

VETOING HUMANITY

How a few powerful nations hijacked global peace and why reform is needed at the UN Security Council

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ABSTRACT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report aims to highlight the humanitarian consequences of the dysfunction at the UN Security Council and humanitarian finance mechanisms. A few powerful states are obstructing peace processes and undermining international laws which should be equally binding for all people. There are 23 protracted crises examined in this report, with case studies on the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria and Ukraine. The growth of humanitarian needs, gaps in humanitarian funding, and the impacts of veto and penholding power are explored.

Ahead of the Summit of the Future in 2024, Oxfam urges the UN member states to use this opportunity to take decisive and bold action to rebuild a more equal, inclusive, efficient, and responsive system. This will ensure that they fulfil their roles in reducing and resolving crises to avoid the spiralling humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Cover photo: Marcelline walks to collect water near Bangassou in the Central African Republic on 3 March 2021. 'I didn't understand the gunshots, I did not know where they were coming from. I was scared, I could hear too many gunshots, I was tormented,' says the 36-year-old-mother of four, as she recalls the attack on Bangassou on 3 January 2021. Credit: Adrienne Surprenant/Oxfam (2021).

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ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ATT	Arms Trade Treaty
CAR	Central African Republic
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East African Community
EACRF	East African Community Regional Force
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IGN	UN General Assembly Intergovernmental Negotiations
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
MONUSCO	United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory
P5	The five permanent UN Security Council member states
PSC	African Union Peace and Security
RECs	Regional Economic Communities (in the African Union)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAMIDRC	Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNWRA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The promise of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to maintain international peace and security is broken. Conflict around the globe is rife. Dozens of conflicts have raged – some for decades – with no sign of abating, leaving an unprecedented trail of human suffering. The 23 protracted crises examined in this report have been included in the UN's Global Humanitarian Needs Overview for at least five of the last ten years.¹

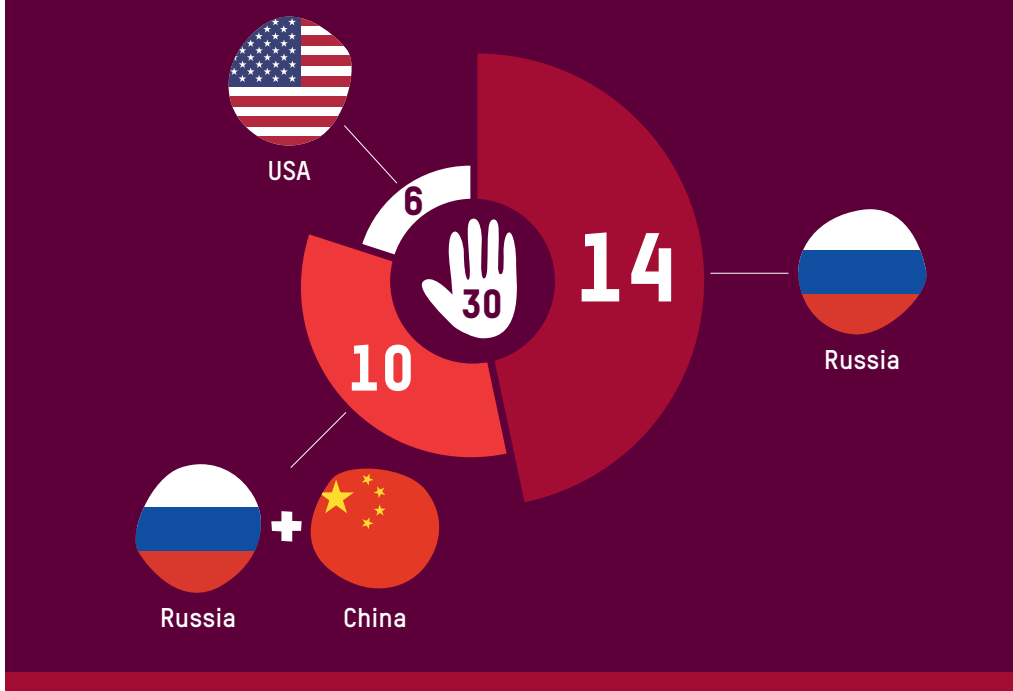
Over the last decade alone, conflict has killed 1.1 million people in those 23 crises. Millions have been forced out of their homes, and conflict has been the primary driver of hunger – pushing 135 million conflict-affected people into severe hunger.² During the same period, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has risen nearly four times, driving funding needs to nearly triple – from US\$20.3bn to a staggering US\$56.1bn – to address this escalation in human suffering.³

This is not a coincidence. A handful of powerful nations who represent only 25% of the world population, but hold its nuclear button, have too often manipulated the global peace and security system to meet their geopolitical and economic interests. Between 2014 and 2024, one or more of the five permanent UNSC member states (the P5) vetoed 30 UNSC resolutions on protracted crises, including resolutions on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel, Ukraine, Syria and Yemen. Russia and the USA cast 75% of the 88 UNSC vetoes since 1989, with the rest by China – neither France nor the UK have used their veto power over that period.⁴ Many of the vetoes obstructed resolutions that were similar to those that overwhelmingly passed in the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

Moreover, the P5 have deliberately cherry-picked which conflicts to address in the Council. Over the last decade, over 95% of the resolutions that the UNSC passed relate to just half of the protracted crises, leaving the other half mostly neglected.⁵

The P5 are not homogenous: some of these influential countries have expressed openness to reform where others have – and continue – to use the veto in violation of the Charter's own provisions. The gridlock within the UNSC has left the 23 crises discussed in this paper largely unresolved – namely those in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, OPT, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela and Yemen.

FIGURE 1: RUSSIA, CHINA AND THE USA ISSUED ALL THE VETOES DURING THE LAST DECADE (2014–24)



Source: UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. (n.d.). UN Security Council Meetings and Outcomes Tables: Veto List.⁶

As a result, local, women's rights and feminist organisations, as well as NGOs and humanitarian and UN agencies, have struggled to respond to people's immediate needs in these protracted crises. In 2023 alone, more than 100 million people could not be reached with protection and lifesaving food, water, sanitation and health assistance.⁷

Oxfam's *Vetoing Humanity* report illustrates how the current UNSC system is no longer fit for purpose. A handful of powerful nations have manipulated it to their own short-term political gains, resulting in a global humanitarian catastrophe that is now outpacing our ability to respond. Through three case studies – in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine – it shows how the P5 have not only failed to resolve these crises by abusing their veto and penholding powers, but have undermined the very goal of global peace and security that they first established.

The P5 provide far more military aid than humanitarian assistance.⁸ For example, in 2019, the USA provided US\$18.8bn in security assistance but just US\$6bn in humanitarian aid – and it was still the largest aid donor. While it may be argued that military aid fits into the P5 mandate of security, the imbalance between military aid and humanitarian aid is glaring. The P5 also overwhelmingly dominate the world's legal arms trade, together accounting for 73.5% of sales.⁹ In 2021 alone, P5 arms exports totalled more than US\$90bn, or enough to cover that year's entire humanitarian funding gap of US\$17.63bn more than five times over.¹⁰

Ahead of the Summit of the Future, Oxfam urges the UN member states to use this 'once-in-a-generation'¹¹ opportunity to take decisive and bold action to rebuild a more equal, inclusive, efficient and responsive system, which truly captures the UN Charter's ambitions and puts global peace above politics. This includes making the following changes:

- Renouncing the P5 veto and penholding monopoly and, instead, expanding membership to represent people and not military power.
- Permanent member states have a moral responsibility to uphold International Humanitarian Law and the Arms Trade Treaty,¹² and stop arms transfers and military aid that exacerbate violence and suffering, and that are potentially used in committing war crimes.
- Women and other disadvantaged groups must be at the heart of peace negotiations: this is the only way to find inclusive and sustainable solutions.
- The international community must make humanitarian funding mandatory to create a humanitarian finance system that leaves no one behind.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Failure to tackle the root causes of conflict, including ensuring just peace, has caused humanitarian needs to spiral and has stretched the humanitarian sector's capacity to its limits. This report is part of Oxfam's efforts to challenge and transform the systems that should contribute to peace, justice and the wellbeing of all, but instead often perpetuate conflict and fragility.

