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for every child

CHILD FOOD POVERTY

A Nutrition Crisis in Early Childhood

Foreword

**A few spoonfuls of porridge.
A small cup of rice.
For young children living in food poverty, this may be the only food they consume in a day – day in, day out.**

Children cannot live on staple grains alone. They need to eat a diverse range of nutritious foods – including fruits, vegetables, fish, eggs, and dairy products – to fuel their growing brains and bodies.

Yet today in low- and middle-income countries, 2 out of 3 children under the age of five experience food poverty. These children are not fed the minimum diverse diet they need to grow and develop to their full potential.

Even more troubling, 1 in 3 children under five – or 202 million – live in and suffer from severe food poverty, meaning they are fed extremely poor diets that include at most two food groups, often a cereal and perhaps some milk.

Children living in severe food poverty are particularly vulnerable to severe stunting and wasting – the most life-threatening forms of undernutrition in early childhood – which can increase children’s risk of death by up to 12 times and undermine their ability to reach their full potential.

Fueled by conflict climate change and the enduring secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global food and nutrition crisis is pushing already vulnerable children into unprecedented levels of food poverty and nutrition vulnerability.

We estimate that in 2022, the number of children suffering from severe wasting in the 15 countries worst affected by the crisis has increased at an extraordinary speed: one additional child with severe wasting every single minute.

What and how children are fed in early childhood determines their survival and shapes their growth, development and learning for the rest of their lives. But millions of children – especially the youngest, the poorest and the most marginalized – do not have access to the minimum nutritious foods they need during the time in their lives when good nutrition matters most.

The crisis of children living in food poverty – and what it means to children, families, and nations – calls for a new vision and response.

We must build a world where food systems deliver the nutritious and safe foods that children need to survive and thrive; where essential nutrition and social protection services are in reach; and where nutritious and safe foods and essential nutrition services are available and affordable for every child — no matter who they are or where they live.

Families everywhere play a critical role in ensuring that children are fed nutritious foods, but they cannot do it alone. The crisis of children living in food poverty must be solved through a systems approach – leveraging the potential of food, health and social protection systems – and driven by decisive political will and national and global investments.

Every child has the right to food and nutrition. Especially now, with so many millions of children at risk, it is up to all of us to help realize that right for every child – and prevent food poverty from casting a shadow over the futures of yet another generation of children.



Catherine Russell
UNICEF Executive Director





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What is child food poverty?

Child food poverty: Children's inability to access and consume a minimum diverse diet in early childhood

UNICEF and WHO recommend that young children be fed a variety of foods to meet their nutrient needs and support healthy growth and development.^{1,2}

The consumption of foods from diverse food groups in the first two years of life is associated with improved linear growth.³ Conversely, diets lacking in diversity – particularly nutrient-dense foods such as eggs, fish, dairy products, fruits and vegetables – can increase the risk of nutrient deficiencies, stunted growth and impaired physical and cognitive development.^{4,5}

UNICEF measures child food poverty using the UNICEF-WHO children's dietary diversity score in early childhood.⁶ UNICEF and WHO define minimum dietary diversity as the percentage of children 6–23 months of age consuming foods and beverages from at least five out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.

The eight food groups used to tabulate this indicator are: **1.** breast milk; **2.** grains, roots, tubers and plantains; **3.** pulses (beans, peas, lentils), nuts and seeds; **4.** dairy products (milk, infant formula, yogurt, cheese); **5.** flesh foods (meat, fish, poultry, organ meats); **6.** eggs; **7.** vitamin-A-rich fruits and vegetables; and **8.** other fruits and vegetables.

Based on this indicator, UNICEF defines children living in food poverty as the percentage of children under 5 years of age consuming foods and beverages from four or fewer of the eight defined food groups. We distinguish between:

Severe child food poverty: The percentage of children under 5 consuming foods and beverages from zero, one or two out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.

Moderate child food poverty: The percentage of children under five 5 consuming foods and beverages from three or four out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.

What does this brief aim to contribute?

Across the globe, millions of families are struggling to provide their children with the nutritious food they need to grow, develop, and learn.

