Complex emergencies

Conflict causes complex humanitarian emergencies

War breaks out, or perhaps there is conflict between government supporters and opposition supporters, rebels or insurgents. All of a sudden, everyday lives are disrupted. People have to worry about their safety and flee for their lives. Food and water become scarce. Diseases spread. Human rights are ignored. The scale of the emergency is so huge that United Nations agencies and humanitarian organisations, such as World Vision, must coordinate humanitarian assistance to stop the suffering. Normal life has been replaced by a complex emergency.

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What is a complex emergency?

A complex emergency is defined by the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee as:
“...a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression...”

This committee is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance.

Why do complex emergencies happen?

Each complex emergency has a different trigger or root cause behind the conflict. Some examples are: ethnic, religious, ideological or political differences; uprisings of a population against repression by an authoritarian government; or food and water shortages. Over time, situations can become more and more complex as conditions change.

What are the features of complex emergencies?

There are a number features which are common among complex emergencies. However not all complex emergencies have all these features.

• The situation is caused by people (man-made), although sometimes the original cause may be a natural disaster or event.
• Law and order has broken down and the government may no longer have authority over all of the country.
• The conflicting armed groups, of which there might be several, have significant ideological differences.
• The facts can be unclear with conflicting groups making allegations against each other.
• Lots of civilians are affected by the fighting, and many lose their lives either in the crossfire or by being intentionally targeted.
• Huge numbers of people are displaced from their homes.
• People’s human rights are violated.
• Societies, economies and infrastructure, such as roads, hospitals, schools, water systems, and economies, are damaged.
• Coordinated large-scale humanitarian assistance is needed.
• Humanitarian workers are in danger and may be targeted by armed groups.
• Lifesaving food and medical supplies are prevented from getting to those who need them.
• Political intervention is needed to get humanitarian assistance through.

Syria: Missiles and bombs hit Shaima’s village, forcing them to flee to Jordan where they now live in a refugee camp.
Alex Whittle / World Vision

Iraq: World Vision is supporting the medical and psychosocial needs of this family whose three children were injured in an explosion and their house was destroyed in the fighting.
Sacha Myers / World Vision
How does conflict make emergencies complex?

Prior to the 1990s, conflicts were generally international with official country military forces fighting against each other on a battlefield. The people affected were often military.

In recent times, there have been more civil conflicts involving various formal and informal armed groups. The groups fight for control of power and resources inside a country or across a border. These conflicts are more complex and longer lasting, and are centred on towns and cities rather than battlefields. There has also been an increase in the number of conflicts. Both changes have led to an increase in the number of non-military people (civilians) whose lives are impacted and who need humanitarian assistance – situations called complex emergencies.

How many people are affected by complex emergencies today?

It is difficult to know exactly how many people are affected because of the danger, complexity, rapidly changing situations and destruction of communications systems during complex emergencies. The United States Agency for International Development reports that conflict and government instability affected at least 50 countries and 1.5 billion people in 2016. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the end of 2016, 65.6 million people around the world had been forcibly displaced from their homes. As a result, they were internally displaced in their own countries, seeking asylum or living as refugees in another country.

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During 2017 complex emergencies were ongoing in:
- Afghanistan
- Central African Republic
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Ethiopia
- Iraq
- Libya
- Mali
- Myanmar
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Syria
- Ukraine
- Yemen

Where are complex emergencies happening today?

People want to return home. They want their children to go to school. They want to be productive citizens. They want to be self-reliant… That is why the South Sudanese are urging their leaders to silence the guns and give peace a chance.

– David Shearer of New Zealand, Special Representative for South Sudan and Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan.
How do complex emergencies affect people?

Complex emergencies often take place in towns, cities or agricultural areas. This means they have significant impacts on people’s everyday lives. Children, women, the elderly and people with disabilities are especially vulnerable. Complex emergencies may affect people’s lives in various ways.

**Injury and loss of life:**
Civilians make up between 50 per cent and 90 per cent of those who experience violence during complex emergencies. Many civilians are injured and killed when fighting takes place in towns and cities. In some situations civilians are specifically targeted by armed groups, while other armed groups may use civilians as human shields for protection. Landmines and unexploded ordnances – live weapons including grenades, bombs and missiles – continue to kill and injure people long after the fighting ceases. The trauma people go through causes them to experience grief, stress and even post-traumatic stress disorder, leading to long-term mental health effects.

**Damage and destruction:**
Large numbers of people are unable to meet their human needs for food, shelter and safety. Conflict can destroy homes, agricultural fields, shops, roads, schools, hospitals, sewerage and water systems. Farmers cannot plant crops in fields that are suspected to contain landmines. Without any way to grow or buy food, people face long-term hunger and malnutrition. People resort to drinking unsafe water, which puts them at risk of disease.

**Displacement from homes:**
As it becomes too unsafe to stay at home, families face the difficult decision to flee for safety. Travelling is dangerous and takes weeks or months, especially for families with very young or elderly members. People on the move are at risk of being exploited or trafficked. There is no guarantee that their destination will be safer. Diseases spread quickly where people live close together in bad conditions such as temporary camps.