There is fundamental inequality at the heart of our global peace and security architecture. Following the end of the Second World War, five nations – China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA – took upon themselves the 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security' through the UN Security Council (UNSC).¹³ Despite the Charter affirming the equal rights of all nations,¹⁴ these five nations (known as the 'P5') were imbued with the power to veto any resolution in the UNSC, and the UN Charter further obliged all other member states to 'agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council'.¹⁵

Nearly eight decades on from the UN's foundation, the world looks quite different to the 1940s: the number of member states has nearly quadrupled from 51 to 193. Many of these later signatories were colonies of the P5¹⁶ during the creation of the UN, and have experienced decades-long struggles for independence. This colonial legacy is still often shadowed in the practice of 'penholding' in the UNSC, where former colonial powers frequently hold the exclusive power to draft UNSC resolutions on countries they once controlled. Compounding this inequality, the P5 maintain their veto on peace and security while at the same time supplying the majority of the world's weapons. Companies in the P5 countries account for nearly 75% of worldwide arms sales.¹⁷

As we approach the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024,¹⁸ we must acknowledge that the inequality between the P5 and other countries has fundamentally broken our ability to create the conditions needed for peace and security. While companies make billions from arms sales, humanitarian needs have grown to astronomical proportions with nearly 300 million people around the world needing humanitarian assistance this year.¹⁹ These needs continue to grow because the conflicts driving them are not ending. From protracted conflicts in Syria, the DRC, Yemen and Niger to over 50 years of occupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem, humanitarian aid cannot meet the needs of populations when the Security Council fails to find ways to end conflicts.



An Iraqi woman stands in front of the tent where she and her extended family live. It is erected on the site where part of their house used to be, before it was destroyed by a rocket during the ISIS conflict. Credit: Zaid Al-Bayati (2021).

A new vision is needed to advance the ideals and promises on which the UN was based. While this paper cannot address the broad range of issues needed for UN reform,²⁰ it argues that the first fundamental step is to address the inequality in the peace and security architecture that allows a handful of states to block the possibility of peace and security in many contexts. At the Summit of the Future, states are being called to make bold recommendations on transforming global governance – and reforming the UNSC and other UN organs. The first step in this process is to forge a vision that is more equal, feminist and anti-colonial.

‘We can’t build a future for our grandchildren with a system built for our grandparents.’

– António Guterres, UN Secretary-General²¹

BOX 1: DECOLONIZATION

Oxfam recognizes that naming and acknowledging the legacy of colonial power and the current system of neocolonial power is vital to our efforts to campaign for transformative systemic change. While state colonization has mostly ended, its influence on how we think and act remains. Colonization saw some groups of people believing they were ‘better than’ others. It provided them with the justification and authority to exploit, infantilize and dictate to those they saw as ‘lesser’. It is this sense of superiority that persists today, often unquestioned, and means that power is still skewed towards former imperial powers in the Global North. Neocolonial power imbalances between countries and communities have a profound impact on inequality, injustice and – ultimately – feed into the humanitarian crises we face today.

Source: Oxfam. (n.d.). *Oxfam GB’s Decolonial Partnerships Strategy in Summary*.²²

2. IN THE CROSSFIRE: HOW PROTRACTED CONFLICT DRIVES HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Violent conflict is the main driver of rising humanitarian need, acute food insecurity and forced displacement. Moreover, nearly 90% of all people requiring humanitarian assistance live in countries experiencing high-intensity conflict.²³ According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, 12% more conflict occurred in 2023 compared to 2022, and there has been a 22% increase in political violence over the past five years.²⁴ Over the past decade, over 1.1 million people have died in protracted crises,²⁵ both combatants and civilians caught in the crossfire.²⁶

BOX 2: THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL'S ROLE IN PROTECTING CIVILIANS

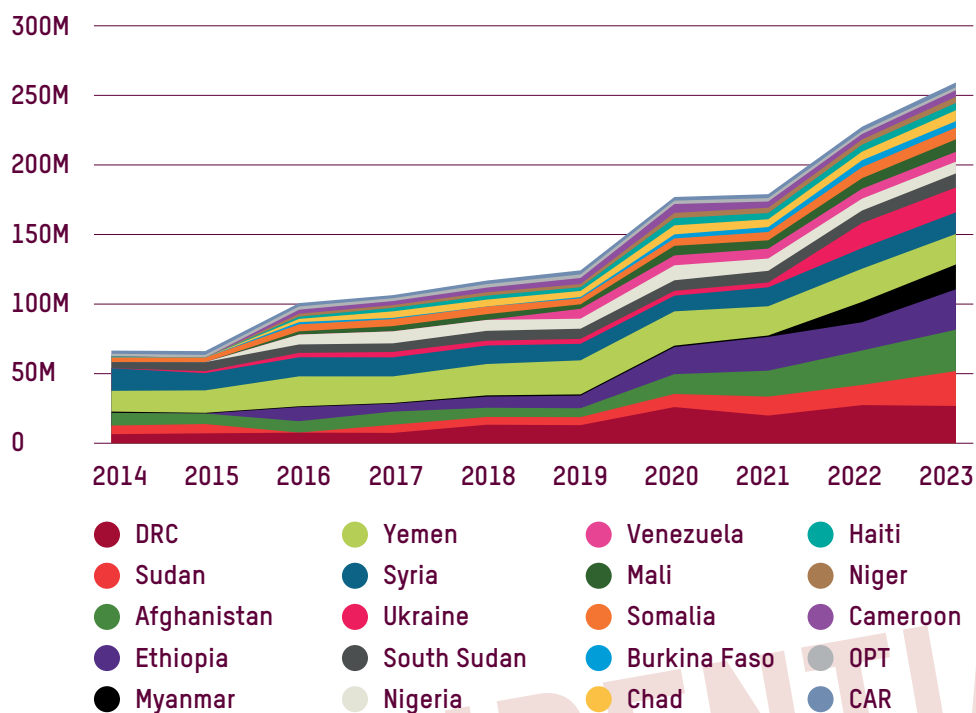
Over the last 25 years, the UNSC has tried to protect civilians and women trapped in conflicts, passing several landmark resolutions, including:

- UNSC Resolution 1265 on protection of civilians in armed conflicts (1999);²⁷
- UNSC Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security (2000);²⁸
- UNSC Resolution 2417 on conflict-induced food insecurity (2018);²⁹
- UNSC Resolution 2475 on protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict (2019);³⁰ and
- UNSC Resolution 2730 on protection of humanitarian personnel and UN and associated personnel in armed conflict (2024).³¹

However, despite these demonstrations of the UNSC's ability to pass resolutions on peace, security and international humanitarian law when political will aligns, these resolutions have seldom been effectively enforced and remain woefully ignored by the parties to conflicts.

