



Save the Children

# HUNGER – A LETHAL WEAPON OF WAR

The impact of conflict-related hunger on children

# Summary

Where there is conflict, there is almost always hunger. And where there is hunger, it is children who are most at risk.

Save the Children's analysis of child malnutrition in the world's ten worst conflicts for children shows that, between August and December 2018, 590,000 children are likely to miss out on treatment and to die as a result of hunger. This means that, without emergency relief in these conflict zones, an average of 1,600 children a day – or one child a minute – will fall victim to starvation and disease.<sup>1</sup> Warring parties often deliberately withhold or deny humanitarian access, destroy the infrastructure civilians need to meet their basic needs, and weaponise starvation. For the first time in decades, global hunger is on the rise – with three-quarters of stunted children living in conflict zones.

Conflict is driving this rise in hunger. As violence rages in the Democratic Republic of Congo, children eat once a day in Kasai. In South Sudan, children are recruited into armed groups, lured by the prospect of having access to food. In Afghanistan, nearly 10% of children are wasting away.<sup>2</sup>

Children are particularly vulnerable to hunger. Malnutrition is a direct threat to life; it also weakens children's immune systems and leaves them at the mercy of killer diseases – including cholera and pneumonia. For the children who survive, the effects of malnutrition can be life-long, affecting their physical and cognitive development.<sup>3</sup> The combined effects of conflict and hunger drive displacement, expose children to abuse and exploitation, and threaten their futures.

We are in danger of this becoming accepted as the new normal. A normal where children are more likely to die as a result of hunger and disease than fighting. A normal where the fact people face emergency food shortages and rely on assistance for survival no longer moves the international community to action. A normal where warring parties and armed groups violate international law with impunity.

## KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Almost 100 years ago, the appalling suffering of children deliberately starved in the aftermath of the first world war moved our founder, Eglantyne Jebb, to start a movement for children – and Save the Children was born. Inspired by her commitment to stop “wars against children”, we are redoubling our efforts to protect children in conflict – including from hunger.

We believe the UK government and its international partners can do the same by:

1. Recommitting to their obligations under international law to take all necessary measures to protect children – including from hunger. This should include a focus on tackling child malnutrition in conflict zones, within a new Protection of Civilians strategy.
2. Working with international partners to safeguard and expand humanitarian access – improving the reporting, prevention and mitigation of the denial of humanitarian access, and holding violators to account.
3. Sustaining humanitarian and development responses to malnutrition in fragile and conflict-affected states based on early action, integrated and community-based interventions, and building resilience – targeting the most marginalised and deprived children first.

**Cover photo: Saadu and her daughter Maroea fled fighting in northern Nigeria. Pictured here at a nutrition centre in Borno state, the red reading on the band around Maroea's arm shows she is likely to be severely malnourished. (Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Save the Children)**

