

3. Urban Food Supplies

In several cases, urban food consumption (and the macro-economic management required to facilitate it) emerged as a major political-economic issue and intermittently a PM one. Sudan and Syria are prominent instances. In both these cases, catering for urban food demands is a political priority and in the case of Sudan it is currently a serious obstacle to macroeconomic stabilization. Sudan is unusual in that urban food insecurity registered on the IPC scale in 2017 and subsequently: in most cases urban hunger is politically significant in a manner that is disproportionate to its relatively lower scale/intensity according to IPC metrics. That said, urban food protests are rarely a PM phenomenon; more often a demonstration of civiness and opposition to corruption.

Sudan provides an interesting and probably unique case in which there is both a highly extractive agrarian capitalist sector – with sesame, sheep, groundnuts, cotton, camels, and gum Arabic making up 45 per cent of commodity exports in 2019 (alongside produce such as sorghum which is important in bumper years), and an inordinately expensive urban food subsidy, importing wheat for city dwellers. Both elements are longstanding (i.e. they long preceded the emergence of Sudan's PM in the 1970s) but both intersect with it at important junctures. For much of the past decade, rural food producers accounted for about half of export earnings: food exports amounted to 3-4 percent of GDP. But most wheat was imported: wheat subsidies amounted to about 0.5 percent of GDP. Sudan is a special case not merely because it has urban food subsidies – these have long been widely used as a means of managing urban dissent – but because its urban food subsidies depend on foreign exchange generated mainly from food exports (except during the oil years 1999-2011). A further complicating factor is the existence of special discounted foreign exchange rates for wheat. Many well-connected interests clustered around the wheat trade, because it allowed them access to cheap foreign currency.

Commercial food imports can therefore be a source of both profit and political funds. In Syria, for instance import of wheat has become a way for the regime to both extract funds from, but also reward regime loyalists. Similarly in Somalia, both the export of products such as lemons and sesame, and food-imports remains a lucrative business. In fact, despite much productive land being under

al-Shabaab control, commercial cash crop production, trade, and food imports, are still controlled by a limited number of businesses (with at least implicit cooperation from al-Shabaab) – with often the same business involved in all three. The concentration of production, money transfer, and aid resources to a few actors, has arguably worsened the exploitation of marginalised and minority groups, many of whom have been displaced, and continues to generate rents for the highly transactional political system in Somalia.

4. Humanitarian assistance, humanitarian spending and humanitarian entrepreneurship

Humanitarian assistance is a public good that is, on principle, initiated and organized according to civic principles that counteract the logic of the PM. Aid to a suffering population can contradict or support the war aim of a belligerent. A humanitarian operation is also conducted by staff members who are witnesses who may publicize violations and bring pressure for them to be stopped. At minimum, a humanitarian operation is therefore a kind of civic institution that complicates the PM.

A humanitarian operation does not dismantle the PM but becomes part of it. Life-preserving assistance can benefit the leaders of the community targeted by violence and starvation, while impeding the war aims of those seeking that community's destruction. More commonly, the more powerful actors manipulate assistance to their advantage. Food aid can be a source of political finance either through large-scale organized diversion and theft (as with the Houthis in Yemen, or Somalia in the 1990s) through lucrative transport contracts (as in Somalia prior to 2011, and Darfur in 2005) or through large scale local purchase. Food aid allocations can be a form of reward and patronage. However, what we generally found was that humanitarian food aid was a relatively small contributor to political funding and relatively minor contributor to national budgets, compared to other sources such as minerals, except in Somalia. And even in the countries with the highest quantities of food aid per capita, food aid does not make up a significant proportion of consumption outside a few crisis areas.