The number of people in humanitarian need living in a country in protracted crisis has grown by more than 150% in the last decade to over 230 million people across 23 countries in 2024 (**Figure 2**).³² Between 2019 and 2023, the number of people worldwide living in acute food insecurity more than doubled, from 137 million to 282 million; for 135 million in 2023, violent conflict was the principal driver of crisis-level hunger.³³ The number of forcibly displaced people increased from 59.5 million in 2014 to 117.3 million in 2023.³⁴ Many of the 23 countries that have suffered protracted crises over the last decade (listed in **Figure 2**) are resource-rich, and have high levels of poverty and gender inequality; almost all are former colonies.

FIGURE 2: HUMANITARIAN NEEDS ACROSS 23 CONFLICTS HAVE MORE THAN DOUBLED OVER THE PAST DECADE
PEOPLE NEEDING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE BY COUNTRY (2014–23)



Source: UNOCHA's Global Humanitarian Needs Overviews 2015–24, excluding Iraq and Libya which were not included in 2023.³⁵

2.1 INEQUALITY FUELS CONFLICT

Horizontal inequalities and perceptions of exclusion can evolve into group-based grievances, which can sometimes lead to violence if not addressed.³⁶ Inequality spikes during and in the immediate aftermath of conflict, and is deeply tied to issues such as state/elite capture,³⁷ corruption and the war economy. Conflict also deepens pre-existing economic and gender inequalities. For example, forcibly displaced households are generally poorer than non-displaced households, and are more likely to be female-headed.³⁸

Women experience gender-based violence at higher rates in emergencies. Adolescent girls in conflict situations are 90% more likely to be out of school³⁹ – and are likely never to resume their education.⁴⁰ Around 60% of preventable maternal mortality occurs in humanitarian contexts – over 500 women and adolescent girls die daily from pregnancy and childbirth complications.⁴¹ The Global Protection Cluster has found that the risk of gender-based violence is the highest concern in all of its operations.⁴² Girls accounted for 97% of the victims in reported cases of sexual violence against children in conflict situations between 2016 and 2020.⁴³

Despite UNSC members pledging to make women, peace and security 'a top priority',⁴⁴ women are frequently excluded from formal peace negotiations, peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes, as well as from post-conflict reconstruction. Their vital insights and leadership are absent, which hobbles the sustainability of peace and

reduces the attention paid to women’s needs.⁴⁵ Women, men, girls and boys, transgender and non-binary people living in poverty face multiple interconnected shocks and stresses – yet they have different vulnerabilities, meaning that they are exposed differently to risks and uncertainties and are affected differently by them.⁴⁶ Their voices must be heard at all levels of decision-making.



CASE STUDY:
HOW DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN THE P5 HAVE LED TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL’S FAILURES IN SYRIA

The conflict in Syria has resulted in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with over 600,000 people killed and more than 12 million Syrians displaced both internally and externally since it began in 2011.⁴⁷

The conflict has pushed two-thirds of Syrians (15.3 million people) to need humanitarian assistance in 2024.⁴⁸ Nearly 13 million Syrians faced acute food insecurity in 2023.⁴⁹ Despite this, the UNSC has often been deadlocked and unable to prevent and respond to the growing crisis.

Engagement by the UNSC has been marred by divisions among the P5 members, including two members of the P5 (the USA and Russia) with active military operations in Syria.

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My boys have endured so much: the absence of their father, harsh winters, hunger, and dark nights where they study by candlelight.’ Hiam, 50, helps her sons with their studies in Aleppo, Syria. Credit: Islam Mardini/Oxfam (2023).

The P5 have largely failed to adopt a unified approach to Syria. The USA, UK and France have generally supported stronger actions against the Syrian government while Russia and China have tended to insist that state sovereignty should be respected. In all, P5 members vetoed 15 resolutions on Syria between 2014 and 2023. Russia and China vetoed seven of these draft resolutions in tandem, while the rest were vetoed by Russia alone (figures 5 and 6; Section 3.3). All these resolutions were perceived threats to Syrian sovereignty and highlight the deadlock between the P5 members: they are unable to come to an agreement, despite the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people.⁵⁰

That is not to say that the P5 have not succeeded in making progress at times. Examples such as the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism investigating the reported use of chemical weapons⁵¹ and several resolutions on humanitarian aid delivery, stand in stark contrast to the usual stalemate.

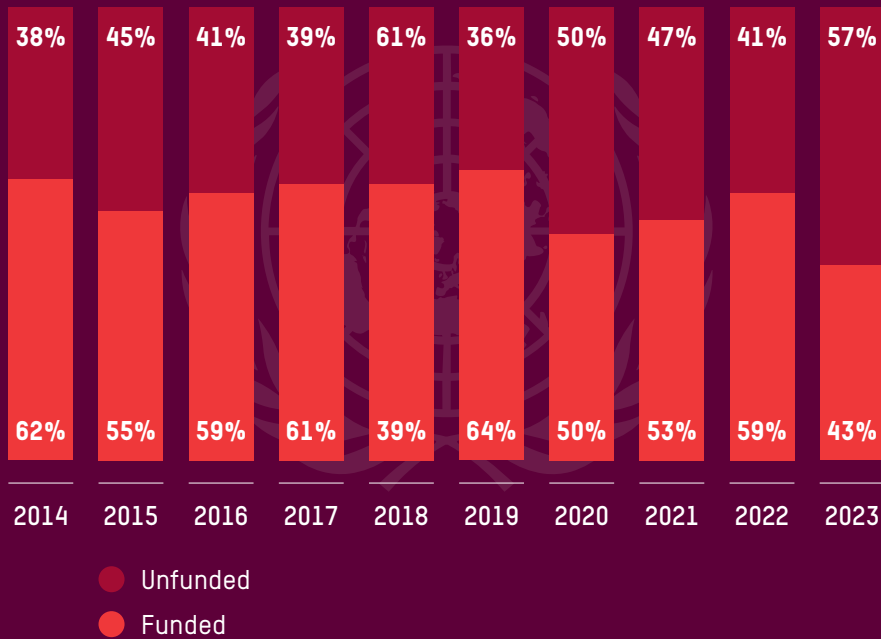
Since 2011, the conflict has led to increased risk of gender-based violence: many women and girls face violence both within their homes and in refugee camps.⁵² Child marriage has spiked as a coping mechanism against financial hardship, increasing the risks of sexual violence.⁵³ However, despite the evident gendered impact of the conflict, the Security Council has taken a gender-blind approach to peace negotiations.⁵⁴ Syrian women's organizations have played an important role in monitoring the human rights situation, providing humanitarian assistance and undertaking efforts to resolve the conflict.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, formal peace processes have consistently excluded women.⁵⁶

Populations should have unhindered access to basic services and humanitarian relief, but that will not solve the root causes of the conflict in Syria. That requires justice and peace. That is what the world urgently needs the UNSC to act on.

