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Food Insecurity and Political Stability: Evidence from Multi-Country Studies

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity remains a critical global challenge with far-reaching socio-economic and political consequences. This study examines the relationship between food insecurity and political stability through a multi-country analytical lens. Drawing on cross-national datasets and existing empirical literature, the paper conceptualizes food insecurity as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing availability, access, utilization, and stability, while political stability is framed in terms of regime durability, public order, and legitimacy. The analysis identifies key mechanisms linking food insecurity to instability, including grievance mobilization, erosion of social cohesion, economic decline, competition over scarce resources, and increased likelihood of protests and political violence. Evidence across regions particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and East Asia demonstrates a consistent negative association between food insecurity and political stability, although outcomes vary depending on governance quality, state capacity, and policy responsiveness. Methodological challenges such as data limitations, measurement inconsistencies, and potential endogeneity are also highlighted. The study concludes that while food insecurity often undermines political stability, effective governance and targeted policy interventions can mitigate its destabilizing effects. It contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive multi-country perspective and identifying gaps for future research, particularly regarding governance systems and long-term causal dynamics.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Political Stability, Governance, State Capacity and Cross-Country Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity constitutes a major societal challenge with wide-ranging consequences. From an economic perspective, it contributes to slower growth and increased inequality through channeling resources to coping strategies [1]. Socially, food insecurity engenders sentiments of unfairness and rising grievance. Citizens are more likely to contest unjustly perceived food policy issues or, beyond political protest, to resort to violence against the regime or other groups competing for scarce resources like food [2]. Furthermore, food insecurity jeopardizes state capacity as governments must allocate scarce revenue to subsidize or regulate food prices in response to the escalation of political pressure and social discontent [3]. Food security, a key issue in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), affects political stability of many countries [4]. Food insecurity implies a lack of access to affordable and quality food; food stability refers to the sustained or prolonged fulfilment of the food insecurity status. Determining food stability is thus determining the persistence of a food insecurity status. Several studies confirm that food insecurity affects political stability in various dimensions and context of development [1]. Nevertheless, a multi-country analysis remains unexplored. The present analysis examines the impact of food insecurity on political stability based on cross-country evidence. It aims to propose a general understanding of food insecurity and political stability with a multi-country perspective, useful for policy implication [3].

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Theoretical Framework

Food insecurity pertains to the unavailability of food at the national level or the inability of individuals or households to access food personally, where only the latter is the focus of the empirical studies reviewed [3]. Moreover, food insecurity addresses questions of availability, access, utilization, and stability, falling under the broader umbrella of food systems providing daily sustenance [3]. Wide-ranging indicators spanning amelioration of hardships, coupled with threats to food access, also characterize food insecurity [2]. Political stability, comprising durability of regimes, public order, and legitimacy, is closely linked to food insecurity. Governance, defined as inclusive and participatory institutions, accountability for policy choices, and societal and ecological foundations of the social contract, nevertheless presents a more general concept, encompassing a question of state capacity associated with the provision of public goods underpinning eligibility for food systems and the functioning of sustainable agricultural systems [3].