In some cases, humanitarian aid has influenced the workings of the PM. Somalia is the principal case: business fortunes and political careers were launched on the back of the massive international spending in Somalia during the UNITAF-UNOSOM period of 1992-94, and the food aid delivery contracts of the 2000s also assisted the commercial and political ambitions of some members of the elite. The post-2011 shift from food aid to cash has altered the beneficiaries of the humanitarian programming: the food trucking cartel has been broken and money transfer companies are now the commercial actors who gain (though aid vouchers are not sufficiently large to be their main business). The recent shift has not changed the overall structure of Somalia's PM, but some of the commercial beneficiaries are different, and in turn some politicians have been advantaged and others disadvantaged.

The role of humanitarian aid in a PM can change over time. In South Sudan, aid was a crucial resource for all parties in the civil war in the 1990s. It became marginal when the country's politics were funded by oil. During the recent war, it has become more important once again, especially at a local level, where humanitarian operations, facilities and commodities become important sources of political finance. In Yemen, the selective allocation of humanitarian aid is a means of rewarding constituency leaders. The DRC case study of Kasai was notable in that there was no substantial humanitarian aid operation to be coopted, and the resources from those relief operations were insignificant compared to those available from mining.

Humanitarian aid may also be more significant at the local level (including within capital cities' economies). An example of this is in South Sudan and Somalia where it can be a significant source of local political revenue through corrupt levies and taxes, and through the profits from renting out

NGO compounds (which house humanitarian operations).

An issue that was touched upon in several case studies (Somalia, South Sudan, Syria) was that local humanitarian actors of all kinds can also be PM operators, using the same kinds of skills as politicians including maintaining political networks and monitoring shifts in the PM, constantly negotiating their position and adjusting it accordingly, and brokering information and access. They are political actors of necessity, but with humanitarian goals.

One of the unforeseen consequences of sustained international humanitarian presence and funding is that these people have an opportunity for in-country employment that would otherwise not exist: humanitarian operations sustain this class or cadre of individuals who are indispensable for both short-term humanitarian programming and also for the longer-term norms and ethics of society.

The overarching point here is that the different actors in a PM, including humanitarians try and work within the structural constraints of the political system as best as they can, to achieve their own goals. In some cases, local individuals and organizations are able to navigate the PM better than other (international) humanitarian organizations.

5. (Lack of) Economic Reform

A pervasive impact of a PM system is that it obstructs economic reform intended to stabilize the economy and provide public goods. In some contexts the entire national economic strategy has been geared towards corrupt activities – such as in Zaire under Mobutu, continuing to the economic networks which dominate commercial activity in present day DRC. In others, even when funds are available for investment in public goods, they may be diverted towards sustenance of a bloated security sector or used to maintain expensive patronage networks. For instance, even when oil revenues were at their peak in Yemen, President Ali Abdalla Saleh in Yemen obstructed investment because of his fear that it would empower opposition and weaken the dominance of his ‘big-tent’ patronage system, and all case studies could well have included numerous such cases. Such transactional demands operate at an international level too: an example is the demand of the Trump Administration and the UAE to Sudan that it recognize Israel as a *quid pro quo* for lifting the state sponsor of terror designation.

The way in which the PMF turbo-charges political business as normal as the driving force in politics makes this resistance to reform a fundamental feature of PM countries, and forms an essential part of the context of humanitarian crisis. This also leaves humanitarians at a persistent structural disadvantage *vis-à-vis* transactional politicians.

6. Macroeconomic (Mis-)Management

Following from point (5), most PMs are characterized by some form of macro-economic mismanagement (i.e. deviation from established best practices of economic governance) which commonly forms a backdrop to humanitarian crisis. From the perspective of elites, decisions that are irrational in terms of fiscally responsible and pro-growth economic strategy, may be perfectly rational according to the logic of the PM. One particular example of how macroeconomic (public) institutions can be instrumentalized for political purposes with major negative implications for food security is central banks. The Central Bank of Yemen was relocated from Sana’a to Aden and ceased paying civil service salaries in Houthi-controlled areas for political reasons, contributing to the disastrous fall in incomes in those areas. The Central Bank of Sudan was requisitioned by the former regime as a gold purchasing agent in order to secure both state and political finance, which was an inflationary strategy that contributed to the collapse in real incomes in Sudan.