2.2 LONGER WARS, LESS AID

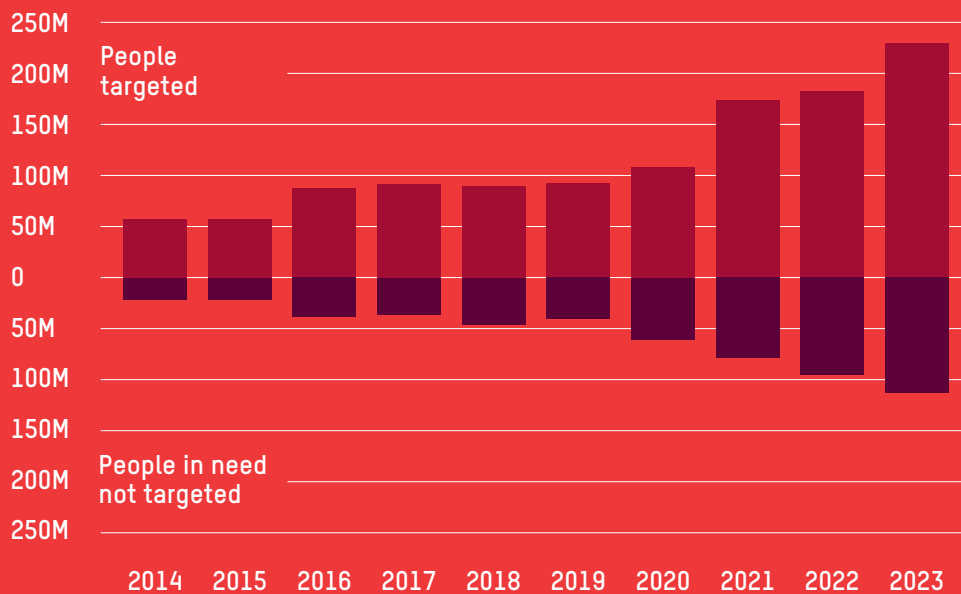
The humanitarian system is desperately underfunded. In 2023, only 43% of the US\$56.1bn required was provided.⁵⁷ The UN-coordinated humanitarian plan for that year targeted 230 million people, excluding more than 100 million people who were in need of assistance.⁵⁸ This represented the highest recorded number of people targeted for assistance, and the highest recorded percentage of needs unmet in the last decade.⁵⁹

FIGURE 3: HUMANITARIAN FUNDING (%) IS AT ITS LOWEST LEVEL IN TEN YEARS
HISTORICAL COVERAGE OF UN APPEALS (2016–23)



Source: UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS). (n.d.). *Historical Coverage of Coordinated Plans: Humanitarian aid contributions 2023*.⁶⁰

FIGURE 4: HUMANITARIAN NEED AND THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE NOT TARGETED FOR ASSISTANCE ARE GROWING AT AN ALARMING RATE
PEOPLE NEEDING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN COUNTRIES WITH UN APPEALS (2014–23)



Source: *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*. Humanitarian Action.⁶¹

As figures 3 and 4 starkly show, needs keep rising. Sadly, this is because conflicts are not ending. While the Security Council is unwilling to end conflicts due to political contradictions, the needs of the civilians affected and displaced are growing.

The fundamental flaw in the global humanitarian finance system is its voluntary character.⁶² UN bodies and other humanitarian actors can appeal to donors for the funding required, but there is no way to guarantee any level of finance. It is up to the donors which countries and sectors they will support. This contrasts sharply with the financing of the regular UN budget, peacekeeping operations, and international tribunals, which are covered by mandatory assessments of member states.⁶³

The shortfall in humanitarian funding over the past decade (2014–2023) totalled US\$145bn,⁶⁴ yet even a whole decade's gap is far from insurmountable. By way of illustration, the revenues of the top 100 arms-producing and military services companies for 2022 were US\$597bn – more than four times the whole decade of humanitarian aid shortfalls.⁶⁵ A gross receipts tax of just 3.6% on sales from those companies would have generated US\$21.5bn in 2022, more than enough to cover that year's whole humanitarian funding shortfall of US\$21.2bn.⁶⁶

'...the revenues of the top 100 arms-producing and military services companies for 2022 were US\$597bn – more than four times the whole decade of humanitarian aid shortfalls.'

CASE STUDY: HOW UNDER-RESOURCING AND LACK OF COOPERATION HAS LED TO UN SECURITY COUNCIL FAILINGS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



The UNSC has had peacekeepers deployed in the DRC since 2000.⁶⁷ The current iteration of the peacekeeping mission is the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).⁶⁸

Since its inception, MONUSCO's ability to respond has been hindered by chronic underfunding and lack of resources.⁶⁹ With only 16,316 military personnel⁷⁰ covering a vast area of DRC and the constraints of older and insufficient equipment, MONUSCO has had inadequate means and capacities to fulfill its mandate.⁷¹ This has led to disillusionment in the host country and decreased cooperation with MONUSCO.⁷²

Another major challenge for MONUSCO is the lack of coordination and cooperation with regional actors, particularly the African Union Regional Economic Communities (RECs). In recent years, several regional forces have also been deployed in eastern DRC alongside MONUSCO.⁷³ The East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), led by the East African Community (EAC), was stationed in eastern DRC for a year but has now withdrawn.⁷⁴ Even before EACRF's withdrawal, the Congolese government sought support from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which on 8 May 2023, decided to deploy the Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) in eastern DRC. Both the EAC and SADC have sought UN logistical and operational support for their forces in the DRC but little possibility of sufficient funding for any of these peacekeeping missions has materialized.



'We fled the Mbote war, they threatened us and killed people with arrows but the biggest reason was the sexual violence that the women were suffering. The last time they came, they burned our village and everyone fled. We have not received any food assistance from the NGOs for nine months now.' Lubumba, 41, living in the Kikumbe site in the DRC. Credit: Arlette Bashizi/Oxfam (2021).

It is worth noting that with the various competing peacekeeping processes in the DRC, the African Union Peace and Security (PSC) has indicated that more would be achieved if peacekeeping efforts were streamlined and coordinated.⁷⁵ The PSC call also speaks to the need for continental leadership in these processes.⁷⁶ However, the AU's role remains less than clear which represents a significant missed opportunity for the AU to fulfil its peace and security mandate inside the continent.

3. THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL: HIJACKING GLOBAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Conflict not only drives inequality; inequality lies at the heart of the failure to resolve conflicts. The establishment of the P5 cemented inequality in the global peace and security architecture, allowing five states to block the will of the rest of the world on conflict resolution.

3.1 THE BROKEN PROMISE

Following two world wars and emerging into an atomic age in which war has the potential of ending all life on Earth, the member states of the UN conferred a profound duty on the Security Council:

'... to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.'

– Article 24 (1) of the UN Charter⁷⁷

The UNSC bears primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Unlike the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the Security Council also has the ability to bind all UN member states through its decisions.⁷⁸

However, over the past decade, while humanitarian needs have grown ever higher, the UNSC has been marred by inaction.

FIGURE 5: HUMANITARIAN CRISES ARE RECEIVING VERY DIFFERENT LEVELS OF POLITICAL ATTENTION

NUMBER OF UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS (PASSED, NOT VETOED) FOR PROTRACTED CRISES (2014–23)



Source: UN Security Council Resolutions.⁷⁹

As shown in **Figure 5**, over the last decade, nearly 50% of protracted crises have had fewer than five resolutions passed.⁸⁰ Of all resolutions that have passed, over 95% relate to just half of the protracted crises, leaving the other half mostly neglected. While a greater number of resolutions may not necessarily positively influence efforts to achieve peace, it does reflect the scale of political will and attention.

Given the extent of crises across the world, this lack of action is staggering. In practice, there are many levers at the disposal of UNSC members to block action: these include controlling funding allocations, such as withdrawing, or threatening to withdraw, funding to UN agencies;⁸¹ or withholding budget contributions to the UN in general.⁸² However, the two most direct powers used by the P5 are ‘penholding’ and the veto.

3.2 THE POWER OF THE PEN

The informal, yet very influential, process of ‘penholding’ involves one or more members of the UNSC leading activities on an issue or a crisis, such as drafting and managing negotiations on the outcome, or preventing related discussion.