The situation stands to worsen as the world grapples with a crushing global food and nutrition crisis that is taking the greatest toll on the most vulnerable children and families.

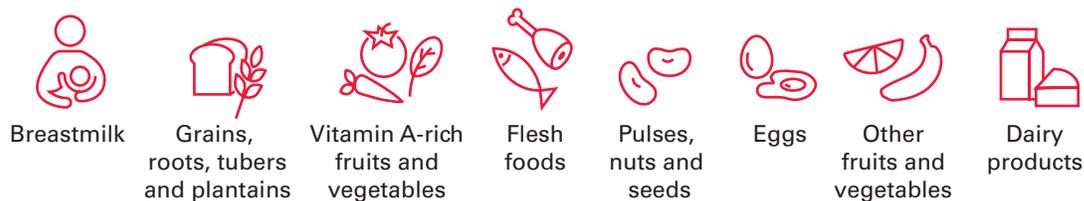
This brief aims to sound the alarm on the crisis of child food poverty – a state where young children are not fed the bare minimum number of food groups they need in early childhood.

We present data to illustrate how many children are experiencing food poverty, how many children are living in severe food poverty, what their diets look like, where they live – including in which households, communities and countries – and how these metrics have changed over time.

The brief ends with a call to action for national governments and the global community to commit to tackling the crisis of child food poverty and upholding the right to food and nutrition for every child.

To meet the minimum dietary diversity for healthy growth and development, children need to consume foods from **at least five out of the eight** recommended food groups.

The eight food groups are:



If children are fed:

0-2 food groups/day

they live in severe food poverty

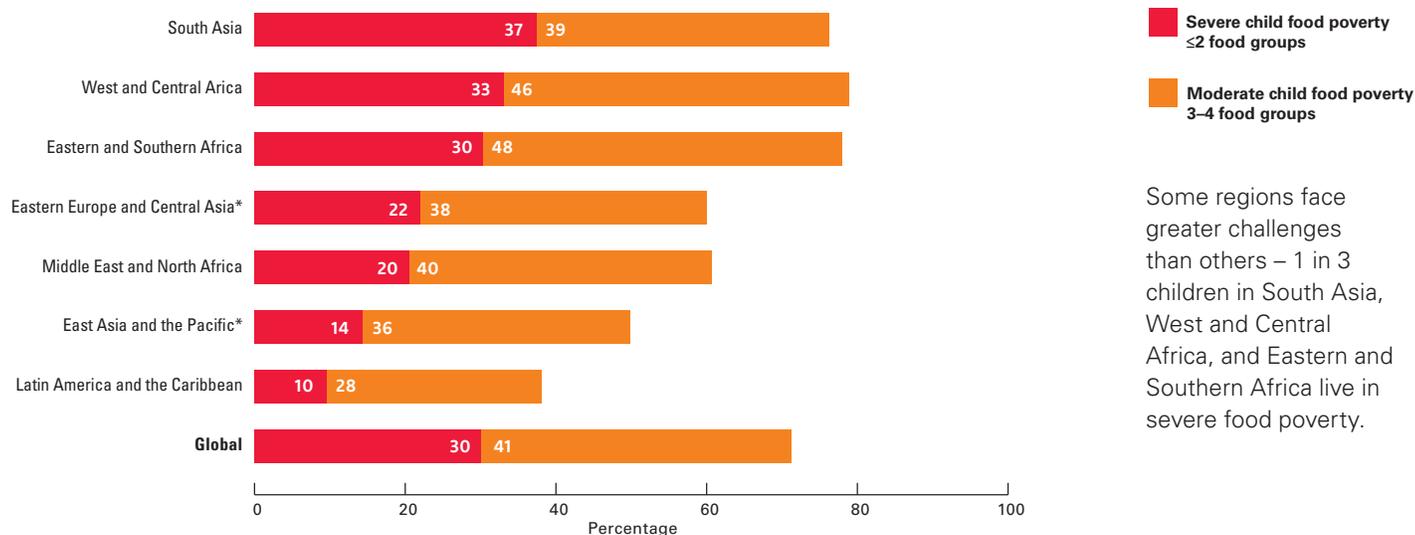
3-4 food groups/day

they experience moderate food poverty

5 or more food groups/day

they meet the minimum dietary diversity

Globally, 1 in 3 children under five lives in severe food poverty

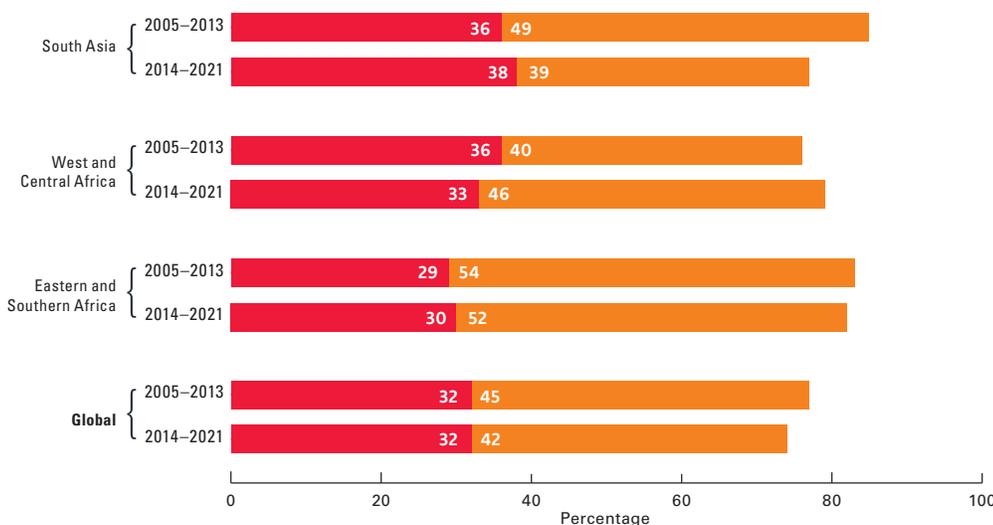


Some regions face greater challenges than others – 1 in 3 children in South Asia, West and Central Africa, and Eastern and Southern Africa live in severe food poverty.

Percentage of children living in severe food poverty and moderate food poverty, by region, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022. *To meet adequate population coverage in each region, East Asia and the Pacific does not include China, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia does not include Russian Federation.

Despite some progress in reducing child food poverty, the prevalence of severe food poverty in children has remained the same for more than a decade



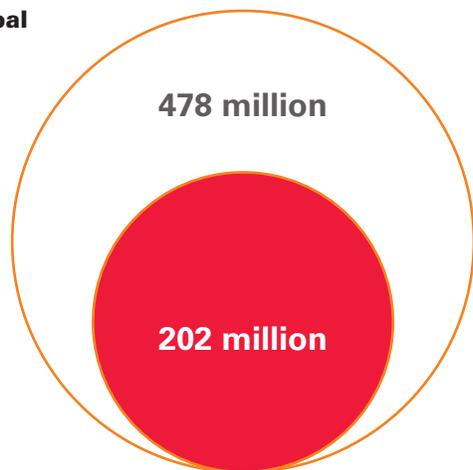
Regional aggregates mask variations at the country level: in 11 of the 51 countries with trend data, the prevalence of severe child food poverty is worse than ever before. Many of these countries are also among those hardest hit by the current food and nutrition crisis, which will likely worsen severe food poverty in children. (see page 11).

Trends in percentage of children living in severe food poverty and moderate food poverty, by region, around 2011 and around 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022. Trends are based on a subset of 51 countries with comparable data between 2005-2013 and 2014-2021. There are insufficient trend data for the regions of East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

How many children are experiencing food poverty and where do they live?