# What's the problem?

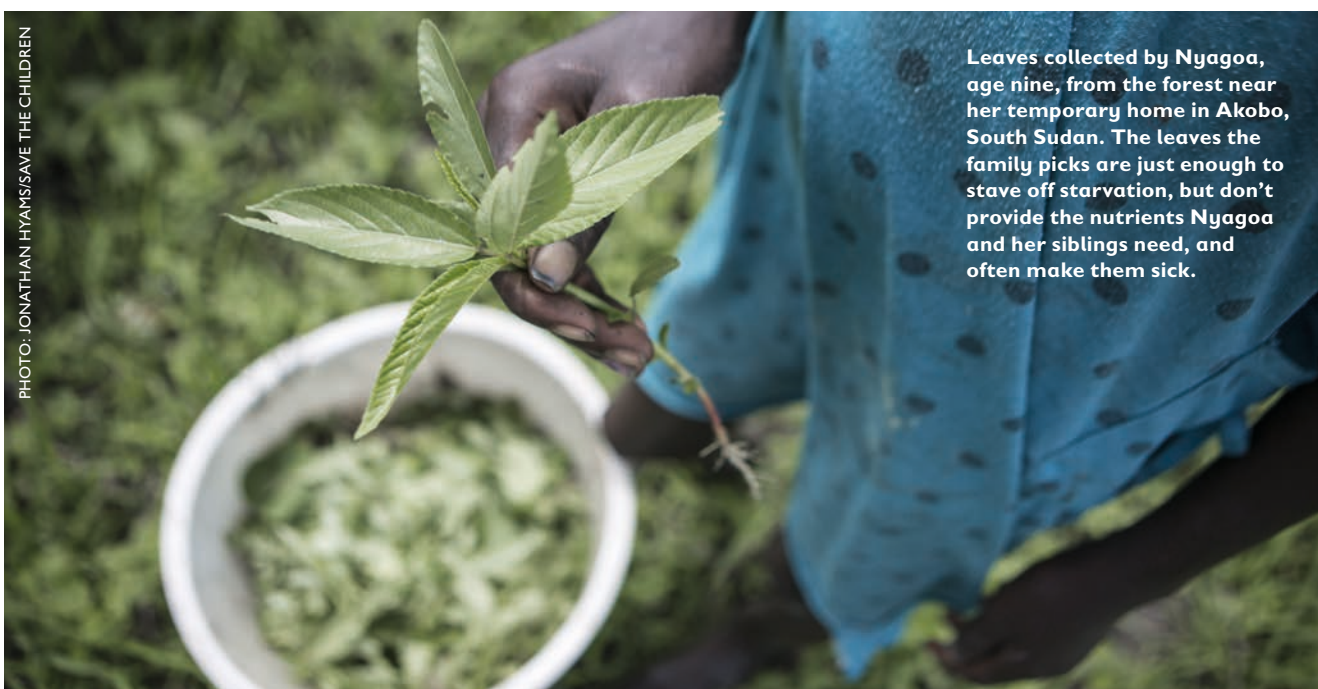
Until recently, there had been a gradual improvement in global food security. A concerted effort by local NGOs, governments, donors and international agencies, combined with overall economic development and poverty reduction, saw the number of stunted children fall from nearly 200 million in 2000 to 155 million in 2016.<sup>4</sup> That achievement should be celebrated and is testament to what collective action towards human development can achieve.

However, in spite of these gains, for the first time in decades there has been a spike in the number of people acutely malnourished. In the world's ten most dangerous conflicts for children, 4.5 million under-fives are experiencing the most severe form of acute malnutrition, according to Save the Children's latest figures. Of those, two-thirds are likely to miss out on treatment – 590,000 children are likely to die in the last four months of 2018 as a result. That means 1,600 children are expected to die every day until the end of the year in these conflict zones, unless they receive urgent assistance.

Of the 155 million stunted children across the world, 122 million live in countries affected by conflict.<sup>5</sup> The World Food Programme, the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN, and the UK government all identify conflict as the main reason behind the spike<sup>6</sup> – reversing what had been a positive trajectory towards achieving

the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating hunger in all its forms.

In 2017 the threat of famine returned for the first time since 2011 in four countries simultaneously – Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen and Nigeria – an indication of a broader trend. Conflict and instability, in some cases exacerbated by climatic extremes, led to displacement, collapsing food systems and lost livelihoods – leaving more than 20 million people needing assistance. While famine has been kept at bay so far, the total number of people in need is yet to drop – conflict in most cases is perpetuating children's hunger. These are not isolated episodes either – almost since its birth as a new nation, South Sudan has been grappling with conflict-related hunger.<sup>7</sup> The conflicts in Syria and Yemen are in their seventh and fourth years respectively, with hunger increasing over time as a result.



Leaves collected by Nyagoa, age nine, from the forest near her temporary home in Akobo, South Sudan. The leaves the family picks are just enough to stave off starvation, but don't provide the nutrients Nyagoa and her siblings need, and often make them sick.

PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAMS/SAVE THE CHILDREN



## Yemen: man-made malnutrition

In the past year Save the Children and its local partners have treated 65,000 children for malnutrition across Yemen.

In June 2018, the Saudi-led coalition launched an assault on the country's main port of Hodeidah, threatening to sever a lifeline of vital food, fuel and aid supplies. A quarter of children under the age of five living in the city were malnourished even before the assault began.

One-year-old Nusair was lucky to survive. He was suffering from a deadly combination of severe malnutrition and diarrhoeal disease when he reached a health centre supported by Save the Children. His mother, Suad, had braved landmines, checkpoints and airstrikes to get him there.

Nusair faced death a second time when an airstrike hit near the hospital where he was receiving treatment. Dozens died in the blast – but Nusair and his mother survived.

“My dream is simple – the war must stop so we can live in peace,” his mother says. “The casualties of this war are ordinary people, civilians.”

**Nusair is treated for malnutrition in a health facility in Hodeida, Yemen.**

# How does conflict drive hunger?

“Armed conflict disrupts food systems, destroys livelihoods, displaces people and leaves those who do not flee both terrified and unsure when they will eat their next meal.”<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between conflict and hunger is complex, with several factors reinforcing each other. For instance, forced displacement, loss of livelihoods and failing food systems are all interconnected. Similarly, there is no single pattern – conflict drives hunger in different ways in different places. The process is sometimes exacerbated by poverty, marginalisation and the climate, and is sometimes a deliberate military strategy.

## ACCESS

One of the most direct, and worrying, factors driving hunger in conflict zones is the denial of humanitarian access and access to services. According to Save the Children’s *War on Children* report, since 2010 there has been a 1500% rise in incidents of humanitarian access being denied.<sup>9</sup> In South Sudan and Nigeria last year only a small number of the total security incidents were enough to deny more than 850,000 people access to humanitarian aid.<sup>10</sup> In Yemen, a military blockade is crippling the country’s food supply and markets, leaving 17.8 million people without an adequate food supply.<sup>11</sup> In Syria, the use of siege tactics, the targeting of bakeries and the refusal to provide aid drew a warning from the UN that starvation as a weapon of war constitutes a war crime.<sup>12</sup> Yet warring parties frequently use starvation as a weapon of war and deny civilians the access to food they are entitled to under international law.

## DISPLACEMENT

In some places, for instance, cities under siege, populations are cut off from their food supply and unable to make a living. In other cases, it is displacement that creates crisis-levels of hunger. More than 15 million people were displaced by just six of the worst conflict-induced food crises in 2016,<sup>13</sup> before the threat of four famines in 2017. We also know that some of the highest

rates of acute malnutrition can be found among displaced communities.

Those who are forced to flee are unable to produce staple crops and manage livestock, severely limiting the availability of food. The mass displacement of communities looking for peace and security – often escaping unimaginable violence – also contributes to the failure of local food markets. There simply aren’t enough people left to buy or sell local produce. What’s more, with the average time people spend internally displaced now at 10 years,<sup>14</sup> the likelihood of communities returning to their land and helping the food supply recover is slim.

As well as those who are forced from their homes by violence and conflict, many more are displaced due to the economic effects of conflict and the collapse of livelihoods. We are seeing a man-made cycle of conflict, displacement and hunger.

## ECONOMIC DECLINE

Displacement and a lack of freedom of movement and access all contribute to economic decline, the collapse of livelihoods and drastically reduced spending power.<sup>15</sup> Conflict destroys basic public services, dismantles governments and devastates economies. Yemen’s currency, the Yemeni rial, has depreciated 131% compared with pre-crisis levels and food prices have soared due to the naval blockade. Even those who can access food probably can’t afford it.<sup>16</sup>

Scorched earth tactics are another way in which conflict drives hunger. As land and productive assets are deliberately laid to waste, starvation is used as a weapon of war and communities are forced to move. Insecurity also leads to the closure of large markets, affecting cross-border trade and local food supplies. And economies are crippled by siege tactics in an age where conflict has become increasingly urban-centred.