France, the UK and the USA have held the pen on two-thirds of protracted crises over the last decade,⁸³ and for 73% of the UNSC agenda since 2003. This gives these three member states vast power on how resolutions are negotiated or tabled.

These three permanent members have used penholding to keep conflicts involving their allies off the UNSC agenda, and to further their geopolitical and neocolonial interests. For example, the UK holds the pen on the Yemen file, where it has interests due to historical colonial links and the strategic desire to maintain maritime routes.⁸⁴ In 2023, the government of Mali objected to French penholding, stating that France was responsible for ‘acts of aggression, violation of our airspace, subversion, and destabilization’.⁸⁵

In theory, the 10 non-permanent UNSC members elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly (known as ‘the E10’) could play a more prominent role in agenda-setting in the UNSC as penholders. Resolutions can be introduced by any member – elected or not. However, this has seldom occurred in practice. To introduce a resolution, the government introducing it must ensure that the majority of the Council will vote in favour, and that there will be no veto from any of the P5. It also requires considerable resourcing of qualified staff to draft and negotiate resolutions, something only wealthy governments can afford to invest in, and which permanent membership makes feasible.⁸⁶ This, of course, solidifies the power of P5 penholders, who may be in a better position to ensure resolutions are passed by negotiating for many years on any given crisis. It also means that many resolutions are not even put forward for fear they will be vetoed.

If the UN Security Council Secretariat Branch was better funded, it could fulfil the role of drafting resolutions on behalf of all members, making the process more equal.

3.3 THE POWER OF THE VETO

The UN Charter⁸⁷ allows any of the P5 to veto any action by the UNSC. While this veto was sold as a promoter of stability, ensuring checks against illegal military interventions, it is effectively used to prevent accountability for the permanent members and their allies, entrenching the unequal power balance in the UN and conflict contexts. Russia and the USA cast 75% of the 88 UNSC vetoes since 1989. (France and the UK have not issued vetoes since 1989, and 16 of China’s 18 vetoes were in collaboration with Russia.)⁸⁸

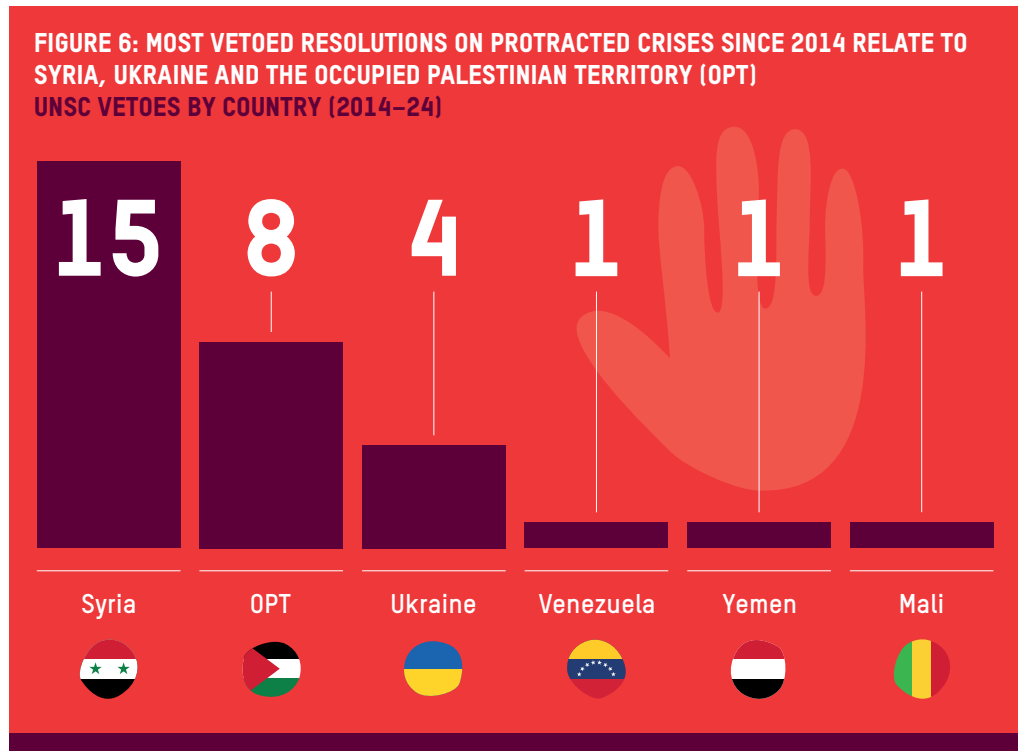
The veto has stymied action on many issues since the council’s inception, leading to a peace and security architecture defined by entrenched inaction. Between 2014 and 2024, 30 UNSC resolutions on protracted crises were vetoed by one or more of the P5.⁸⁹

Beyond the formal use of the veto to protect their own interests, the veto power is so significant that draft resolutions end up not even being formally put forward because of the *threat* of one.⁹⁰ As a result, many initiatives aiming at limiting its use have been developed over the years, and it is among the topics most frequently raised in the context of discussions of Security Council working methods.⁶³

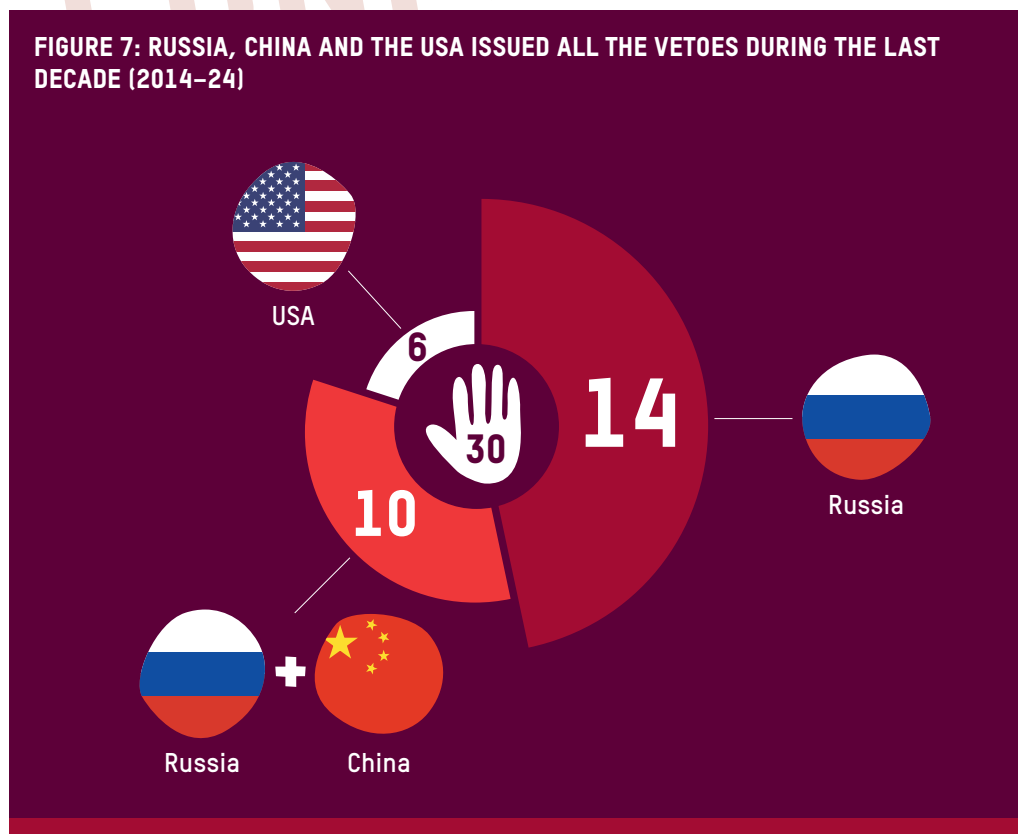
Over 90% of the vetoed resolutions on protracted crises since 2014 relate to just three contexts: Syria, Ukraine and OPT. For example, in July 2023, Russia’s refusal to allow a nine-month extension of cross-border assistance to northern Syria left 4.1 million people with little or no access to food, water and medicine.⁹¹ Proposals for a ceasefire in Gaza have been repeatedly vetoed by the USA,⁹² as have proposals for UN membership for Palestine (despite a General Assembly vote of 138 in favour to 9 against).⁹³

