

# Surviving in crisis: Unpacking the link between conflict, displacement and food security in Burkina Faso

A mixed-methods analysis

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## Introduction

Burkina Faso has witnessed a significant rise in violence, internal displacement and food insecurity in recent years. The number of conflict incidents rose seven-fold between 2018 and 2022, the number of food-insecure people nine-fold and the number of IDPs multiplied by 30. At the end of 2022, around 1.9 million people were living in internal displacement and 2.6 million were experiencing acute food insecurity, both of which are among the highest levels on record for the country.

This background paper investigates the relationship between internal displacement, conflict and food security in Burkina Faso. The selection of Burkina Faso as a case study is based on the availability of internal displacement and food security data spanning several years. Specifically, the analysis draws from disaggregated time-series data on food security assessments that cover a minimum of 75 per cent of the population from 2014 to 2022, and internal displacement data from 2016 to 2022. The country's rapidly deteriorating situation and persistent challenges of internal displacement and food insecurity in 2022 underscore the relevance of this research.

This study employs a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, to uncover the relationship between internal displacement, conflict and food security in Burkina Faso. Specifically, the analysis draws on national-level data from CONASUR (Government) and food security assessments from Cadre Harmonisé, which are both disaggregated at the regional and provincial levels. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are used to explore trends, which are complemented by qualitative data to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the data, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between internal displacement, conflict, and food security. The results of this analysis highlight how a range of policies and strategies can be developed and implemented, involving multiple stakeholders and across various sectors, to address the underlying causes and effects of these interlinked challenges in the context of Burkina Faso. By working collaboratively, policymakers and other stakeholders can leverage their resources and expertise to create more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to mitigate the impacts of conflict, internal displacement and food insecurity.

## A deteriorating situation

Burkina Faso has been experiencing a complex and volatile situation that has led to unprecedented levels of food insecurity and internal displacement. The situation has continued to deteriorate since 2018, with the number of conflict incidents increasing every year. In 2022, there were 739 conflict incidents resulting in at least one fatality, representing more than a 40 per cent increase from 2021. The rise in conflict incidents, alongside other factors, has been a major driver of the increase in food insecurity and displacement.

Over 2.6 million people in Burkina Faso were estimated to be food insecure at the end of 2022, more than doubling over the past three years. For the first time since the food security assessments from Cadre Harmonisé were introduced in the country in 2014, over 1,810 people were estimated to be facing catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 5) at the end of 2022. All of them lived in Soum province, in the Sahel region where the town of Djibo has been under siege since early 2022 (see box 1).

By August 2023, the number of acutely food-insecure people is projected to increase by 42 per cent, reaching over 3.4 million people, which would be one of the highest figures ever recorded. According to this projection, around

43,000 people will be in the highest phase of food insecurity (IPC Phase 5).<sup>1</sup> The most affected regions, both in the current and projected periods, are the Centre-Nord, Est, Sahel, Nord and Boucle du Mouhoun regions, altogether accounting for 75 per cent of acutely food-insecure people.

In addition to the rise in food insecurity, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) by conflict and violence has also increased. Burkina Faso has become one of the largest internal displacement crises in West Africa, alongside neighbouring Nigeria. The number of IDPs in Burkina Faso increased from 47,000 in 2018 to 1.9 million at the end of 2022, representing a more than thirty-fold increase in just four years. The situation is expected to continue to worsen in 2023 with tens of thousands of internal displacements being reported in the first few weeks of the year alone.

Throughout 2022, the already complex humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso has been exacerbated by deteriorating humanitarian access. The increased influence of armed groups across the country has severely restricted the movement of both civilians and humanitarian workers. Relief military convoys to blockaded localities are frequently assaulted by armed groups, and the accompanying instability has resulted in fewer convoys travelling to provide food and aid.