Inflation itself can be an instrument of political-economic power shift, depriving those reliant on

wages and local currency activities, and benefiting those with access to hard currency or gold. An inflationary strategy may be both the outcome of an attempt to manage the competing demands of political constituencies, and a deliberate transfer of wealth. However, inflation can be a dangerous or counter-productive tool: in South Sudan it has hit hardest at the pro-government constituencies which relied most heavily on salaried jobs and markets, causing hunger in areas not directly affected by fighting. In Sudan it was a major factor behind the uprising that overthrew President Omar al-Bashir.

7. Economic Reconstruction

In a PM, contracts for post-conflict reconstruction are often awarded on a crony capitalist basis: those who contribute to political budgets get the contracts. This is happening now in Syria, where contracts for import of food and oil have been used to channel public resources to elites allied to the regime. In turn this can lead to undermining food security both by eliminating employment and livelihoods, and by large scale land acquisition. Similar dynamics have been observed in Somalia, as noted above. The Sudan government has tried to do this in the agricultural sector but foreign investors are mostly leery.

The same infrastructure projects that are designed to promote economic development, such as roads, bridges, and electrification may also create new vulnerabilities in times of conflict. This is dramatically the case in a complex and urbanized middle-income country such as Syria but can also be seen a smaller way in South Sudan, where improved access to rural areas has exposed previously remote communities to attack.

8. Peripheral Governance

The characteristic form of peripheral governance in a PM country is that rural areas are managed on the basis of a violent, monetized patronage system, with authority over localities delegated to provincial elites (tribal leaders, militia leaders, political-military entrepreneurs). This creates systems constantly in local political turmoil with competitive bargaining for meager resources provided from the center, a turbulent version of the old divide-and-rule strategy. The central elite PM rationale for peripheral governance includes (a) resource extraction where those resources can contribute to political finance (e.g. artisanal minerals, timber), (b) keeping those provincial leaders either loyal or preoccupied with their own local affairs, (c) keeping down administrative costs, and (d) the cheap mobilization of male labour for organized violence.

This also creates incentives local elites to rebel, using violence as a means of communication and bargaining. The case study of Kasai in DRC is an example of how competing claims over a particular chieftainship led to a rebellion which then fragmented and became a highly disruptive conflict with a humanitarian crisis in train. The origins of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria are comparable, with the added twist that militia groups were mobilized initially for gubernatorial elections with the blessing of the central authorities. It is also a recurrent feature of South Sudan and Darfur. In both these cases, rivalries among central elites (the Islamists in Khartoum after the 2000 split, the South Sudanese after the recent peace agreement) were displaced to the peripheries where they took on violent forms, with serious humanitarian consequences.

The ways in which President Saleh managed Yemen's peripheries is perhaps the pre-eminent example of peripheral governance through disorder. Saleh went so far as to foment local wars in order to keep his own rivals busy fighting, and consuming their own military resources in those wars, so as to reduce their challenge to his power. Along with the Nigerian case, this also shows how these strategies can backfire on the leader when provincial rebels (the Houthis, Boko Haram) become more powerful than anticipated.

One of the instruments of patronage in a PM system is license to act with impunity. This means that a ruler can reward a local actor not with direct cash payment but with an assurance that he can do whatever he wants to enrich himself, and to sustain his own political business, and will not have to report back. That can include extractive or predatory taxation, raiding and cattle rustling, and other activities that cause local micro-famines.

9. Local manifestation of starvation crimes

The logic of the PM operates at all levels: it is applicable to the bargaining and use of violence among local elites as much as national ones. Although the main focus of applying the PMF in our cases has been at country level, when the focus is changed to provincial or local level, the same calculus is relevant, but belligerents methods for inflicting starvation vary. The norms against deliberate starvation are usually strong at local level; however, once these norms have been overridden by the logic of the PM, then local perpetrators who know the targeted communities and households the best can inflict the most damage. The larger point is that in PMs, normative safeguards against the highly localized use of extreme organized violence, including starvation crimes can be eroded relatively easily, with severe humanitarian consequences.