These vetoes have helped trap the people of Palestine and Syria in ongoing conflicts and have driven humanitarian needs ever higher. Both Syria and OPT have required extraordinary levels of humanitarian aid: since 2016, Syria has received over US\$22bn in

humanitarian aid.⁹⁴ OPT has been receiving humanitarian aid almost constantly for over 60 years, so it is difficult to quantify the total, but an estimated US\$40bn has been spent since the Oslo Accords in the mid-1990s.⁹⁵



Source: For details on UNSC vetoes, see UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. (n.d.). *UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables: Veto List*.⁹⁶



Source: UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. (n.d.). *UN Security Council Meetings and Outcomes Tables: Veto List*.⁹⁷

The UN Charter clearly calls upon member states that are a party to a dispute to refrain from voting on that matter in the UNSC.⁹⁸ This prohibition appears in the same provision that confers veto power on the P5. Nevertheless, P5 states have used their veto to shield themselves from UNSC action – of course, no other member states enjoy this power to serve as a *de facto* judge in their own case. For example, since 2014, Russia has repeatedly vetoed efforts to address its invasion of Ukraine, illegal annexation of Crimea, proxy military activity in eastern Ukraine, and efforts to promote separatism in Georgia.⁹⁹ In the 1980s, the USA vetoed efforts to address its military interventions in Nicaragua, Grenada and Panama.¹⁰⁰



**CASE STUDY:
RUSSIA HAS BLOCKED UN SECURITY COUNCIL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS ITS VIOLATIONS OF THE UN CHARTER IN UKRAINE**

The Ukraine crisis escalated dramatically in February 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale invasion. This was a remarkable violation of Article 2 of the UN charter by a P5 member; the article states:

‘All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...’¹⁰¹

This has resulted in widespread destruction, a humanitarian disaster and economic turmoil. In February 2024, the UN estimated that 14.6 million people needed humanitarian assistance, including 1.6 million internally displaced people. Five million have fled to neighbouring countries as refugees. At least 10,000 civilians have been killed since 2022. Even those who have been able to stay in their communities remain extremely



Petr Zarovnyi, 53, at the Church of St Feodosia in Yatsevo, Ukraine. Petr, a church nightwatcher, described how the church was attacked and occupied by Russian soldiers in February 2022: ‘There were tanks driving across [the] cemetery.’ Credit: Kieran Doherty/Oxfam (2023).

vulnerable to violence, which has destroyed homes, schools and hospitals.¹⁰² Women and other marginalized groups – including Roma people, LGBTQIA+ people, the elderly and people living with disabilities – face some of the greatest hardships.

The USA, the UK and France have supported draft resolutions and international sanctions against Russia. China's position has been more ambivalent, often abstaining from votes and calling for dialogue and diplomacy. Russia however has maintained its veto despite Article 27(3) of the UN Charter stating that 'a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting'.¹⁰³

Russia's repeated vetoes of UNSC resolutions on its invasion of Ukraine have rendered the Council all but irrelevant to peace-making. Clearly, the vetoes are not in keeping with the UN Charter, and Russia has violated numerous principles by undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and right to self-determination. Because of its use of the veto, Russia has enjoyed virtual impunity in the UNSC to engage in potential war crimes, including targeting civilian infrastructure, particularly energy infrastructure, and unlawfully deporting children.¹⁰⁴

The humanitarian response has been relatively well-funded – in 2023, donors provided 73% of humanitarian assistance requirements in Ukraine, compared against a global average of 43% funding for all crises (Section 2.2).¹⁰⁵ This reveals the practical consequences of major humanitarian donor countries reflecting their own national preferences in funding crises, and the ongoing consequences of dysfunction in the UNSC.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, a number of factors impede the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance locally. Geopolitics associated with the war, combined with the lack of a neutral, international structure to mediate negotiations, particularly with Russia, has a significant impact on the humanitarian assistance that is available to affected communities in Russia and in areas under Russian occupation. This, coupled with Russia's systematic denial of entry of humanitarian assistance into the areas it controls from Ukrainian-held territory, has essentially precluded any viable or sustainable provision of essential humanitarian assistance in Russian-held areas.¹⁰⁷ In fact, there is very little information or evidence on the humanitarian needs of these communities, but significant concerns have been raised about the humanitarian rights situation. Additionally, Ukrainian laws and policies on activities that take place in Russian occupied territories present significant barriers for humanitarian access, particularly for local actors navigating the humanitarian response in these areas.

The invasion of Ukraine stands as a stark example of the urgent need to reform the UNSC. The body has been mandated by all UN members to preserve peace and security, yet one of the P5 has directly violated the Charter and the rest of the UNSC has been powerless to stop it.¹⁰⁸

3.4 THE POWER OF THE FEW VERSUS THE WILL OF THE MAJORITY

Article 24(1) of the Charter states that members conferred the powers on the UNSC so that 'the Security Council acts on their behalf'.¹⁰⁹ In practice, accountability to the wider body of member states is entirely lacking, as UNSC members pursue their national interests. The UNGA, where every UN member state has an equal vote, has overwhelmingly passed resolutions on topics on which one or more P5 members have issued a veto in the UNSC, demonstrating the power inequality between the P5 and the other 188 UN member states.

BOX 3: MOVING UN REFORM FORWARD AT THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE

There have been numerous reform proposals over the past decades with the objective of making the UN Security Council more representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable, including the UN General Assembly Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on the Reform of the Security Council.¹¹⁰ While the reform of the Security Council is a priority for the Summit of the Future, the language on it is still missing in the drafts of Pact for the Future and depends on conclusions of IGN negotiations. However, all meaningful reforms of the UNSC require UN Charter review. Global leaders should use the Summit of the Future to make a call for a general conference to review the UN Charter, within Article 109, which could provide long-awaited Security Council revitalization.

For example, over the past decade, the UNGA has passed at least 77 resolutions supporting Palestinian self-determination and human rights, and approved at least 18 resolutions since 2016 calling for an end to Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Since 2011, the UNGA has approved at least 18 resolutions condemning the Syrian government's attacks on its own citizens.¹¹¹ Some of these resolutions attracted majorities in excess of 70% of member states, but unlike key UNSC resolutions, those at UNGA are not legally binding. These votes make it clear the UNSC has failed in its mandate to act on behalf of states, and risks delegitimizing the core mandate of the UN to act collectively 'to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace' as Article 1 of the Charter demands.¹¹²

CASE STUDY:

ONE P5 MEMBER HAS MORE POWER THAN THE MAJORITY OF UN MEMBER STATES – THE UNSC'S FAILURES IN SECURING PEACE IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

The UNSC has over 50 years of involvement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, yet it serves as an horrific example of how a failure to bring peace has driven decades of humanitarian crisis and skyrocketing costs: when the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began in 1950 there were 750,000 Palestine refugees.¹¹³ In 2024, that number is 5.9 million.¹¹⁴

Achieving consensus has been repeatedly hindered by geopolitical interests, particularly those of the USA, which has frequently used its veto power to block resolutions perceived as unfavourable to Israel. Other P5 members have varied in their positions, albeit with Russia, China, the UK and France generally supporting a two-state solution and opposing Israeli settlement expansions. The divisions among the P5 have led to stalled progress in implementing resolutions that have been successfully adopted and made it difficult to achieve effective and lasting solutions to the conflict.