PHOTO: JOAN DEL MUNDO/SAVE THE CHILDREN

## DRC: Helping Kasadi recover

**Kasadi is treated for severe malnutrition and pneumonia.**

Kasadi, age one, was close to death when she was brought into a clinic supported by Save the Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Her mother, Kapigna, had fled into the bush after an attack on her village, leaving the family's food and belongings behind. After weeks in the bush, Kasadi began to lose weight and fell sick.

When she arrived at the clinic, Kasadi was just 4kg, less than half the weight of a healthy baby her age. She was also suffering from pneumonia and diarrhoea.

But after a course of antibiotics and three days of nutrition treatment her weight increased to 5.2kg. Save the Children has given Kapigna a two-month supply of enriched peanut paste to help Kasadi put on more weight and fully recover.

“In our hospital, the three diseases that affect children the most are measles, pneumonia and meningitis. Malnutrition is usually combined with one of the three illnesses,” says Didier Musanya Kabaz, the baby's nurse. “When malnourished, it's very easy for a child to get ill. The functions of the organs are heavily affected, increasing the susceptibility to diseases.”

# What is the effect of conflict and hunger on children?

The most severe impact of conflict-related hunger on children is loss of life. Hunger and associated diseases are responsible for more conflict deaths than the fighting itself.<sup>17</sup> Save the Children's figures reveal the scale of the problem – 4.5 million children are acutely malnourished, the most life-threatening form of malnutrition, in the world's ten worst conflict zones. That constitutes a violation of children's rights and often international humanitarian and criminal law. The UK government and international community cannot ignore this growing problem.

When malnutrition doesn't kill, its effects can be life-long, life-changing and intergenerational. If a child doesn't get the right nutrition in their first two to three years, the effects on their physical and cognitive development are irreversible.<sup>18</sup> Undernutrition makes children more vulnerable to illness, including killer diseases such as pneumonia and cholera. Overall, malnutrition contributes to nearly half of the deaths of children under five – that's 2.5 million children every year.<sup>19</sup> Maternal malnutrition is a danger too, contributing to low birthweight and child stunting. Malnutrition has also been shown to limit economic activity and social mobility, compounding a pattern of poverty.<sup>20</sup>

Children in refugee and IDP camps are particularly vulnerable to being recruited by armed groups,<sup>21</sup>

further fuelling conflict and a vicious cycle of instability and hunger. When moving from rural to urban areas, children are often forced to work to help support their families, and are exposed to sexual violence and exploitation. More than 35 million children across the world's ten worst conflict-related food crises are out of school – with a large proportion of them missing out on their right to education due to displacement and hunger.

Even where conflict and hunger do not force people from their homes, they still wreak havoc on children's ability to access basic services such as education and health. Families may be forced to choose between paying for healthcare and food or for school fees. A lack of staff and pupils forces some schools in conflict-affected areas to shut. And during conflict schools themselves often come under attack, or are used or occupied by armed forces.

As already discussed, the economic drivers and effects of conflict-related hunger can cripple public institutions. In South Sudan, teachers' salaries have to be funded by NGOs, and in Yemen public salaries have not been paid in almost two years in some cases – meaning households cannot afford food. Children are losing their lives, health and futures to conflict-related hunger.

# Conclusion and recommendations

The links between conflict and hunger, while complex, are clear. So is their impact on children – more children malnourished, more children likely to die, more children forced from their homes, more children out of education. Although there are multiple factors at play, we cannot escape the fact that the conflicts driving hunger are man-made and many of the consequences for children are avoidable. Despite the gravity of the challenge, there is action we can take to afford children the protection and rights to which they are entitled.