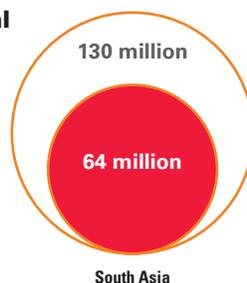
Global



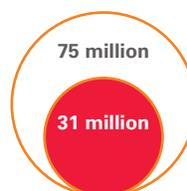
Globally, **478 million** children under 5 are experiencing food poverty, of which **202 million** are suffering from severe food poverty

- Total child food poverty
- Severe child food poverty ≤2 food groups

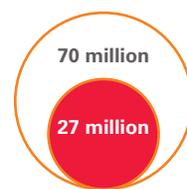
Regional



South Asia



West and Central Africa



Eastern and Southern Africa



East Asia and the Pacific*



Middle East and North Africa



Eastern Europe and Central Asia*



Latin America and the Caribbean

Globally, 478 million children under 5 are experiencing food poverty in early childhood, of whom 202 million are suffering from severe food poverty. More than 2 in 5 children (42%) experiencing food poverty are living in severe food poverty.

In South Asia, half of all children experiencing food poverty live in severe food poverty. In sub-Saharan Africa, 40 per cent of all children experiencing food poverty live in severe food poverty.

Together, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are home to over 60 per cent of all children living in severe food poverty.

Number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty and number living in severe food poverty (in millions), by region, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022. Note: *To meet adequate population coverage in each region, East Asia and the Pacific does not include China and Eastern Europe and Central Asia does not include Russian Federation.

Children in poor and rural households are more vulnerable to severe food poverty



Severe child food poverty exposes the inequalities between the richest and poorest families.

Globally, the prevalence of severe child food poverty is 1.5 times higher among children living in the poorest households compared with those in the wealthiest households. In the Eastern and Southern Africa region, it is 2.5 times higher.

Similarly, children living in rural areas experience a higher prevalence of severe food poverty compared with children living in urban areas.

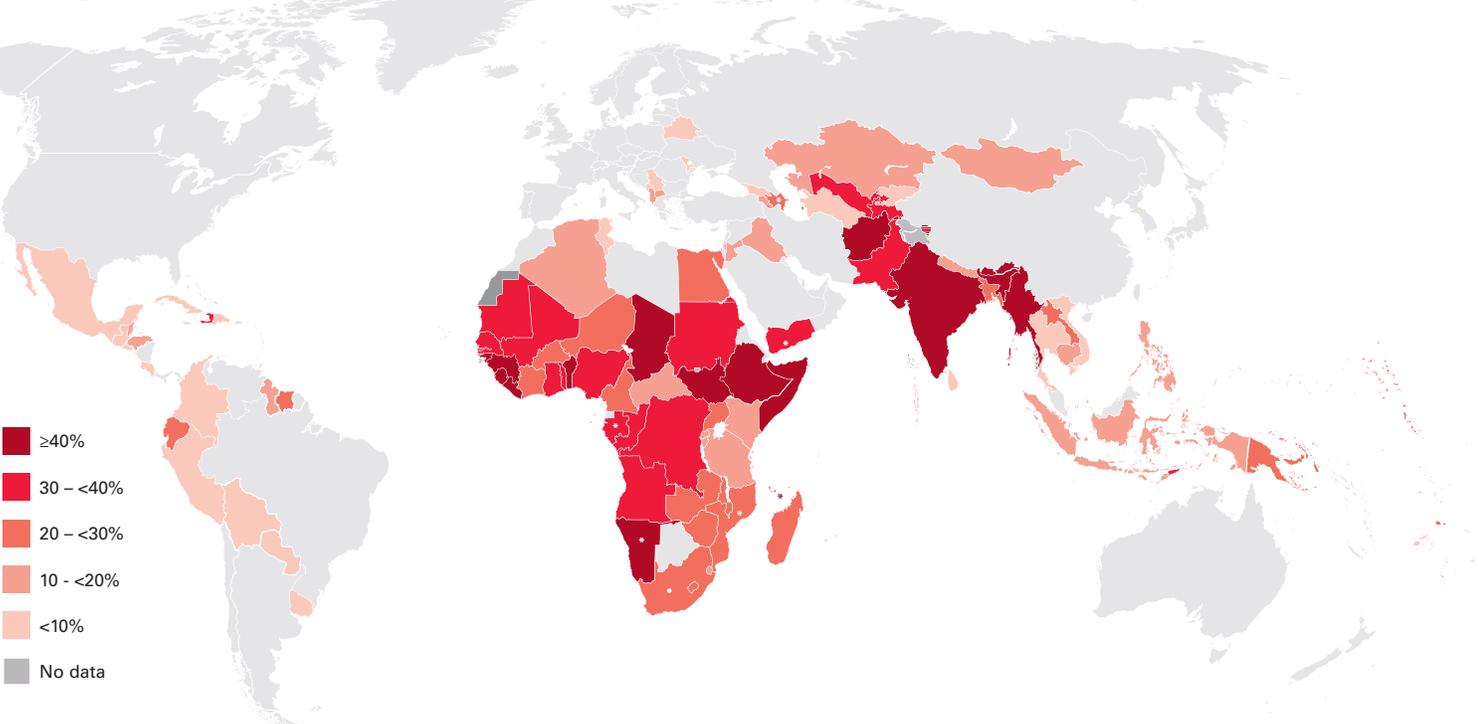
Overall, there is little difference in the prevalence of moderate food poverty in children by place of residence or household wealth status. However, children living in poor households or rural areas in East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean have a higher prevalence of moderate food poverty.