One of the striking observations from South Sudan was that local militia forces were more efficient perpetrators of starvation against neighbouring communities than forces drawn from further away. The reason for this was that militiamen from a neighbouring community know more about the assets and livelihoods of the target group and can more thoroughly loot them, hunting down people, livestock, food stores and other assets that are hidden away. They may also be able to put those assets (e.g. livestock) to more immediate use. This has implications for early warning and operational planning – for instance, knowing the identity of the belligerents may help humanitarians plan for the extent of damage to which they will need to respond.

This finding also contradicts a commonly held assumption among humanitarians that 'local' or 'communal' forms of organized violence are inherently less impactful on food security than those involving formally recognized armed actors like rebel groups and government forces.

10. Generating an exploitable and cheap source of labour

A feature across several case studies was that humanitarian crisis served as a mechanism for generating a cheap labour force (albeit as a second degree impact rather than an intended consequence). In turn, cheap labour was beneficial to both agrarian capitalists (in Sudan), urban contractors (in Somalia), and military recruiters (everywhere). In general, conflict and resulting displacement accelerate the evolution of capitalist labour markets as the displaced join the ranks of the urban poor earning a livelihood from informal work.

A displaced population can also be a magnet to attract humanitarian aid, which can sustain that population as a reserve labour force or a recruiting pool for militiamen or gangs. Those who broker access to the displaced populations, and especially those who control the allocation and handling of relief commodities, can be politically empowered and also reap material rewards. This has been well documented in Somalia, where 'gatekeepers' control access to IDP sites and IDP populations, requiring humanitarian actors to negotiate with them.

On the other hand, the humanitarian crises in Darfur and north-eastern Nigeria occurred in peripheral areas in which there is little or no commercial agriculture, and the greater part of the displaced labour generated by these crises is not integrated into local capitalist labour markets. To the contrary, the displaced are seen as an economic burden and a security threat. This shows how a violent political economy can generate internal contradictions. It is possible that agrarian capitalists may

later take advantage of emptied lands and dislocated populations, but this was not a driving force in these crises.

11. War Economies

The expression 'war economies' encompasses a wide variety of phenomena, but at its simplest can be used to refer to commercial transacting (including for private enrichment) among armed groups and businesspersons (usually men) in conflict. This is, of course, different from the PMF which is a broader framework for understanding a political system where transactional politics are dominant. These can exist independently of each other, but war economies are fertile breeding grounds for the broader marketization of politics and are often a characteristic of armed conflicts in political markets.

In every case examined, a war economy had developed that was intertwined with the humanitarian crisis. There were clear examples of collusion across front lines in many cases, usually for profiteering – with the most egregious examples being trade around and smuggling of weapons between belligerents. They were also characterized by the extraction of resources from the movement of goods and people, and more generally by pillage, various forms of licit and illicit taxation, and shakedowns. The diversion, taxation and looting of aid and humanitarian resources is often a central feature of these war economies. In fact, in some of our cases, as interests in the war economy became more entrenched, battles became rarer, frontlines crystallized and cooperation between warring factions became common; armed operations were undertaken more for commercial purposes than in pursuit of military victory. These have first order impacts on humanitarian crises, but the increased taxation of mobility which is central to livelihoods (whether that is cyclical labour migration or the movement of livestock) can exacerbate hunger and food insecurity.

