

# RUNNING ON EMPTY

THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL HUNGER CRISIS ON CHILDREN, GIRLS AND VULNERABLE GROUPS



The charity for  
girls' equality

The same pressures impacting food security globally are also impacting food prices in Australia and Plan International recognises the impact that this is having on vulnerable people, particularly children. We also recognise that the impact is disproportionate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia, particularly in remote communities.

Although this report focuses on the global crisis, the authors recognise the critical need to address food insecurity everywhere, and express our support for the many organisations, groups and communities already undertaking this critical action in Australia, including First Nations organisations and communities.

Plan International Australia continues to evolve our intersectional, gender responsive approach to research, and is working to ensure that this is underpinned by a commitment to decolonisation.

Plan International Australia is committed to ensuring that the rights of those participating in all our research projects, or data collection or analysis are respected and protected, in accordance with Ethical MERL Framework and our Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy.

**Cover Image:** In Mozambique, Amina, 11, only gets to eat once or twice a day.



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# FOREWORD



**Sara Sinada**  
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## A choice between the hungry and the starving: the humanitarian sector is being forced to make impossible decisions on the global hunger crisis and the world simply must do more.

As a humanitarian worker for the last 15 years, I have met incredibly inspiring people and communities from some of the world's most vulnerable places. I have witnessed remarkable examples of resilience and strength and survival and hope; of people overcoming all odds. But I have also seen so much human misery. Quite often the pain and misery is preventable and protracted.

In 2011, a quarter of a million people died in a terrible drought-induced famine in Somalia. Half of these people were children under the age of five. The humanitarian sector failed to act in a timely manner, despite the repeated warnings of a major food crisis. Following this historical failure, world leaders and humanitarian actors committed to end drought emergencies by 2022. Anticipatory work was emphasised as a priority to prevent future famines.

A decade later, we're facing a frighteningly similar situation – only this time, it could be a lot worse. The Global Report on Food Crises for 2022 anticipates we are on the brink of the worst recorded food crisis in history. By June 2022 the number of people facing acute food insecurity – whose access to food in the short term has been restricted to the point that their lives and livelihoods are at risk – had soared from 135 million in 2019 to 345 million in 82 countries, according to the UN's World Food Programme<sup>1</sup>. The head of that agency has warned of a famine of "biblical proportions".

Yet where is the shock, where is the outrage? The UN 2022 appeal for the hungriest nations only attracted 3% of its total ask of \$4.4 billion by May this year, leaving millions of people in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and other places to face starvation. With shrinking resources and enormous need, humanitarian actors are being forced to make an impossible decision – to abandon the hungry for the starving when it comes to

funding allocations. Food assistance is being shifted from locations where food aid recipients need it to have a dignified life, to locations where food aid recipients urgently need food assistance to survive. Assistance is being taken from those who formerly lived on only one meal a day, and given to those who cannot even find one meal a day.

Since 2020, we have been referring to the drivers of this current food crisis as the 'three Cs': conflict, climate, and COVID-19, and their economic consequences. The impact these three factors have had just in the last year are frightening. Conflict and war have pushed 139 million people worldwide into acute food insecurity, up from 99 million in 2020. The climate crisis and weather extremes have pushed 23 million people into that same category, up from 15 million the year before. More than 30 million people have become food insecure since 2021 as a result of economic shocks, mainly due to the pandemic fallout.

Now, more than ever, we are calling for a drastically escalated response and large scale action to protect lives and livelihoods and support sustainable food systems and production where it is needed most.

Conflicts around the world and mass migration can always be traced back to hunger. Governments and donors have a choice – to act and commit funding now to prevent starvation and famine, or to spend it down the track in peacekeeping or intervention as countries collapse, conflict soars and migration explodes.

While the reality is grim, there's still a chance to turn things around. The time to act is now. We hope we're not too late this time around.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and now the war in Ukraine have created the perfect storm for global hunger. As a result more than 10,000 children<sup>2</sup> are dying each day. That's the equivalent of an Australian classroom dying every 3.5 minutes.

More than half a million people in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Madagascar and Yemen alone are at risk of catastrophic famine. The UN has warned that in eight regions of Somalia, where food shortages and drought have killed millions of livestock and caused crops to fail, could see full-blown famine in a matter of months<sup>3</sup>.

Individually these events would be difficult for countries in food crisis to manage, but when merged with the devastation of protracted conflicts, climate change, rising food costs and gender-based violence it creates almost impossible living conditions.

Individuals, families, communities and economies are being devastated by these combined events. And it is the most marginalised people who are experiencing the greatest suffering. Children, women and girls, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ communities are systemically disadvantaged and discriminated against, which often means they go without adequate food, health care and resources, leaving them facing malnutrition, poverty and discriminatory violence.