Percentage of children living in severe food poverty and moderate food poverty, by household wealth status and place of residence, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022. Note: *To meet adequate population coverage in each region, East Asia and the Pacific does not include China, Eastern Europe and Central Asia does not include Russian Federation and Latin America and the Caribbean does not include Brazil.

Children in low- and lower-middle-income countries are disproportionately affected by severe food poverty

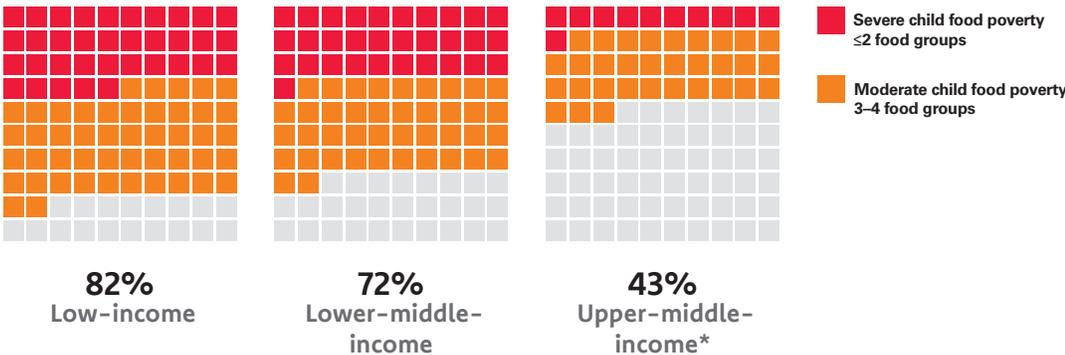
Severe child food poverty is reaching dire levels. Globally, 1 in 3 children live in severe food poverty. In 13 countries, more than 2 in 5 children live in severe food poverty



Percentage of children living in severe food poverty, by country, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2022. Note: *denotes countries where most recent data are between 2005–2013. This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

Nearly 3 in 4 children experiencing food poverty in early childhood live in low- and lower-middle-income countries



More than 30 percent of children in low- and lower-middle-income countries live in severe food poverty in early childhood compared with only 11 per cent in upper-middle-income countries.

Percentage of children experiencing food poverty in early childhood, by income classification, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2022. Note: * denotes low population coverage; interpret with caution.

Children: At the epicentre of the global food and nutrition crisis

The combined effects of conflict – including the war in Ukraine, climate-induced drought, and the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – are driving a devastating global food and nutrition crisis.