Conceptualizing Food Insecurity

Food insecurity designates the lack of adequate physical, social, and economic access to sufficient or nutritious food to meet dietary needs for an active and healthy life [3]. This definition embraces not only the food supply availability, but also its accessibility, utilization, and sustainability over time. Food security comprises two dimensions: food availability relates to the supply side and concerns the quantity and quality of food at the national or regional level; food access relates to the demand side and concerns individuals' ability to acquire sufficient food, affected by household expenditures, financial supports, and other factors [4]. Three qualities characterize food insecurity: it is a chronic condition, referring to prolonged periods without access; it can be remedied through available public or private coping strategies; and it represents an involuntary condition owing to prevailing socioeconomic circumstances, policy failures, or external shocks [5]. Only the first two qualities apply to hunger and therefore differentiate the concepts, which otherwise partially overlap. Food insecurity can also be distinguished from poverty, as those who have sufficient income to purchasing food may still lack the means to meet non-food requirements. Food insecurity exhibits three dimensions for assessment: food sufficiency (the caloric intake level), food quality (the diversity of consumed products with respect to basic nutrition), and coping strategies (the extreme measures taken under adverse situations) [7]. Food security can be represented in three distinct indicators, namely, the Food Security Experience Scale that incorporates both the level and the severity of the experience; the caloric intake adequacy rate at country level; and the coping strategy indicator, normalized proxy for food insecurity because it correlates highly and positively with the score of the Food Security Experience Scale [5]. Food-related governance outcomes can be evaluated with factors on food policies, institutions, and stakeholders, which include food political commitment and agility; transparency and decentralization; existence of cross-sectoral food policy; public-private advisory or consultative platform; and the establishment of food policy formalization into law, regulation, or strategy. Food security is critical to human subsistence as nutrition sustains health and productivity, and simultaneously, it influences food governance profoundly [7]. Food insecurity triggers several political stability mechanisms, two of them directly diminish social contracts. Two additional pathways considerably degrade stability without specifically promoting aggression or grievance mobilization, yet the net effects lead to higher instability [7]. Political stability denotes the durability and legitimacy of governance systems, both are mandatory to the framing stipulations. Formal definitions specify stability and durability as sub-part of quality and legitimacy, and thus, governance is comparable to quality. Governance comprises the three specified aspects, yet not all three dimensions qualify as governing factors, and further reduction is necessary [8]. Food insecurity exerts inconclusive effects on governance quality across periods, regimes, income levels, and regulatory environments. The four governance defining aspects allow capturing the full range of institutional state deficiencies. Each of the defined elements links both food security and governance in a multi-country analysis, addressing potential biasing macro-levels, external shocks, and partial endogeneity [9].

Political Stability and Governance

Political stability is characterized as a regime or system that remains stable over time, whereby the duration of different regimes becomes an important indicator [1]. Public order, measured as the capacity to control population behavior without major unrest, is linked to legitimacy, the degree of people's support for the policies of their authorities. Stability per se does not address the quality of governance that patterns the social contract, responsiveness, and accountability of institutions underpinning the stability of a regime, such as military and political parties [2]. While the complementarity between governance and stability is acknowledged, the multilayered and multidirectional nature of interactions is recognized; stability, for example, can also influence the quality of governance, shaping the extent of the social contract, the mechanisms through which public policy is defined, and the economic performance of a regime [3]. Food insecurity is expected to have two immediate effects, which, although they sit at the intersection of governance and stability, they directly affect stability on the

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schematic [4]. First, the absence of socio-economic or political freedom and dissatisfaction catalyzes rebellion, protests, and demands for regime change, where maintaining order refers to managing these pressures. Second, food insecurity heightens pressures on economic and political resources that are the collective prey of society and that at the first order boost the likelihood of competing problematic order, such as forced transfers and harsher mass repression, or of competitive deteriorations of the economic or political contract that in a dialectic fashion reduce trust towards the regime, therefore long-term cheerful macro political stability [5]. The intensification of pressure on state resources and the lengthening of wait for pompous and massive humanitarian turns also deteriorate the order of preference of society between collective appropriation of income/rent and fundamental rights, augmenting the pertinence of order around economic appropriation of rent and suggesting probable food stress to hamper state building, nation building, and economic transition [6]. Balance and expectation of estimated returns on political actions also coalesce toward attractive shifts towards political violence, reinforcing once again the couple food/insecurity disturbance on (macro) political stability. Food stress also multiplies the answer of counter-food policies that generally enhance no provision of neither redistributive state capacity or transitional tense of the economic political trilemma and increase in parallel the distribution of instantaneous burn on the socio-economic or public good cycle and the risk of misallocation of agricultural cultivated surface [6].