Girls in particular are at extreme risk. When food is scarce, girls are the first to be pulled out of school and the last to be fed. Entrenched gender inequalities mean that they are given less food to eat and are the first in the family to skip meals. Recent data has shown that rates of child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence in hunger hot spots have soared in the last year.

Research shows that if we invest in feeding women and girls, the situation for families and entire communities in hunger hotspots can dramatically improve. School meals programs – such as those rolled out by the WFP to 17 million children worldwide – boost enrollment and attendance among girls, and for every year a girl stays in primary school her future income increases by 20%. It also makes her more likely to marry later, have fewer children and avoid being a victim of violence<sup>4</sup>.

There is an urgent need for humanitarian assistance and funding to overcome this unprecedented combination of challenges and save lives.



For the past six months, 21-year-old mother of two, Kogol, has been sheltering in a school classroom in Pibor after fleeing her home in the south due to attacks on her village.

# KEY FINDINGS

## ■ Children are bearing the brunt of this crisis

A staggering **10,000 children are dying of hunger every single day**<sup>5</sup>. That's the equivalent of 24 children — a typical Australian school class — dying every 3.5 minutes. Between school starting at 9am and recess at 11.30am, the equivalent of 60 classrooms will die of starvation<sup>6</sup>.

More than 17,400 children and young people under 20 have died of COVID-19 worldwide since the pandemic started<sup>7</sup>. **Child deaths from starvation and related causes exceed that figure every 42 hours.**

An estimated **45 million children under the age of five** now suffer from wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition, which increases children's risk of death by **up to 12 times**.

In Somalia, which is on the brink of famine, it is feared that by the end of 2022, 1.5 million children under the age of five will be acutely malnourished, including 380,000 who are likely to be severely malnourished<sup>8</sup>.



**10,000 CHILDREN**  
are dying of hunger every single day.

## ■ Hunger disproportionately impacts women – particularly girls

During times of food scarcity, women and girls go hungrier than men and boys. Of the 690 million people who are food insecure in the world today, **60% are women and girls – that's more than 16 times the population of Australia**<sup>9</sup>.

Child marriage is further fuelled by food insecurity. In times of crisis, families may resort to arranging marriages for their daughters. In South Sudan, **4 million girls have been affected by early or forced marriage so far in 2022 an increase from 2.7 million in 2021**<sup>10</sup>. More than half of all girls in South Sudan are married before they turn 18.

Malnutrition in girls results in poor growth and development of the body, which in turn can result in complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as low birthweight babies. Complications from pregnancy or childbirth remains one of the leading causes of death among girls aged 15-19 globally.

During food crises, girls are often reported to be forced into sexual exploitation in exchange for food or resources.



**4 MILLION GIRLS IN SOUTH SUDAN**  
have been affected by early or forced marriage so far in 2022 – an increase from 2.7 million in 2021.

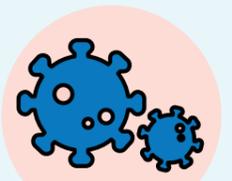
## ■ COVID-19, conflict and climate change have created a perfect storm

An additional 161 million people faced hunger in 2020, the first year of the pandemic<sup>11</sup>. On top of the existing acute levels of global hunger, in its first year **COVID-19 pushed an additional 300 people worldwide into hunger every minute.**

The war in Ukraine threatens to worsen the food crisis in struggling nations. The World Food Programme (WFP) buys half of the wheat it distributes around the world from Ukraine, which will create food shortages and drive food prices even higher<sup>12</sup>.

Increasing greenhouse gas emissions are damaging essential food crops such as maize and wheat. It comes as food production **needs to ramp up by at least 60%** to meet the demands of the world's 9.6 billion people by 2050<sup>13</sup>.

With resources dwindling and organisations at the forefront of fighting hunger struggling to access funding and food, humanitarian groups are being left to make impossible decisions when it comes to funding allocation. In South Sudan, the WFP has needed to direct all funds to save the starving over the hungry – **leaving 1.7 million hungry people who were recipients of food aid on the brink of famine.**



**COVID-19**  
has pushed an additional 300 people worldwide into hunger every minute.

Plan International South Sudan and the UN World Food Programme are distributing food aid to hundreds of vulnerable families in Greater Pibor and surrounds, with a focus on breastfeeding mothers, pregnant women and families with children under five.





Ada, 21, Mozambique has not been allocated any land to grow food.

# WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP

## The Australian Government must:

- **Immediately commit to urgent famine prevention relief of \$150 million in the critical hunger hot spots of Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.**

The Australian Government should prioritise working in partnerships with NGOs who are already working in hard to reach areas.

- **Develop a long-term strategy that complements and supplements global efforts to address the root causes of food insecurity and invest \$200 million annually over 3 years of new and additional multi-year funding.**

This strategy must address the gendered impact of food insecurity and particularly social protection and safety nets for women, adolescent girls and children.

## Governments, donors and humanitarian actors must:

- **Halt the global hunger crisis now by investing in anticipatory action to protect people against the risk of hunger and famine.**

Prevention and response to the hunger crisis must be tackled from an age and gender perspective by ensuring gender-responsive child protection, gender-based violence prevention, maternal, child, and sexual and reproductive health services and education.

- **Mobilise the UN's global target of US\$21.5 billion of flexible, unearmarked funding, for emergency food assistance for famine relief and prevention to assist 49 million people at the brink of famine.**



A mother feeds her child in Pibor county where hunger is particularly acute following devastating floods last year, that destroyed people's homes, crops and livelihoods.

# MILLIONS OF LIVES IMPACTED

A staggering 49 million people in 81 countries are living on the edge of famine. The number of people facing acute food insecurity has soared from 135 million before the pandemic to 345 million, according to the UN's World Food Programme – more than 13 times the population of Australia<sup>14</sup>.

The ongoing global food crisis is a worsening problem the world cannot turn away from. Millions of people are experiencing dire food shortages and the numbers are increasing each day.

According to a recent United Nations report, the number of people affected by hunger globally rose to as many as 828 million in 2021, an increase of about **46 million** since 2020 and **150 million** since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 2.37 billion people did not have access to adequate food in 2020 – up by 320 million people in just one year<sup>15</sup>.

Globally, the world is not on track to achieve targets for any of the nutrition indicators that made up the Sustainable Development Goals endorsed by the World Health Assembly by 2030<sup>16</sup>.

**“We are facing hunger on an unprecedented scale, food prices have never been higher, and millions of lives and livelihoods are hanging in the balance.”**



— António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations<sup>17</sup>.

# INTERSECTIONAL EXPERIENCES

**In the past, crises have exacerbated existing barriers and discriminatory practices, making it harder for vulnerable people including women and girls, children and young people, the elderly, LGBTIQ+ communities and people with a disability to respond and recover.**

## Gender

In every region of the world – Africa, Asia, Latin America, Northern America and Europe – during times of food scarcity, women and girls commonly go hungrier than men and boys<sup>18</sup>. Of the 690 million people who are food insecure in the world today, 60 percent are women and girls – that’s more than 16 times the population of Australia<sup>19</sup>.

Young children and girls are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and the impact of the hunger crisis on adolescent girls in particular is often unacknowledged. Girls are being exposed to new risks while having their wellbeing and future prospects undermined. Women are often excluded from what little food is available because they are disempowered by gender-based inequalities. Across the board, they have less decision-making powers, limited access to education, lower access to resources and services, and can be subjected to gender-based violence<sup>20</sup>. Gender norms and entrenched gender inequalities result in girls and young women often eating less and last when food is scarce<sup>21</sup>, and their nutritional needs may take a back seat to those of boys and men<sup>22</sup>. A lack of food puts girls at increased risk of dropping out of school due to costs or being expelled due to low engagement rates. When household incomes drop and food is scarce, girls are at risk their families will sell them into early or forced marriages, putting them at risk of early pregnancy<sup>23</sup>.

One 13-year-old girl living in Somalia told Plan International that her biggest fear is being sent to the city to work or being married off in exchange for money:

**“Whenever I see a man speaking with my mother, I get scared thinking that I am the deal.”**

A 15-year-old from Kenya said:

**“This year has been the toughest year ever for girls as the lack of water and food makes some girls offer sexual activities in exchange for sanitary pads, food and clean water.”**



**“As many as 45 million children suffer from the most severe form of malnutrition. Girls are the first to be taken out of school and the last to be fed when food runs low.”**



— Dave Husy, Deputy CEO, Plan International Australia.

The results are evident in health conditions such as anaemia. An estimated 29.9 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years in 2019 around the world are affected by anaemia and it is most prevalent in less developed countries. More than 30 per cent of women in Africa and Asia were affected by anaemia, compared with only 14.6 per cent of women in Northern America and Europe<sup>24</sup>.

The prevalence is particularly high in Western Africa, representing 51.8 per cent, with little progress since 2012 when it was 52.9 per cent. No region has shown real progress in reducing anaemia with trends stagnating or worsening in all regions except Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>25</sup>.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the gender gap in food insecurity. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity grew to become 10 percent higher among women than men in 2020, compared to 6 percent in 2019<sup>26</sup>.