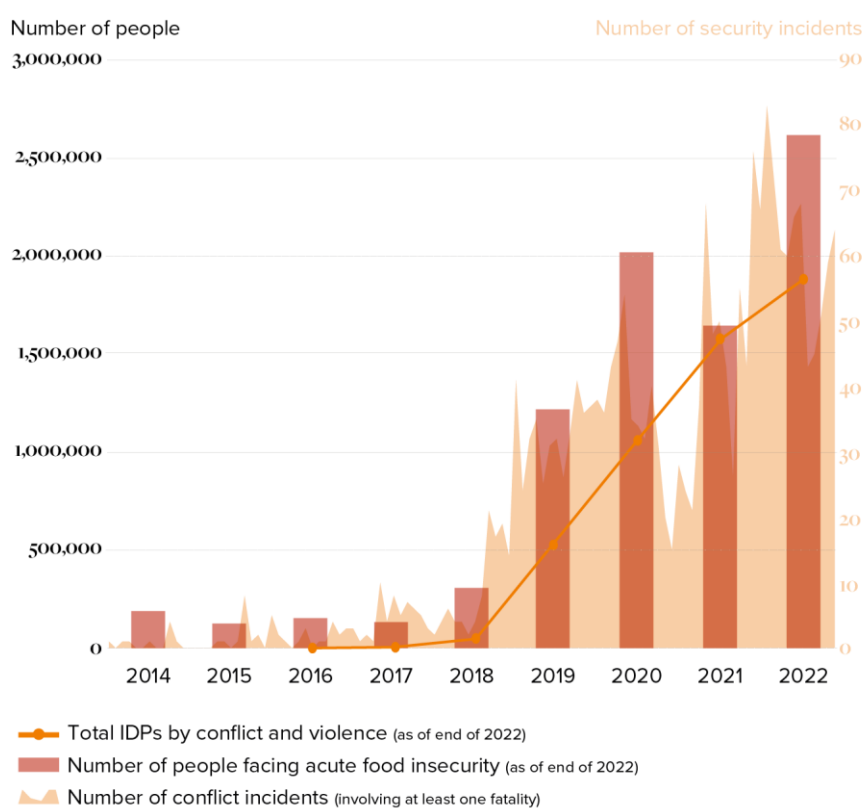


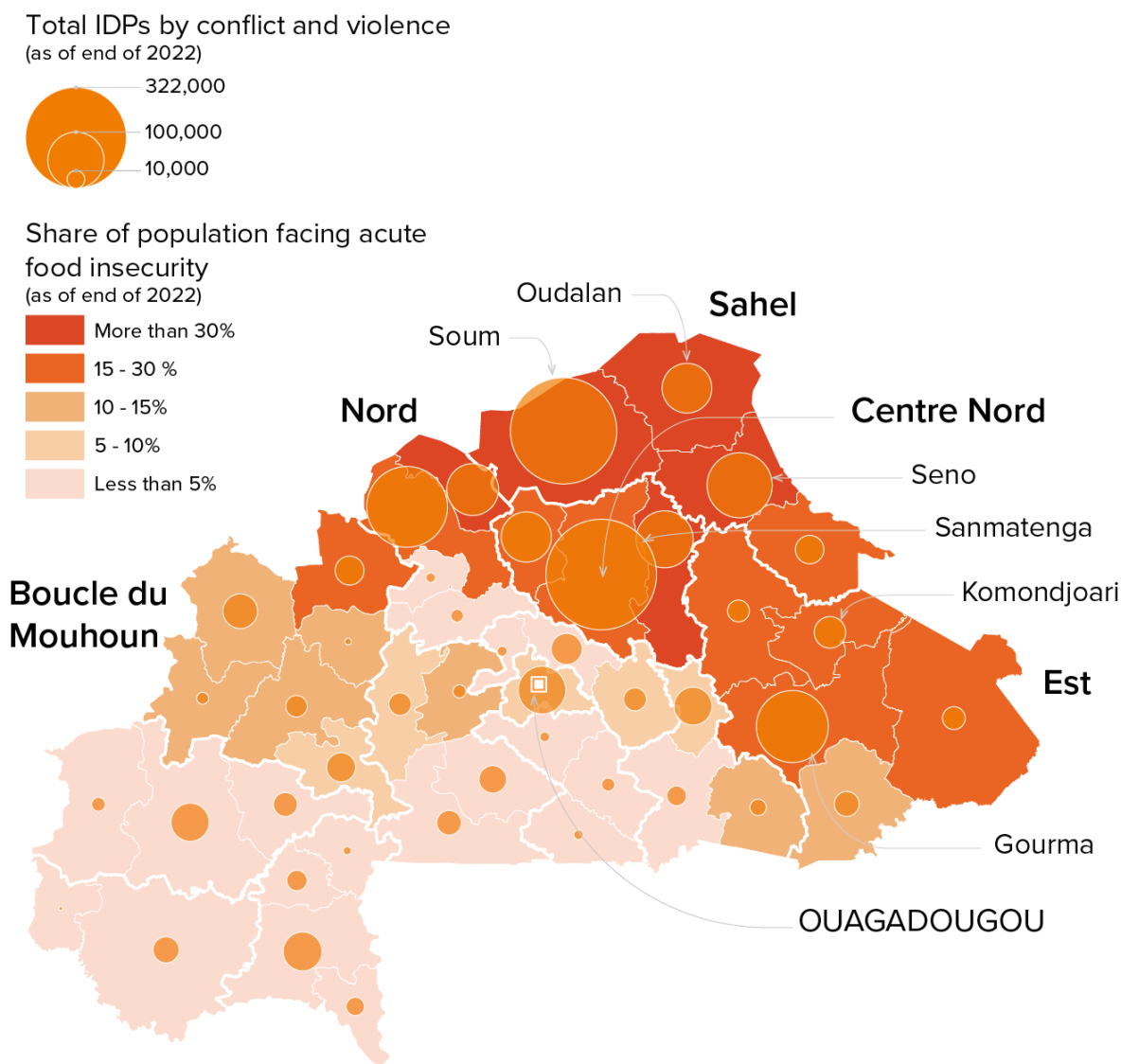
Figure 1: Evolution of conflict incidents, conflict IDPs and food insecure people in Burkina Faso, 2014-2022  
Sources: CONASUR, Cadre Harmonisé, ACLED.

## Overlapping internal displacement and food security at the sub-national level

Burkina Faso is one of the few countries where data on internal displacement and food insecurity as per IPC measurements is disaggregated at the sub-national level and by displacement status, making it possible to unveil the true scale of these overlapping crises and to unpack their temporal and spatial footprints. Overall, the regions in Burkina Faso with the highest prevalence of food insecurity coincide with those with the greatest number of internally displaced persons, and a significant correlation has been observed between conflict-induced displacement and food insecurity at the provincial level.

<sup>1</sup> Cadre Harmonisé, Résultats de l'analyse de l'insécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle aiguë courante en mars-mai 2023 et projetée en juin-août 2023, March 2023.

The regions of Centre-Nord and Sahel in Burkina Faso host the largest internally displaced populations and the highest levels of food insecurity. In 2022, these two regions alone accounted for more than half of the country's IDPs and over one-third of those facing crisis levels of food insecurity or worse, as defined by IPC Phase 3+. The province of Sanmatenga in the Centre-Nord region has been particularly affected, having the highest number of IDPs and acutely food-insecure people in the country. Similarly, the province of Soum in the Sahel region has the second-highest number of IDPs and is the only province facing catastrophe/famine, as defined by IPC Phase 5 levels of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