Mechanisms Linking Food Insecurity to Stability

Across various settings, food insecurity can exacerbate socioeconomic pressure and grievance mobilization, erode socio-political cohesion, depress economic activity, foster competition for resource access, spur protests and political violence, and challenge governance and policy responsiveness [3]. While such dynamics may reflect unfulfilled social contracts and produce anti-regime shifts, food insecurity can also incentivize policies that reinforce state capacity, legitimacy, and compliance, leading to a more supportive equilibrium. Multi-country studies analyze these interlinked causal pathways through which food insecurity shapes governance, on a global scale and across diverse regions [7]. The directional effect of food insecurity on governance is the predominant empirical focus, reflecting its role as a pivotal stressor [4]. Yet bidirectional feedback between insecurity and state capacity remains theoretically conceivable and is further justified by observational selection biases common to time-aggregated models used within individual countries; in these contexts, food insecurity often appears exogenous. Multi-country designs mitigate these endogeneity concerns, while the consideration of prior food insecurity measures helps account for associated state-capacity dynamics [3].

Methodological Approaches in Multi-Country Studies

Food insecurity affects both governments and citizens, however multi-country studies addressing the relationship between food insecurity and political stability have grown more common in recent years, likely due to the geopolitical disruptions related to food security rising after the covid pandemic and intensified by the war in Ukraine [5]. Political stability has many definitions but broadly refers to the durability of a government regime paired with a level of public order, as measured by violence, regime changes, political upheavals, or the absence of violent governance challenges [7]. Governance is sometimes confused with stability; while they are related, they represent conceptually distinct phenomena. Governance denotes which agents or agencies make decisions and how societies react to those decisions, closely connected to the public contract with legitimacy. Food insecurity likewise has many conceptualizations but is distinct from hunger, malnutrition, or poverty [4], it measures inability to consume sufficient quantities of food, quality of food, or food diversity, while duration of food insecurity, food quality, and price stability are also important indicators of food welfare; [5]. Universal data across countries and time frames complicate gathering and harmonizing data from different sources. Only a handful of multi-country datasets covering a comparable time range exist. Challenges include time misalignment, validity of food security indicators, and potential mismeasurement of the governance concept [6]. Multi-country studies test associations rather than inferring causal relationships; to address concerns about spurious relationships generated by omitted variables or reverse causation, pooling permits the use of fixed effects, instrumental variables, and natural experiments [7].

Data Sources and Measures

Food insecurity is distinct from hunger and relates to inequitable access to food, preventing adequate caloric consumption across populations and individuals [7]. The temporality of food insecurity is indicated not only by prevalence and intensity measures but also by the duration of inadequate access to food [5]. Each of the studies examined employed different measures of food insecurity that relate to food access specifically, experience-based indicators of food insecurity, caloric adequacy (i.e. the calorie supply available to the population per capita), and coping strategies (e.g. employing food-based coping strategies, emergency food, or food assistance during crises). These indicators, though conceptually distinct, capture dimensions of food insecurity related to access, which is why their applicability across studies and time frames is justifiable [6]. Cross-country studies of food insecurity and political instability face greater conceptual and operational difficulties than similar research linking food

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security to political stability, a broader and less frequently monitored phenomenon [7]. Traditionally, political instability is construed as any abrupt change in a state's governing authority particularly a change brought about by violence or force [6]. The durability of a government and the degree of political order and civil security, which reflect how well a government mediates and regulates the social contract between citizens and the state, are also dimensions of political instability [4].

Analytical Strategies

Political stability is defined as the durability of regimes, public order, and legitimacy [4]. It involves the absence of what North et al. (2018) term "disorder," linked to phenomena like the collapse of political order, everyday wrongdoings, and organized crime similar to governance quality [5]. Both consider governance quality at the center of their theorizing, connecting evaluation to overall stability. Regimes attain durability through provisioning of constitutional order, legal enforcement, and social contracts. Food insecurity shapes multiple stability-relevant factors. Institutions and policies mediate insecurity's effects, particularly where democratization and accountability enter social contracts [6]. Degree of state capacity availability of public goods, effectiveness of service-delivery systems, size of bureaucracy, and skills of personnel also matters. State capacity influences the public apparatus through which food interventions reach political constituencies and is connected to overall income and developmental attainment [7]. Stability outcomes are further shaped by macro-factors such as ongoing conflicts, electoral processes, and environmental shocks. Such dynamics also characterize adjacent countries, underpinning the consideration of multiregional datasets where political stability data are available [7]. An immediate challenge then resides in identifying direct and indirect relationships that align with scholarly expectations regarding causation; although food insecurity evidently associates with many macro-patterns determining stability, the multiregional approach captures only part of the full political-insecurity nexus [3]. The possibility of reverse causation from stability to food insecurity constitutes an additional theoretical consideration [7]. Where earlier studies have been conducted within rural environments, mechanisms related to global food-prices possess limited relevance. Regional-level analyses, though, afford an alternative representation of global prices which nevertheless obtains limited attention [5].