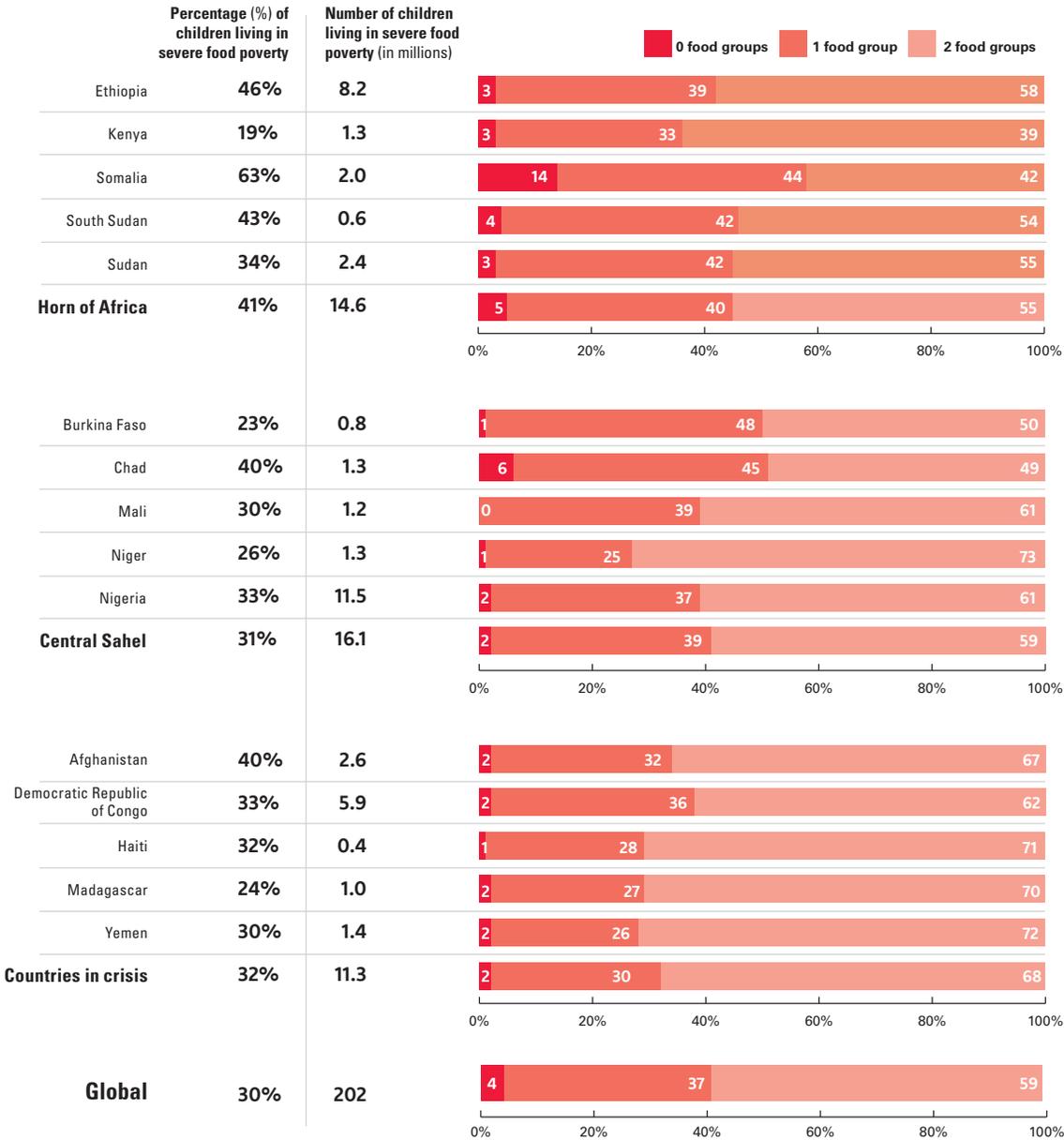
According to the 2022 Global Report on Food Crises, 42 countries are experiencing high levels of food and nutrition insecurity; 15 of them are experiencing some of the worst impacts of the global crisis. These countries can be grouped into three clusters:

- **Horn of Africa:** Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan.
- **Central Sahel:** Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.
- **Countries in Crisis:** Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Madagascar and Yemen.