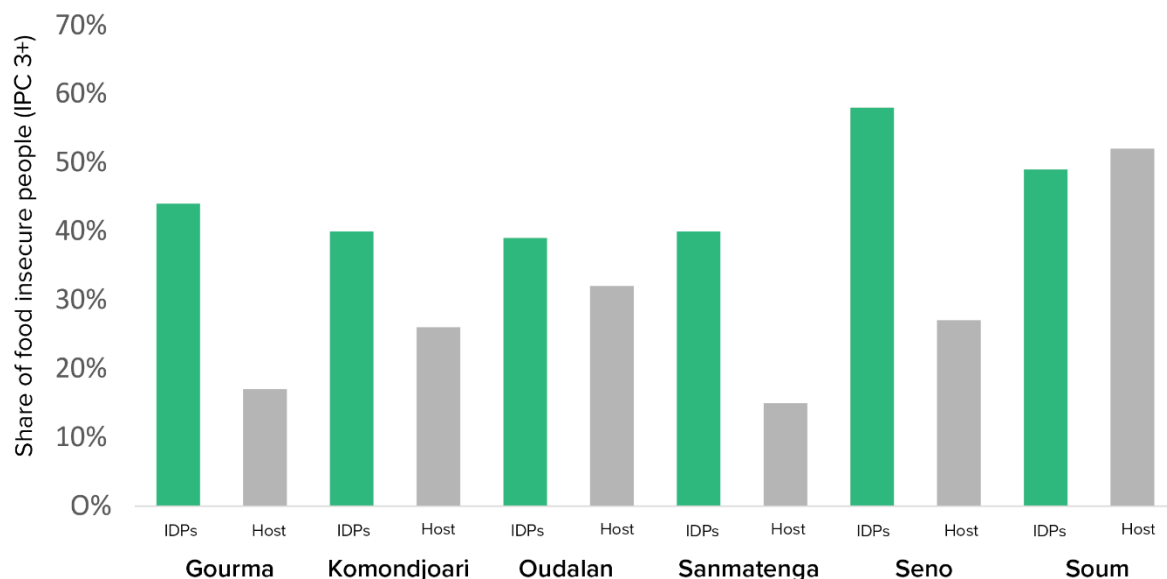


**Figure 2: Spatial footprint of conflict IDPs and food insecurity in Burkina Faso in 2022**  
Sources: CONASUR, Cadre Harmonisé.

In six out of the 12 provinces that make up the Centre-Nord, Sahel and Est regions (Gourma, Komondjoari, Oudalan, Sanmatenga, Seno and Soum), food security data was disaggregated by displacement status, revealing differing impacts on displaced and host communities. An average of 45 per cent of IDPs experienced acute food insecurity compared with 28 per cent of host community members.<sup>3</sup> The gap differed significantly between provinces, however, reflecting the distinct nature of each situation and highlighting the fact that such disaggregation is essential to better understand and address food insecurity.

<sup>2</sup> IPC-CH dataset, last accessed on 19 January 2023

<sup>3</sup> IDMC analysis based on the IPC-CH dataset.



**Figure 3:** Food insecurity among IDP and host communities in six provinces in Burkina Faso, 2022  
Source: Cadre Harmonisé.

IDPs in Sanmatenga, for example, were almost three times more likely to be acutely food insecure than host community members, pointing to their heightened vulnerability. Host communities with limited economic resources and IDPs in areas under blockade such as in northern Sanmatenga were obliged to reduce their number of meals or limit adults' consumption so that children could eat.<sup>4</sup> In Burkina Faso's northern province of Soum, where non-state armed groups are very active, levels of food insecurity were critical for both host and IDP communities, indicating generalized levels of need.<sup>5</sup> This was partly the result of a blockade of the provincial capital of Djibo in place since February 2022, which has severely interrupted supply lines, impeded humanitarian access and increased food insecurity for all inhabitants (see box 1). Djibo has received more than a quarter million IDPs since 2019, making up more than three-quarters of the city's population.<sup>6</sup>

***“There is nothing left to eat,” said one resident to NRC. “Whether you are internally displaced or a local, you go hungry.”***

<sup>4</sup> Few's Net, Emergency (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity persists in the far north despite harvests, October 2022.