Challenges and limitations

Political stability, especially in developing countries, is shaped by a variety of factors [2]. The multi-country studies reviewed here measured governance as political stability and associated these data with the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) as well as the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) during the period from 2012 to 2021. It was found that food insecurity has a significant negative impact on political stability [3]. An increase in food deprivation by one point on the GFSI is projected to raise the risk of regime change and civil unrest by 5.4% and 8.3%, respectively [13]. Similarly, an increase of one percentage point in the population enduring moderate or severe food insecurity according to the FIES would raise those risks by 4.7% and 5.4%. In several African as well as Asian and Latin American countries, food insecurity has been a significant driver of political instability [12]. Societies facing economic crises such as rising prices and an impending recession typically experience higher food insecurity [4]. Consequently, the onset of crises and shocks that compromise food systems should prompt governments to enhance monitoring systems that address food availability and access, especially for vulnerable populations. Food insecurity is expected to aggravate the political instability caused by adverse shocks [5].

Empirical Evidence across Regions

Cross-country studies provide consistent evidence that food insecurity undermines political stability, with particular concerns for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the East Asia and Pacific regions [6]. Food insecurity encompasses challenges at different stages and varies in occurrence and intensification; it is distinguished from hunger, food poverty, and malnutrition. Cross-national studies frequently examine food insecurity with a view to its serious economic and social consequences on stability [7]. Political instability arises from numerous configurations such as a temporary cessation of formal governance, widespread civil disorder, or protracted periods of informal governing arrangements, but still a common conceptual emphasis remains on the durability of democracy and persistence of order [8]. Lacks of state capacity, uneven implementation of government actions and dissimilar responsiveness of regimes to increasing economic woes further curtail food supply as an immediate cause of instability [6]. The character of food insecurity within regions, predominantly economic or social, shapes the nature of ensuing unrest, stability, and subsequent governing configuration [5]. Prevalent data on food insecurity among numerous countries, aligned with political stability data, is available for analysis of the relationship between the severities of food challenges without direct intervening attention [6].

Sub-Saharan Africa

Food insecurity has never been at an all-time high since the World Food Programme (WFP) started measuring it in 2017. One in five surveyed individuals in the sub-Saharan region reported that they were unable to obtain food a year prior to the survey [5]. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food insecurity is on the

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rise in a larger number of countries globally than at any previous moment since the 1990s, while the rates appear to have stabilized in several regions including Europe, Northern America and Asia [5]. The factors that lie behind such developments namely the failure to eradicate poverty, increasing malnutrition, food price surges and global economic downturn, all exasperated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to elevated food insecurity levels and food price hikes in many countries around the world, especially within Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Middle East [7]. Thus, food safety and security is essential for the stability of any nation especially under the increasingly tough conditions that prevail today [6]. Nevertheless, numerous countries in sub-Saharan Africa still remain trapped in an intricate multi-dimensional spiral of corruption, inequity, lack of governance, refusal to uphold the law and others [5]. Enormous gaps exist between the wealthy and impoverished, who even struggle to find food for their immediate survival. An illustration of the multi-faced and complex situation that sub-Saharan Africa faces can be seen from South Sudan, where food insecurity, mass exodus of citizens to other countries and other problems have been rampant since establishing integrity and spacing out power-sharing stopped the hugely destructive civil war before long, thus tackling with food security has been a top priority in South Sudan [6]. Efforts to fill the combined gaps of food security and corruption continue to soak up a majority of the fiscal budgets, public spending going into agriculture to combat with food insecurity regional reforms are still low, nevertheless, through the whole SADAC region a small portion of the large fiscal budgets nevertheless goes into agriculture even within the economically progressive regions [7].