Moreover, the UNSC's approach to peace negotiations has been heavily criticized by human rights organizations, scholars and member states for being insufficient in addressing power dynamics and structural injustices.¹¹⁵ This is especially true among





Duaa Abu Sabha cooks in her tent in the Al-Mawasi area in Khan Yunis Governorate in the Occupied Palestinian Territory while her husband plays with their children. Credit: Alef Multimedia/Oxfam (2024).

the wider UNGA membership, whose voting patterns and statements show clear dissatisfaction with the UNSC's late responses¹¹⁶ and vetoes.

The political deadlock in the UNSC to fulfil its mandate to bring peace is costing thousands of lives and billions of dollars in aid. Over two million people (96% of the population of the Gaza Strip) now face acute food insecurity. While the whole territory is classified in the 'Emergency' category (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Phase 4, or IPC Phase 4), over 495,000 people (22%) are facing catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 5). The situation is most severe in northern Gaza, where about 300,000 people are trapped at the time of writing.¹¹⁷ Humanitarian aid cannot solve this crisis, only justice and peace can. That is the responsibility of the members of the Security Council.

Momentum is growing to work around institutions whose effectiveness has been undermined by the P5 in order to advance a more consistent application of international law. For example, South Africa has sought to shift the debate on accountability and impunity¹¹⁸ through a landmark case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.¹¹⁹ By bringing this case against Israel, South Africa has emphasized the need for international legal mechanisms to be used by all states to address and prevent atrocities, *de facto* challenging the status quo of impunity enjoyed by powerful states, especially in light of continued inaction by the UNSC. This move has not only highlighted the plight of Palestinians but also underscored the role of the Global South in holding Global North nations accountable for their inaction under international law.

The UNSC must take the opportunity of the Summit of the Future to make transformative institutional change. For it to fulfil its mandate to maintain global peace and security, it is time for it to leave behind the power struggles of another era and stop keeping millions of people locked in a struggle to survive.

4. THE P5: PROMOTING PEACE OR FUELLING CONFLICT?

There is a contradiction at the heart of the UN peace and security architecture. While the P5 governments bear a special responsibility within the UN system for ensuring global peace and security, the available evidence suggests that they are providing more resources in the form of military aid than they are in humanitarian assistance. Security assistance can support self-defence measures that are in keeping with the UN Charter,¹²⁰ but in too many instances it helps to fuel and perpetuate the conflicts that the UNSC is failing to prevent and resolve. This can be seen, for example, in P5 security competition in West Africa, which has become less peaceful and stable in recent years.¹²¹

Complete and reliable data on military aid is hard to come by, but there is good information on US security assistance. This shows that in 2019, the USA provided three times as much security assistance as humanitarian aid: US\$18.8bn versus US\$6bn.¹²² China pledged US\$20 million a year in military aid grants to Africa over 2015–17,¹²³ whereas its worldwide humanitarian assistance in 2016 totalled less than US\$21 million.¹²⁴

As a result, the taxpayers of the P5 states are in many instances underwriting the violence that undermines the UN peace and security system through this aid. Meanwhile, millions of people in countries experiencing protracted crises are not receiving the humanitarian aid that they need, and violence persists.

There is much more comprehensive data available on the P5's dominant role in the world's legal trade in armaments (which includes some security assistance). This commerce likewise can contribute to violence and conflict.¹²⁵ Oxfam noted over 15 years ago that 95% of the most used arms in African conflicts are supplied from outside the continent, including from P5 countries.¹²⁶ The P5 have sold heavy weaponry to 22 of the 23 countries in protracted crisis in the past ten years, the only exception being Haiti.¹²⁷

The combined arms exports of P5 members – including both military assistance and commercial sales – accounted for 73.5% of global arms transfers between 2019 and 2023; for 2021 (the most recent year that data is available), that amounts to US\$93.35bn out of a total of US\$127bn in arms sales.¹²⁸ During this period, the USA ranked first, with 42% of the total global sales.¹²⁹ China was the largest exporter to sub-Saharan Africa. The top exporters to the Middle East were the USA (with 52% of the Middle Eastern market) and France (with 12%). Weapons sold to that region have found their way into conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and Yemen.¹³⁰ The P5 countries are also home to 23 of the top 25 arms-producing and military services companies by revenue. The top five are all headquartered in the USA.¹³¹

Not only have the P5 governments repeatedly failed to act to avert conflict, many have profited from wars by directly selling weapons to warring parties despite violations of international humanitarian law and the human suffering resulting from these wars. For example, the USA, France and the UK have continued to sell arms to Israel despite the ICJ ruling that there is a risk of violation of the rights of Palestinians in Gaza under the Genocide Convention.¹³²

There is a serious lack of coherence in P5 states' policies. Incoherent policies work at cross-purposes rather than in mutually reinforcing ways.¹³³ The P5's provision of military aid and promotion of weapons sales frequently does not align with the P5's efforts to fulfil their responsibility for maintaining global peace and security.

BOX 4: THE ARMS TRADE TREATY

Powerful states do have the option *not* to profit from the suffering linked to conflict. The 2014 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)¹³⁴ has set an international norm to prevent arms transfers being used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, or other international crimes. By setting such norms, and attempting to put people before profit, the ATT aims to ensure that arms transfers are conducted responsibly and ethically; enhance global security and stability; promote accountability and transparency; and support broader human security goals such as poverty reduction and improved healthcare.

The USA has signed but not ratified the ATT; Russia has done neither. These states should ratify and adhere to the treaty immediately. Those already Party to the treaty¹³⁵ – China, France and the UK – must implement it robustly to protect civilians in conflict. In the UN Charter, the Security Council has a duty for the 'maintenance of international peace and security', so no UNSC member should transfer arms in breach of that duty.