<sup>5</sup> IPC-CH dataset, last accessed on 19 January 2023; ACAPS, Humanitarian overview of Djibo town surrounded by armed groups, 19 October 2022.

<sup>6</sup> ACAPS, Humanitarian overview of Djibo town surrounded by armed groups, 19 October 2022.

**Box 1. Djibo, Soum Province, Sahel region.**

With around 350,000 residents including 270,000 internally displaced, the city of Djibo accounts for over 40 per cent of the population currently under blockade countrywide. Since February 2022, non-state armed groups have encircled the city and planted explosives along the main access roads. The destruction of vital infrastructure including water points, bridges and phone installations throughout 2022 further isolated Djibo from the rest of the country.

The city used to be at the centre of trade routes between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and host a vibrant market. With the ongoing blockade, merchants stopped going in and out, and the drop in trade led to much fewer goods reaching local shops and markets. Djibo residents also used to heavily rely on their agricultural production, which made up for roughly half of their food consumption and covered on average 80% of their cereal needs. Prevailing insecurity in Djibo’s outskirts and frequent skirmishes between security forces and armed groups has deterred, if not prevented, most civilians from reaching their farmlands. Access constraints resulted in a dramatic fall in local agricultural production and a sharp increase in prices: the main two kinds of cereal (millet and sorghum) have tripled in price since the blockade was implemented.

Military and civilian aid convoys have regularly attempted to resupply the city but often come under attack. Between April and September 2022 alone, nine convoys on their way to or from the city were targeted. Humanitarian organizations solely rely on airlifting to transport lifesaving assistance, but cargo is limited and falls short of covering people’s most pressing needs.

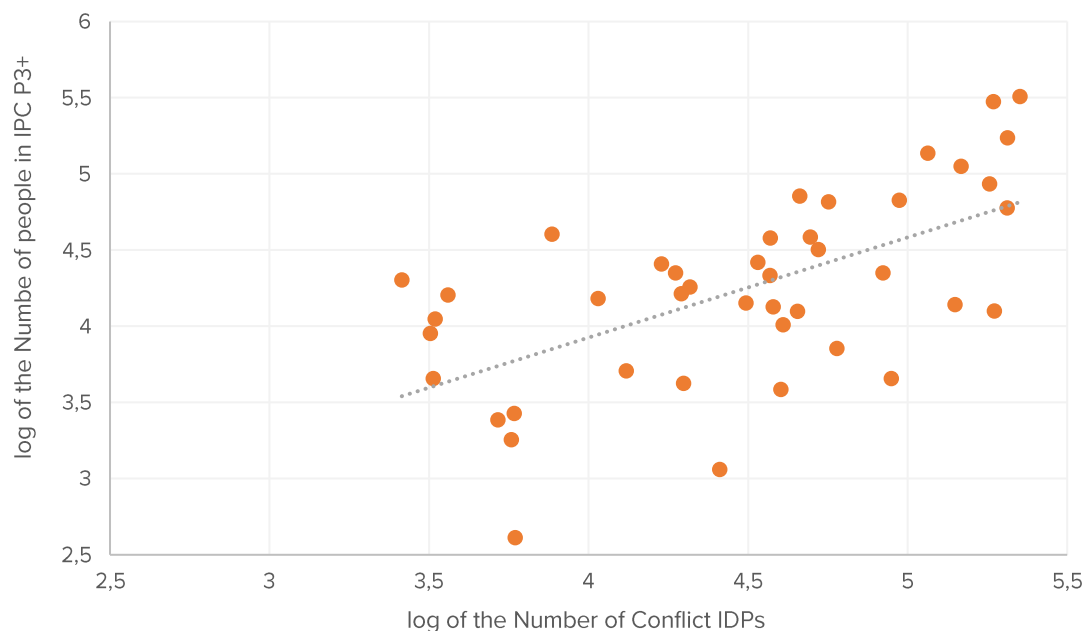
Food insecurity in Djibo is so dire that families’ primary staple now consists of wild leaves, which accounted for 35 to 85 per cent of their daily food intake according to a humanitarian assessment conducted by UN agencies and NGOs in October 2022. The second source of food comes from various forms of assistance, be it from humanitarian or state actors.