These 15 countries account for 8 million children with severe wasting and 40 million children living in severe food poverty. These children are fed diets that include at most two food groups, as opposed to the minimum five food groups that children need to grow, develop and thrive in early childhood.



What are children living in severe food poverty being fed in the 15 countries worst affected by the global food and nutrition crisis?



These 15 countries account for over 20 per cent of all children living in severe food poverty.

The abysmal quality of these children’s diets is cause for alarm. More than 40 per cent of the 202 million children under 5 living in severe food poverty are eating only one – or none – of the eight recommended food groups. In several countries in the Central Sahel and the Horn of Africa this figure is over 50 per cent, which signals that severe child food poverty has reached crisis levels.

Percentage and number of children (in millions) living in severe food poverty, by country 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022. Note: *In case of Yemen, the most recent data are from 2013.

Distribution of the number of food groups consumed by children living in severe food poverty, by country, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022

What is in the diets of children living in severe food poverty?

In the 15 countries most affected by the global food and nutrition crisis, more than 85 per cent of children living in severe food poverty in early childhood are being fed breastmilk/dairy with starchy staples (grains, roots and tubers). Their diets are severely lacking in nutrient-rich foods such as eggs, fish, poultry, meat, pulses, nuts, fruits and vegetables.

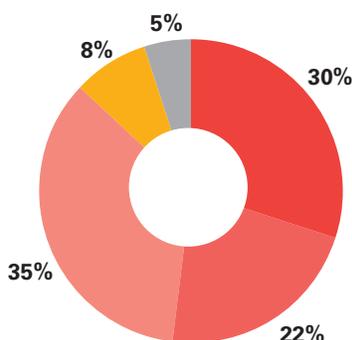
Children in the Horn of Africa are particularly vulnerable. More than half (52%) of the children living in severe food poverty are only being fed some milk, either breastmilk alone or combined with animal milk.

Among children living in severe food poverty, nearly 1 in 3 in the Central Sahel and the Horn of Africa are fed breastmilk only in early childhood.

Only, 10 per cent of children living in severe food poverty are fed foods other than breastmilk/dairy and starchy staples (grains, roots and tubers).

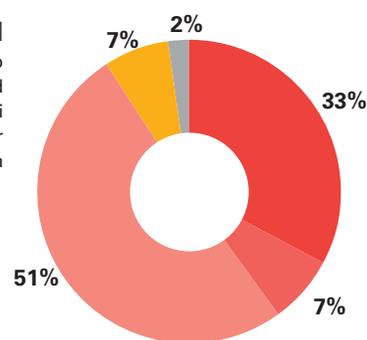
Horn of Africa

- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan



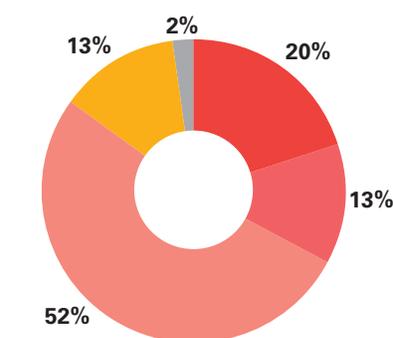
Central Sahel

- Burkina Faso
- Chad
- Mali
- Niger
- Nigeria

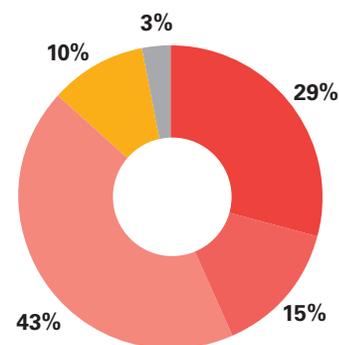


Countries in crisis

- Afghanistan
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Haiti
- Madagascar
- Yemen



Global



Diet content of children living in severe food poverty, 2021

Source: UNICEF Global databases, 2022

A call to action



de 6 à 9 mois

ANJE

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Bolder action and greater accountability to end child food poverty

Governments must take the lead to end child food poverty. Together with development and humanitarian partners, national and international civil society and non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, governments must mobilize the food, health and social protection systems to deliver nutritious, safe and affordable foods and essential nutrition services to guarantee every child's right to food and nutrition, everywhere.