**Recruitment by armed groups:**
Many civilians, including children, are recruited for armed groups. Some volunteer to join due to peer pressure; hoping to get regular meals and wages to assist their families; wanting to protect people they care about; or aiming to bring about political change. Others, particularly children, are kidnapped or forced to fight against their will. Child soldiers are extremely vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse.

**Loss of futures:**
Children miss out on education as teachers are killed or flee and families decide it is too unsafe for their children to attend school. Without a proper education, this generation will have fewer job opportunities and lower earning potential in the future. Destruction of property and businesses and loss of customers leads to significant financial losses for business owners. Without money to reinvest in their businesses, the owners face unemployment and poverty.

**Children separated from families:**
Some children see their parents killed, while others lose contact during the conflict or while escaping to a safer place. Children are especially vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation when they have to leave home in search of safety.

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Democratic Republic of Congo: Destroyed houses and burned fields make it difficult for families to return to their lives. Didier Nagifi/World Vision

Niger: Faba fled from the village in Nigeria that she had lived in for 60 years after it was attacked for the third time. World Vision

South Sudan: Child-friendly spaces provide education for children who cannot attend school. Abraham Nhial/World Vision

Democratic Republic of Congo: Former child soldiers learn vocational skills in a World Vision rehabilitation centre. Kayla Robertson for World Vision UK (Freelance)
In a complex emergency the United Nations, governments and humanitarian organisations need to coordinate to provide assistance and protect people from further loss of their basic human rights. Humanitarian organisations, including World Vision, sign up to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, which includes principles of impartiality and neutrality when providing humanitarian assistance.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs coordinates the various humanitarian organisations which provide assistance. Each organisation focuses on a different sector response, e.g. water or child protection. This avoids duplication, maximises efficiency and ensures there are no gaps in the overall humanitarian response.

If particular groups of people are being targeted in the conflict, they need protection and this may require international intervention. In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Responsibility to Protect which says: “The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means… to help protect populations…”

No two complex emergencies are the same, so World Vision first considers the impact on civilian populations to determine the response. Its response strategy focuses on assisting the most vulnerable, including children, to ensure their basic needs are met and human rights are protected. World Vision collaborates with the United Nations and other international and local humanitarian organisations. World Vision often focuses on the protection of children, their education and supporting their psychosocial needs, because of the organisation’s expertise in this area. In some emergencies World Vision provides assistance in water and sanitation, health, nutrition and food, shelter, or protection.

During 2017, more than 600,000 people fled to Bangladesh to escape the violence of a complex emergency in Myanmar. These people, most of whom identify as Rohingya ethnic group, joined 300,000 others who have sought refuge in Bangladesh in recent years.

As the crisis unfolded, World Vision Bangladesh quickly provided humanitarian assistance in informal camps in and around the Bangladesh city of Cox’s Bazar. In conjunction with the Government of Bangladesh and the United Nations World Food Programme, World Vision focused on providing life-saving assistance, including emergency food rations, cooking utensils and shelters, and addressing needs for water, sanitation and hygiene. World Vision also responded to the needs of mothers and children by providing baby products, addressing women’s needs, such as safe toilets and bathing spaces, and establishing child-friendly spaces where children get support for the trauma they experienced.
Syrian people displaced in their own country

The complex emergency in Syria began in 2011 and has had dramatic effects on people and their human rights. Since this time more than 400,000 people have been killed, many more injured, and 5.4 million people have fled to other countries. Of those people who remained in Syria, 45 per cent have been displaced from their homes and communities. By 2016, 85 per cent of Syrians were living in poverty, most as a result of the complex emergency.

Destruction of water systems resulted in 70 per cent of the Syrian population not having enough drinking water. Limited sanitation and rubbish disposal meant there was high risk of illnesses caused by dirty water, rats and insects.

One way World Vision has helped the people of Syria is through a partnership with the New Zealand Government. This partnership has provided access to safe drinking water, sanitary toilets and rubbish removal services for people living in camps and informal settlements in northern Syria.

Fleeing South Sudan for Uganda

More than four million South Sudanese people have fled their homes and six million don’t have enough food to eat due to a complex emergency in South Sudan.

The world’s youngest nation, South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011. In 2013, South Sudan’s government coalition collapsed with a rift growing between the President and Vice President who represented different political parties and ethnic groups. This erupted into a conflict along ethnic lines, which quickly splintered into various factions and armed groups, endangering the population.

One million South Sudanese people have fled for their lives into neighbouring Uganda, with 650 more crossing the border each day. It is estimated that 61 per cent are children. Gilbert Kamanga, World Vision Uganda Country Director, says: “Everyday World Vision is registering more than 100 separated and unaccompanied minors.”

In Uganda, World Vision partnered with United Nations agencies to assist people in Adjumani, Arua, Koboko, Moyo and Yumbe districts. New arrivals at the World Vision-managed reception for people arriving in Uganda received emergency food, as well as cooking sets, blankets, and monthly food packs or cash allowances. World Vision staff supported children who have become separated from their families, connected them with foster care and provided psychosocial support through child-friendly spaces. In addition, World Vision drilled boreholes and constructed sanitation facilities to prevent sickness spreading. Alongside this emergency response, World Vision planned for rehabilitation, resilience and self-reliance through a strategy of helping communities establish agriculture, learn vocational skills and access credit to establish small businesses.