Early in the morning, these women and children in Djibo take their chances and scout around the outskirts of town in search of wild leaves and flowers. Back home, they boil them with salt, turning the meagre concoction into a meal, and sell the rest to make a few pennies. “Our children eat this and go to bed with nothing else in their stomachs,” explained one mother. “Days when we don’t find leaves, they only drink warm water. In the morning, they wake up and start crying... And we cry with them.” **Photo:** Jacques Bouda/NRC.

## A multitude of contributing factors

An increase in the price of staple food, along with the longer transportation times caused by growing insecurity and targeted attacks on water points, have contributed to the worsening conflict, internal displacement, and food security conditions in Burkina Faso. These factors have played a role in the complex relationship between conflict, internal displacement, and food security in the country.

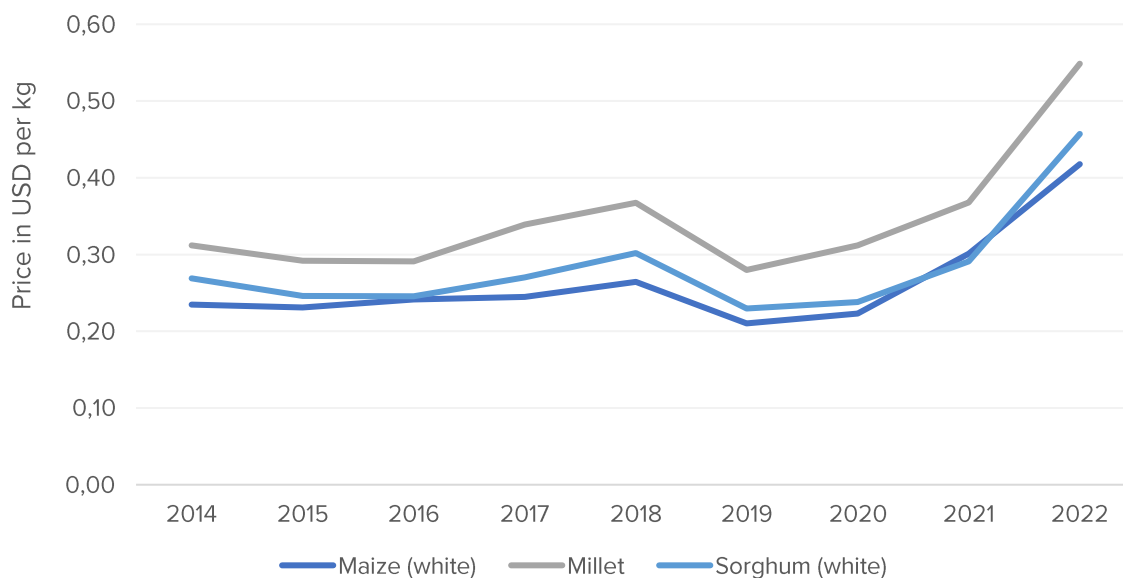


**Figure 4:** Correlation between conflict IDPs and food insecurity at the provincial level, in 2022  
Sources: Displacement data: IDMC, OCHA and CONASUR; Food insecurity data: Cadre Harmonisé.

Figure 4 illustrates a positive correlation between the number of individuals facing acute food insecurity and the number of internally displaced people by conflict in Burkina Faso at the provincial level. The data points are tightly clustered around the trend line, indicating a moderate positive correlation at admin 2. Moreover, the R-squared value of 0.51 suggests that approximately half of the variability in the number of individuals in IPC Phase 3+ can be explained by the number of IDPs, while the remaining 50 per cent of variation may be attributed to other factors.