To end child food poverty, we must:

Shape food systems to be more accountable for making nutritious food available and affordable to families with young children:

- Increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods – including fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat and fortified foods for young children – by incentivizing their production, distribution and retail.
- Implement national standards and legislation to protect young children from unhealthy processed and ultra-processed foods and beverages and harmful marketing practices targeting caregivers.

Leverage health systems to deliver essential nutrition services to young children and their mothers, prioritizing those most at risk:

- Scale up caregivers' access to timely and quality counselling on child feeding and nutrition by investing in the recruitment, training, supervision and motivation of community-based nutrition workers.
- Deliver food supplements, home fortificants and fortified foods to children living in food poverty and ensure access to therapeutic foods for children with life-threatening severe wasting.

Design protection systems that are responsive to the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children and families:

- Deliver social transfers (cash, food and vouchers) to end child food poverty – particularly severe food poverty in early childhood – including in fragile settings and in response to humanitarian crises.
- Use social protection programmes to improve caregivers' knowledge about child feeding and nutrition by providing education and counselling and by encouraging the use of essential nutrition services.

Strengthen nutrition governance – nationally and globally – to eliminate child food poverty, including in fragile and humanitarian settings:

- Elevate the elimination of child food poverty – particularly severe child food poverty – to a national and global development priority and ensure coherent policy support, legislation, incentives, budgets, programmes and services across sectors and systems.
- Strengthen public accountability – nationally and globally – to end child food poverty by setting time-bound targets and tracking progress through country- and sector-specific monitoring systems and regular household surveys, including in fragile settings.
- Align humanitarian response – nationally and globally – with the specific nutrition needs of children living in food poverty by supporting programmes that ensure access to nutritious foods and nutrition services that meet the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children.

Notes on figures

A. General notes

Population weighted global and regional prevalence estimates

All regional and global population weighted prevalence estimates were weighted using the annual population by age interpolated datasets from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects (UNPD-WPP): The 2022 Revision.

Population weighted prevalence estimates for any given region were generated by (a) multiplying the estimates of child food poverty for each country with available data between 2014–2021 by the number of children in the 6–23-month age range in that country; (b) summing all of the country specific products; and (c) dividing the sum of the products by the total population of children in the respective age range in all countries with data in the required time period.

UNICEF presents regional and global prevalence estimates only when the available data are representative of at least 50 per cent of corresponding regions' population, unless otherwise noted.

Prevalence estimates presented for the three clusters of countries; the Horn of Africa, Central Sahel and other countries in crisis are unweighted population aggregates.

Number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty

UNICEF calculates the number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty in early childhood by taking the percentage of children aged 6 to 23 months of age who are not fed a minimum diverse diet and extrapolating that figure to the population of children under 5.

Endnotes

- 1 *Guiding principles for complementary feeding of the breastfed child*. Washington: Pan American Health Organization-World Health Organization; 2003. (https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/guiding_principles_compfeeding_breastfed.pdf, accessed 31 August 2020).
- 2 *Guiding principles for feeding non-breastfed children 6-24 months of age*. World Health Organization. Geneva, 2005.
- 3 Onyango AW, Borghi E, de Onis M, Casanovas Mdel C, Garza C. Complementary feeding and attained linear growth among 6–23-month-old children. *Public Health Nutr*. 2014;17(9):1975–83.
- 4 Prado EL, Dewey KG. Nutrition and brain development in early life. *Nutr Rev*. 2014;72(4): 267–84. doi:10.1111/nure.12102.
- 5 Aguayo VM, Nair R, Badgaiyan N, Krishna V. Determinants of stunting and poor linear growth in children under 2 years of age in India: an in-depth analysis of Maharashtra's comprehensive nutrition survey. *Matern Child Nutr*. 2016;12(1): 121–40.
- 6 *Indicators for assessing infant and young child feeding practices. Definitions and measurement methods*. World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2021.

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