Save the Children is urging the UK government and its international partners to tackle both the causes and effects of conflict-related hunger by:

1. Recommitting to their obligations under international law to take all necessary measures to protect children – including from hunger. This should include a focus on tackling child malnutrition in conflict zones within a new Protection of Civilians strategy.
2. Working with international partners to safeguard and expand humanitarian access – improving the reporting, prevention and mitigation of the denial of humanitarian access, and holding violators to account.
3. Sustain humanitarian and development responses to malnutrition in fragile and conflict-affected states, based on early action, integrated and community-based interventions and building resilience – targeting the most marginalised and deprived first.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Save the Children analysis of SAM caseload and estimated mortality of children under five in ten worst conflict zones for children. Sources: UNOCHA (Humanitarian Needs Overview), Nutrition Cluster, Save the Children research.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Afghanistan, 2017. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/nutrition>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 2017. *Nutrition: Unlocking children's potential*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/nutrition/>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF/WHO/World Bank, 2017. *Levels and Trends in Child Malnutrition*. Available at: [http://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/jme\\_brochure2017.pdf](http://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/jme_brochure2017.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> FAO/WFP, 2018. *State of the World's Food Insecurity 2017*. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/i8386en\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/i8386en_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Statement by UK Ambassador Jonathan Allen, Chargé d'Affaires, at the Security Council Briefing on Conflict and Hunger, March 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/preventing-hunger-as-a-weapon-of-war>

<sup>7</sup> Buchanan, E., 2018. *Hungry for Peace: Exploring the links between conflict and hunger in South Sudan*. Oxfam. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/hungry-for-peace-exploring-the-links-between-conflict-and-hunger-in-south-sudan-620430>

<sup>8</sup> De Waal, A., 2015. *Armed Conflict and the Challenge of Hunger: Is an end in sight?* Global Hunger Index 2015. Available at: <http://www.globalhungerindex.org/issues-in-focus/2015.html>

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children, 2018. *The War on Children: Time to end grave violations against children in conflict*. Pp 30. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.net/waronchildren/pdf/waronchildren.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Special Rapporteur to the UN Secretary General on the Right to Food, 2017. *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, A/72/188*. Available at: [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/72/188](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/72/188)

<sup>11</sup> OCHA, 2018. *Yemen Humanitarian Dashboard January–June*. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-dashboard-january-june-2018>

<sup>12</sup> UN Secretary General, 2016. UNSG press conference January 2016.

Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/01/519982-starvation-weapon-war-crime-un-chief-warns-parties-conflict-syria#VpgaNlmoPAm>

<sup>13</sup> Samberg, L., 2017. *World Hunger is Increasing thanks to Wars and Climate Change. The Conversation*. Available at: <http://theconversation.com/world-hunger-is-increasing-thanks-to-wars-and-climate-change-84506>

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, 2018. *Forced Displacement: Refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced peoples (IDPs)*. ECHO Factsheet. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/refugees\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/refugees_en.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Special Rapporteur to the UN Secretary General on the Right to Food, 2017. *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, A/72/188*. Available at: [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/72/188](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/72/188)

<sup>16</sup> World Food Programme, 2018. *Yemen Market Watch June/July 2018*. Available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000074046/download/>

<sup>17</sup> Special Rapporteur to the UN Secretary General on the Right to Food, 2017. *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, A/72/188*. Pp 5. Available at: [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/72/188](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/72/188)

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF, 2017. *Nutrition: Unlocking children's potential*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/nutrition/>

<sup>19</sup> Save the Children, 2018. *Still Left Behind?* Pp 17. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/policy/Still%20Left%20Behind%20low%20res.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> One, 2013. *Food. Farming. Future: Breaking the cycle of malnutrition and poverty*. Available at: <https://www.one.org/international/policy/food-farming-future-breaking-the-cycle-of-malnutrition-and-poverty/#ftn3>

<sup>21</sup> Office SRSF for Children and Armed Conflict, *Displacement of Children*. Available at: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/emerging-issues-challenges/displacement-of-children/>

In this briefing paper, some names have been changed to protect identities.

**Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works in the UK and around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.**

Published by  
Save the Children  
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First published 2018

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