One factor that has significantly contributed to the worsening conflict, internal displacement, and food security conditions in Burkina Faso is the increase in staple food prices. Since 2014, the price of maize, millet and sorghum in the country has increased by 75 per cent, compared to a 50 per cent increase between 2003 and 2013. The increase in staple food prices can be traced to several reasons, including depleted household stocks in the north, where production shortfalls disproportionately affect households. Additionally, the purchasing needs of IDPs and pressure from traders and private sector actors to replenish their stocks also played a role. Moreover, the lengthened supply times and increased transportation costs caused by insecurity have further aggravated the situation, causing prices to remain high even after the harvest season.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Fewes Net, Ongoing insecurity, decreased production, and atypical price increases are exacerbating food insecurity, February 2022.



**Figure 5:** Evolution of staple food prices in Burkina Faso (in USD per kg), 2014-2022  
Source: WFP



As merchants and traders stopped going in and out of Djibo since the start of the blockade, markets are deserted and local shops only carry some odd items such as cleaning products, tea and coffee, leaving most shelves empty. **Photo:** Jacques Bouda/NRC.

Another contributing factor to the conflict, displacement and food security nexus is the destruction of water facilities in Burkina Faso, particularly in Djibo, which has the highest number of displaced people in the country. In 2022, a total of 830,230 individuals were affected by the destruction of over fifty water facilities, with targeted attacks on water points including direct hits on water sources and water trucks, contamination of water resources, and sabotage of public water networks. As a result, access to water in Djibo significantly decreased to less than three

litres per day per person, compared to roughly twice that amount before the attacks, which was already at a critical level. These attacks have turned access to water into a weapon of war and have further contributed to the complex relationship between conflict, displacement and food security.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 6 provides a comprehensive overview of the interlinkages between food insecurity, conflict and displacement and various contributing factors.<sup>9</sup> It shows that the share of the food-insecure population is strongly and positively correlated with the number of IDPs, as well as moderately and positively correlated with staple food prices (maize, millet, and sorghum). Furthermore, the number of conflict incidents with at least one fatality is strongly and positively correlated with the share of the food-insecure population, as well as the number of IDPs, and moderately and positively correlated with staple food prices. Overall, the results highlight the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the complex interplay between food security, conflict and displacement dynamics.

	IPC Phase 3+	Conflict IDPs	Conflict incidents	Maize prices	Millet prices	Sorghum prices
IPC Phase 3+						
Conflict IDPs	0.95					
Conflict incidents	0.98	0.97				
Maize prices	0.62	0.70	0.68			
Millet prices	0.63	0.66	0.68	0.98		
Sorghum prices	0.56	0.61	0.61	0.97	0.99	

**Figure 6: Correlation coefficients table, 2016-2022**

Sources: Staple food prices: WFP; Displacement data: IDMC, OCHA and CONASUR; Number of conflict incidents with at least one fatality: ACLED

## Conclusion

This paper adopts a mixed-method approach to uncover the intricate connections between conflict, food security and internal displacement in Burkina Faso. The study highlights the impacts of broader socioeconomic and political conditions on food security and underscores the need for collaborative efforts to address the underlying causes and effects. The available disaggregated data provides a unique opportunity to unpack the temporal and spatial footprints of these overlapping challenges. The significant positive correlation between conflict-induced displacement and food insecurity at the local level underscores the urgency of coordinated and multi-sector approaches to mitigate the impacts of these crises. Given the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso, effective measures are required to overcome access constraints and ensure the delivery of larger volumes of food assistance to populations in blockaded areas. A robust and coordinated strategy is needed, even though ongoing negotiations to open humanitarian corridors have yet to yield results. It is essential to acknowledge the holistic nature of these issues and develop comprehensive and sustainable solutions involving multiple stakeholders across various sectors.

<sup>8</sup> Wash Cluster Burkina Faso, Note de Plaidoyer pour la UN 2023 Water Conference, 22 March 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Note: The closer the number to 1, the higher the correlation.