Sieges are an extreme example of control over mobility and trade. Sieges were usually instigated as military tactics for specific military goals, but as wars continued, profits were made from the status quo. The most striking case is Syria, in which smugglers were able to make windfall profits from the price gradients for essential goods between the besieged enclaves and other parts of the country. This quickly led to the organization of a parallel economy. Not only did these activities generate commercial profits and personal fortunes, but the money involved was sometimes put to political purposes, and the points at which profits were extracted—e.g. checkpoints, tunnels, permissions from the security forces—became commodities to be traded or a cause of political strife and security incidents as belligerents fought to control the lucrative source of income. A checkpoint could be bought and sold between different factions, either units within the same armed group or even across contending groups. The political economy of siege, sustained by the logic of the PM, created very high prices for essential food and medicine, deepening and prolonging the humanitarian crisis.

Similar dynamics were seen at work in the counter-insurgency against Boko Haram in Nigeria. Possibly, there are similar dynamics in the case of the blockade of the Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen.

One striking feature of extremist insurgencies was that as conflicts continued, they shifted from being principally ideological actors to more pragmatic PM operators concerned with maintaining their political businesses. This was the case with al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria: as the wars wore on, they became more akin to political market rivalries and less ideological confrontations. The question of whether this applied to extremist groups in Syria including ISIS remained unresolved. That said, mobilizing on the basis of fundamentalist Islam offers some organizational advantages that play well in the political marketplace, including an efficient and credible judicial system and cheap means of enforcing loyalty. Jihadist insurgencies appeared to operate

their own specific segment of a political marketplace, insulated from broader national PMs, but also with specific transactions across the front lines with their adversaries.

12. Peace Agreements

In the PMF, a peace agreement is a share-out of the spoils among political-military elites with the blessing that whatever violence follows either doesn't matter or is a legitimate implementation of the agreement (e.g. through suppressing or disarming spoilers and holdouts). Humanitarians sometimes tend to assume that all peace agreements are created equal – in other words that peace is good, and agreements about peace all the more so. A corollary is that if there is an agreement about peace, then humanitarian needs will immediately begin dropping and the mass return of the displaced will proceed accordingly.

In reality, and in the short term, a ceasefire and peace agreement can often bring positive humanitarian outcomes. They can end fighting, open up markets and trade routes, allow people to move, end sieges, allow humanitarian aid, etc. But if a peace agreement falls apart, the humanitarian consequences can be worse than if it had not been attempted. The collapse of the ARCSS in South Sudan in 2016 is an example. What followed was an extension of war, pillage and displacement into areas that had not been severely affected in the immediately preceding war, and new rounds of destruction including starvation crimes and the declaration of the first famine since Somalia in 2011. In some cases, even just initiating negotiation of a peace agreement can cause a rise in violence, as belligerents try to fight their way into a better negotiating position. PM analysis of the 'real politics' needs to therefore inform humanitarian analysis of the situation in a country regardless of what is agreed on paper.

In the longer term, a peace bargain that consolidates the PM can keep a country vulnerable to humanitarian (and especially food) crisis, or even make those risks even worse. If the PM continues to dominate elite politics, then it is likely that provisions for public goods (democratization, justice, land reform) will be slow-tracked or forgotten altogether. Indeed, a peace agreement that provides for competitive elections in a PM is an invitation for intensified political rivalries and the diversion of ever-larger amounts of money into political budgets for the purposes of winning elections. If a PM formula for providing jobs and licenses at local levels reproduces the existing form of peripheral governance, then we cannot expect fundamental change at that level (and in fact ignoring localized PM dynamics and their linkages to broader political shifts can actively impede the work of humanitarians). Finally, if peace deals include provisions for continuing or extending an exploitative political economy, they will not promote food security. Instead the result could be the extension of agrarian capitalism into areas of smallholder farming or post-conflict reconstruction contracts that undermine livelihoods.