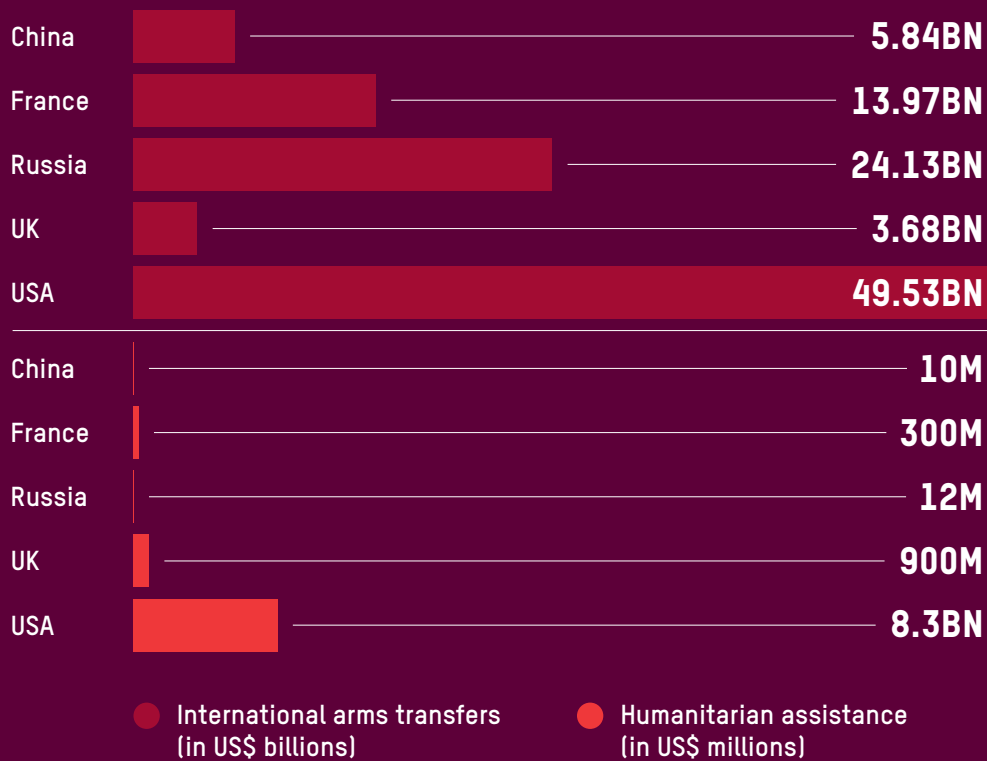
4.1 LIMITED HUMANITARIAN FUNDING FROM PERMANENT MEMBERS

Meanwhile, the P5 governments' contributions to meet soaring humanitarian needs resulting from conflicts they have failed to resolve put their priorities into stark perspective (Figure 8). In 2019–23, the USA consistently provided the largest share of aid of any donor (though it has never met the 1970 UN target of providing 0.7% gross national income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA)).¹³⁶ The rest of the P5 have lagged far behind.

While selling over US\$90bn worth of arms in 2021, in total the P5 only provided approximately US\$14bn in humanitarian aid.¹³⁷ The UK has reduced its aid contributions as the government pulled back from its commitment to the 0.7% GNI target.¹³⁸ France does not even rank in the top 10 donors and has never met its 0.7% commitment; Russia and China have provided such small contributions as to be barely measurable.

FIGURE 8: P5 ARMS EXPORTS STAND IN STARK CONTRAST TO THEIR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

THE P5'S ARMS TRADE SALES COMPARED TO THE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE THEY PROVIDED IN 2021



Source: For arms transfers, SIPRI; for humanitarian assistance, UNOCHA FTS.¹³⁹

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

'... the issue was made crystal clear by the leaders of the Big Five: it was either the Charter with the veto or no Charter at all.'

– Francis O. Wilcox, US diplomat¹⁴⁰

For the past 80 years, the five permanent members of the UNSC have held the peace and security institutions of the UN captive through the 'hard power' of veto rights and the 'soft' power over how the agenda is set and how much money is given. This has perpetuated crises rather than safeguarded peace and stability. As a result, just over the past decade, the number of people in need across 23 protracted crises has nearly tripled.

There have been numerous reform proposals since the UN Charter was signed in 1945, including ongoing UN General Assembly Intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) on the Reform of the Security Council.¹⁴¹ These have included calls to:

- expand the number of UNSC members;
- create a more balanced membership that allocates more seats to underrepresented and unrepresented regions and countries;
- hold P5 members that issue vetoes to account in UNGA; and
- abolish the veto completely.¹⁴²

For the system to work for millions now and for future generations, a more just UN which lives up to the principles of equality and dignity for all, and is true to the UN Charter mission, must be reimagined.

Ahead of the UN Summit of the Future, Oxfam urges leaders of UN member states to take bold decisions to reimagine a global peace and security system that is fit for purpose. Our recommendations are:

1. Make the UN Security Council more equal and inclusive

- **Abolish the veto.** No government should hold the power to block progress towards peace and stability using the veto. As preliminary steps, the P5 must refrain from exercising vetoes on issues involving war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and other serious human rights violations. The rule against the P5 participating in vetoes on issues to which they are party (Article 27(3) of the UN Charter¹⁴³) must be adhered to.
- **Increase membership.** Current membership of the UNSC is not reflective of all regions and countries. For equity, membership should be expanded to improve representation of under-represented and unrepresented regions and countries.
- **Reform the tradition of ‘penholding’.** The capacity to draft resolutions on all country files should be increased and professionalized within the UN Security Council Secretariat Branch rather than staying with the diplomats of France, the UK and the USA. In the interim, ‘co-penholding’ between members of the UNSC should be encouraged and made the norm.
- **Evaluate the humanitarian impact of the veto.** Conduct, with support from either the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly, a review of the humanitarian impacts of the exercise of the veto by the UN Security Council, building on the present report and other relevant analyses, and drawing shared lessons and an agenda for reform.
- **Fulfil the potential of Summit of the Future.** We recognize that some of the above changes to stop the current unsustainable and deleterious humanitarian impacts of UNSC veto power, require a reform of the UN Charter, which the UNSC would need to sign-off.¹⁴⁴ Global leaders should use the Summit of the Future to make a call for a general conference to review the UN Charter, within Article 109.¹⁴⁵ This could provide long-awaited Security Council revitalization; more predictable financing; stronger enforcement mechanisms for UNSC resolutions; and eventually give civil society and global citizens more of a role in international decision-making.

2. Build a humanitarian funding system that leaves no one behind

- **Make humanitarian funding mandatory.** There should be mandatory assessments of the financial capacities of all UN members to fund humanitarian assistance. This should be done through a similar mechanism to that used to assess contributions and funds for peacekeeping. Much of these resources should be made available through simplified funding mechanisms to local civil society organizations, especially those led by women. In the meantime, the target of asking countries to spend 0.7% of their GNI on ODA should be enforced.



Leonie, aged 52, serves water to one of her grandchildren in the Cesacoba site, near Bangassou in the Central African Republic, on 3 March 2021. Credit: Adrienne Surprenant/Oxfam (2021).

3. Stop profiting from conflicts

- **Ratify and adhere to the Arm Trade Treaty.** Those governments that have already ratified should ensure full compliance.
- Do not transfer arms where there is an overriding risk that they will be used in the serious violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
- **Respect, and ensure respect, for IHL** and all UNSC resolutions aiming at protecting civilians. Continuous impunity for violations of IHL contributes to a global erosion of trust in UN institutions and the rules-based order.

For too long, the systems designed to contribute to peace and stability, and deliver assistance have failed people in protracted crises. We must do more for each other and for future generations experiencing conflict and humanitarian crises. A more feminist, decolonial and equal UNSC is possible: the simple reforms outlined in this report are crucial steps towards achieving it. The P5 must focus on ensuring that humanitarian action is efficient and principled, and alleviates the suffering of those affected by conflict. Ultimately, the P5 must stand for humanity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In the annual Global Humanitarian Needs Overviews, published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 23 countries have been listed for at least five consecutive years in the last decade, and can thus be considered to have experienced a protracted crisis (definition by Development Initiatives). UNOCHA. *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*. Accessed 22 August 2024. <https://humanitarianaction.info/>; and <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfres>.
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- 16 China did not have colonies in 1945.
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- 18 Summit of the Future. (2024). Accessed 22 August 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>
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- 20 The range of issues needing to be addressed is enormous, from changing the composition of the UNSC to be more representative, to increasing the scope for civil society participation. These may be the focus of later publications, however, this paper focuses on the core issues of the veto and penholding by the P5.
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- 25 In UNOCHA's Global Humanitarian Needs Overviews, 23 countries have been listed for at least five consecutive years in the last decade, and can thus be considered to have experienced a protracted crisis. See methodology note for definitions and calculations.
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