South Asia

South Asia presents a complex situation regarding food insecurity. The region has made significant investments in agricultural improvements and experienced high GDP growth, yet food security remains a pressing concern [8]. Even with increased food availability, levels of under-nourishment and food insecurity have stagnated; South Asia has the second-highest number of undernourished people globally [9]. The Food Security Index (FSI) is the preferred measure of food insecurity. Two studies in South Asia using the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) observe countervailing effects on stability; one finds a stable negative relationship while another concludes that food insecurity initially facilitates regime transitions but ultimately jeopardizes stability [7]. Major state-level shocks, including genocides and regime transformations, influenced South Asia's trajectory during the twenty-first century [6]. Indeed, regime transitions characterize South Asia. The reopening of food markets after the post-1990 liberalization wave infused both economic opportunity and uncertainty. The FSI, principally captures national food insecurity and is closely tied to market liberalization and GDP; the FSI-GFSI requires protracted state capacity-building [6]. Post-liberalization emergency food and price policies underscore the interaction with state capacity. Emergency price policy roles compliment the primary guidance of regime-lifespan and market-liberalization appropriately parallel food availability, caloric consumption, and agricultural-extensive strategy [7]. Heterogeneities across South Asian countries, large-scale elections, disasters, and foreign interventions modulate trajectories within a shared multi-sectoral regime-lifespan cycle, analysis spanning three decades uncovers compelling evidence of food-security-hindered regime resilience [6].

Latin America and the Caribbean

Food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean is structurally embedded in the socio-productive system while produced by different processes operating at different scales, which intertwine at different, often vague, loci or nodal points [4]. Food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean is also determined by various climatic events; climate variability, droughts and the combined effects of the El Niño phenomenon drives producers to greater reliance on food assistance [5]. Food insecurity has been one of the main issues during the COVID-19 pandemic: the social, economic, cultural and even health shocks created by political and economic upheavals and by the need for social distancing have resulted in an increased rate of food insecurity; contrary to expectations food insecurity tended not to increase in rural areas; analysis of food insecurity following lockdowns showed a notable decline for the upper part of the income distribution and an increase on both sides of the income distribution during the period of highest job losses, suggesting lack of access to food among the non-secure, the pre-existing elevated levels of food insecurity concentrated into specific population groups created a layered intensity problem [10].

East Asia and Pacific

Heightened food insecurity correlates with increased political instability across East Asia and the Pacific since 2020, consistent with multi-country evidence from other regions [12]. Food insecurity has serious, immediate, and direct consequences that undermine political stability and governance, yet effects differ by income level and regime type [11]. Beyond basic needs, food has social and cultural dimensions that render countries vulnerable to shocks from global prices, supply chain disruptions, or extreme weather. Developments such as higher prices, supply or nutrition shortages, and changes in demand may underpin insecurity [13]. Indeed, the region is experiencing extensive urbanization and increasing food insecurity, linked to supply-chain disruptions driven by

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the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Increases in energy prices and floods may exacerbate the situation. Rice and fish remain staple foods even in metropolitan areas, and food deprivation hinders access to education, disrupts public order, and drives protests [11, 12].

Policy Implications and Mitigation Strategies

Food insecurity is an urgent global challenge with implications for political stability. Multi-country studies provide robust evidence linking high levels of food insecurity to declines in political stability [13]. Food insecurity differs conceptually from hunger and malnutrition and encompasses a range of severity levels; a broad definition of food insecurity is adopted to ensure comparability across datasets, which exhibit inconsistencies in measurement timing, scale, and domain [12]. Political stability refers to regime durability, public order, and regime legitimacy, with governance quality, accountability, and the nature of the social contract serving as important mediating factors [11]. Five mechanisms underpin the hypothesized link between food insecurity and stability: food insecurity acts as a socioeconomic stressor, heightening grievances and mobilizing discontent; contributes to the erosion of social cohesion; generates economic contractions that intensify reliance on volatile resource flows; fuels protests and political violence, undermining public trust in regimes; and increases demands on leaders' immediate policy responsiveness, stimulating humanitarian actions without remedying underlying grievances [10]. Although food insecurity is expected to precipitate declines in stability, potentially bi-directional relationships remain a possibility, as do relationships that coincide in time [9]. Multi-country studies mitigate selection bias by examining international determinants of political trajectories at the country level rather than regime-specific factors at the country-year level [8].