13. Information and Labelling

Three of our case studies were marked by controversy over humanitarian information and diagnosis. In Nigeria, 'Famine' (IPC Phase 5) was retrospectively diagnosed by external actors some months after it had occurred, a situation that reveals the shortcomings of an 'early warning' system based on complex information gathering and analysis—where the precise types of information (quantified food consumption gaps, acute malnutrition and/or mortality rates, etc.) are not available, the diagnosis simply cannot be made. In Yemen, hindrances to access for humanitarians has led to recurrent information vacuums, allowing the belligerents to claim that famine is not occurring. In South Sudan, where better information is available, the government has used its position as the chair of the national IPC committee to change classifications, including from Phase 5 to Phase 4 for both proportions of an affected population and geographic areas, i.e. downgrading from 'Famine/Catastrophe' to 'Emergency'. This is done for political reasons, not least of all to deflect potential

calls for accountability. The great majority of deaths from hunger and disease occur in widespread phases 3 and 4 ('Crisis' and 'Emergency').

In a PM, especially a violent conflict, information and labels become subject to transactional political logic: they are bargained over. In the case of Nigeria, the government likely feared that the declaration of an emergency would divert donor funds to humanitarian activities, controlled by the UN and large INGOs, reducing funding to development programmes in which the government was the partner, and which could be more easily utilized for advantage in the PM. In the most extreme example, Syria simply blocks IPC analysis. Although outright corruption of the IPC process has not been documented, the political pressures on humanitarian practitioners and government officials in an IPC process can be considerable.

14. Norms and Accountability

The PMF is a materialist logic driven by power and assisted by greed. Humane norms don't apply. Insofar as members of the political elite treat one another with respect and courtesy it is for instrumental reasons: it's better to have a reputation among potential allies for treating them respectfully. As regards ordinary citizens and especially the poor, their rights and welfare are low priorities for elites. The PMF therefore follows a basically inhumane logic, although of course there are social pressures on politicians and leaders to prevent famine among their followers, their political 'constituencies' and soldiers. This was clear across all case studies. The humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are largely antithetical to the perspective and constraints of actors within a PM – a gap in viewpoints that can hinder mutual understanding and progress on operational issues like humanitarian access. Humanitarians, and especially donor officials, also often arrive in crisis situations assuming good faith actors, or that actors can be moulded in this image over time. Applying the PMF can help them add nuance to their analysis and understanding.

In general, the principles and institutions for accountability are public goods that do not find support within the PMF. This applies both to criminal accountability ('for my friends, impunity; for my enemies, the law') and to political accountability (elections are to be bought or stolen). Success is its own justification; power legitimates itself; a crucial resource of the ruler is bestowing impunity (legal, political-administrative and in official discourse) – on his agents and licensees.

The intersection between the PMF and the framework of starvation crimes will be the focus of a separate paper. Among the key points are the following. Concerning individual responsibility for acts of starvation, the PMF provides some context but no exculpation. It points to the likelihood that middle-ranking political and military actors may be those responsible for the most egregious starvation crimes, perpetrated against neighbouring communities. Concerning higher level responsibility, the PMF provides tools for understanding the operation of conspiracy and joint criminal enterprise.

Looking more widely to political accountability for acts of commission and omission that contribute to famine, the PMF helps explain why there is so little reform of recurrently faminogenic political systems. Once the PM becomes normalized, layered on top of a malign political economy or a violently turbulent system of peripheral governance, then carrying on political business as normal becomes a sin of omission, because we know enough to be grimly confident that humanitarian crises will occur, unless something is done to stop them.

III. Conclusion

The PMF provides a template for evaluating 'political business as usual' and thereby challenging humanitarians to identify what they need to do differently in order for a malign, faminogenic system to function in a different manner. The point is not that humanitarians ought to be trying to change a PM into a functional, institutionalized democracy – that is neither their mandate nor their mission. In recent years, the concept of the 'triple nexus' has expanded the narrow definition of humanitarianism considerably by aspiring to transform the way that humanitarian, development and peace activities are planned, implemented and financed in fragile situations. However, the key point is that humanitarians are trying to operate within a PM while doing the least harm possible and maximizing positive impact, including contributions to peace across all their programming. The PMF contributes to this by allowing humanitarians to test their basic assumptions, and to conduct more precise and nuanced analysis about the likely contours of the humanitarian crises and the impact of their interventions.



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