Gaps in the Literature and Future Research

The interdependencies between food insecurity and political stability remain underexplored, as are the empirical links between food insecurity and governance frameworks or regime types [7]. Future research should investigate these overlooked causal pathways, opening an examination of politically-motivated food distribution and access as a conduit through which regime type influences food security and stability [6]. A similar political economy angle might be brought to bear on the manner in which food insecurity affects political stability under different governance arrangements. Analyses conducted at the domestic level suggest the dynamics between food insecurity and political stability unfold over time [9]. Macroeconomic shocks be they initial supply, inflationary, or terms-of-trade shocks national political events, and significant "punctuated equilibrium" disruptive events directly impact food security, and thereby political stability, but only temporally [9]. Sustained, longer-duration food insecurity exacerbates political instability, countering the notion that food insecurity predominantly operates through sharp shocks [1, 5]. Cross-country studies that account for, or hold temporally constant, the effects of such pivotal macroeconomic or political events remain limited [10]. Regime transitions and widespread regional crises shape food insecurity dynamics differently, with regime switches amplifying shocks or with distinctive socio-political-economic clouds lingering in the aftermath of large-scale events [11]. Secondary examination of countries exiting fragility similarly suggests governance and regime type mediate many direct effects of food security on political stability [12]. Internal governance measures frequently co-variate with governance systems, yet cross-national analysis continues to yield widely divergent results by system type both for food security within political stability and across a variety of other linkages within regime categorizations or classification schemes based solely on these same measures [12]. The extent to which distinctive food-security-specific mechanisms attend food insecurity-governance interactions therefore remains uncertain. The joint field of research encompassing broad national or global food security and systemic yet non-environmental determinants and dynamics, food security which remains markedly separable from the adjacent literatures on climate change, conflict, and migration is relatively underdeveloped [13]. Available studies tend to focus solely on, or disproportionately emphasize, climate-crisis-critical residues or legacies. Yet food-security discussions abound, and such material may readily be integrated into existing explorations of food security thereby rendering substantive contributions to both political stability and a potential but infrequently-advanced, entirely disparate, local governance arena [14].

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that food insecurity is not only a humanitarian and developmental concern but also a significant determinant of political stability across countries. By synthesizing evidence from multi-country studies, it establishes that food insecurity undermines regime durability, weakens public order, and erodes legitimacy through multiple reinforcing pathways, including heightened grievances, economic stress, and social fragmentation. The findings reveal that the relationship between food insecurity and political stability is complex, context-dependent, and mediated by governance quality, institutional capacity, and policy responsiveness. Regional analyses further underscore that while the negative effects of food insecurity are broadly consistent, their intensity and manifestation differ across socio-economic and political environments. In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, structural vulnerabilities and limited state capacity exacerbate instability, whereas

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in other regions, external shocks such as global price fluctuations and pandemics play a more prominent role. Importantly, the study highlights the potential for policy interventions such as social protection systems, food price stabilization mechanisms, and inclusive governance frameworks to mitigate the destabilizing effects of food insecurity. Despite these insights, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding the causal pathways between food insecurity and political stability, the role of regime type, and the long-term temporal dynamics of this relationship. Future research should adopt more robust longitudinal and comparative approaches to better capture these complexities. Ultimately, addressing food insecurity is essential not only for achieving sustainable development goals but also for fostering resilient, stable, and legitimate political systems. Governments and international actors must therefore prioritize integrated food security strategies as part of broader efforts to promote peace, stability, and inclusive development.

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