The experiences of trans, gender diverse and non-binary people are not consistently captured in food security data reporting – collecting data from this community can put them at risk of further discrimination. However it is well known that their experiences of gender-based discrimination and inequity result in higher rates of poverty and poorer health and wellbeing outcomes.

## Children

Hunger affects millions of children around the world and it has serious health impacts. Their physical growth and brain development is impaired and devastatingly, this is irreversible. Often children who don't have enough to eat lack the energy to go to school, learn properly, or even play.

When children are malnourished, their bodies aren't strong enough to fight diseases and this means they're vulnerable to illnesses such as diarrhoea, malaria, pneumonia and measles. In 2020, experts estimated 22 per cent of children were affected by stunting, 6.7 per cent by wasting and 5.7 per cent by being overweight<sup>27</sup>.

Stunting is largely irreversible and the outlook for children with stunted growth is bleak. As children they are more prone to sickness and miss out on learning opportunities. Stunting is associated with an underdeveloped, diminished mental ability and learning capacity, and increased risks of nutrition-related chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity in future<sup>28</sup>. As adults they are more likely to earn less

income and suffer from chronic diseases. Stunted mothers are more likely to give birth to children who will be stunted, leading to intergenerational effects of poverty and future stunting<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, preventing extreme hunger and stunting from a young age can truly change people's futures and help eradicate poverty.

However sadly, COVID-19 has worsened conditions for children suffering chronic hunger. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates an additional 5 to 7 million children became stunted and between 570,000 and 2.8 million more were wasted<sup>30</sup>.

**“LGBTQI+ people are among the most vulnerable and marginalised in many societies, and among those most at risk from COVID-19. In countries where same-sex relations are criminalised or trans people targeted, they might not even seek treatment for fear of arrest or being subjected to violence.**

– UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet<sup>31</sup>.



## Older adults

Discrimination against older people exists not only in social settings, but in the workplace and in the provision of health and other critical services and resources. Ageist attitudes and practices frequently compound discrimination older people may already suffer on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity or disability. Older women and people with disability are at particular risk of aggravated forms of discrimination<sup>32</sup>. This can prevent them from receiving equitable access to food and nutrition.

## Disability

People with disabilities experience a greater risk of malnutrition and food insecurity<sup>33</sup>. More than a third (36 per cent) of people or households with disabilities do not always have food to eat, compared to 23 per cent of people or households without disabilities<sup>34</sup>.

People with disabilities experience barriers to accessing food and good nutrition because they are overrepresented in unemployment and lower earnings in employment data. If they live in countries where they receive social benefits, these are often insufficient and don't cover health-related expenses, pushing food and good nutrition down the priority scale.

Where food assistance programs exist, information may not be accessible nor disseminated to persons with disabilities. They are also stymied by inaccessible designs of food products and packaging, supermarkets, food distribution sites and lack of accessible transportation.

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Sadly, infants, children and youth with disabilities don't always benefit from school-based nutrition programmes because they are less likely to attend school<sup>35</sup>. The gender gap between men and women with access to food is 7 per cent for those with disabilities compared to 3 per cent for those without disabilities.

Girls with disabilities are commonly more underweight than boys with disabilities due to culturally determined gender preferences<sup>36</sup>. What's more, persons with disabilities are often barred from food production systems, despite being overrepresented in low-and middle-income countries and in rural areas, where there is a higher reliance on farming activities.

Infants, children under five, and their mothers are the primary targets for Plan International's nutrition programs, and those with disabilities are prioritised in programs. In schools where Plan International runs school feeding programs, for example, there are often a number of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) activities to ensure those with disabilities still have access to bathrooms and handwashing facilities and that they are able to access the warm meal offered per day. In cases where adults with disabilities cannot access food distribution points, Plan International project staff deliver food rations to their homes.

Local laws, policies and customs may prevent them from controlling land and resources, and they may also be prohibited from signing loan or credit contracts necessary to develop land and invest in farming equipment such as seeds and fertiliser<sup>37</sup>.



A student in Zambia eats a meal provided through Plan International's school feeding program, designed to encourage children to stay in school.

# COUNTRY ANALYSIS: ZIMBABWE

## “Children will suffer malnutrition”

In Zimbabwe, the greatest issue is a severe and prolonged drought that has gripped the country in various forms since 2002. While some years have been less severe, they have still gone weeks without a drop of rain and it is affecting even the hardiest crops.

“Even the drought-resistant crops, like sorghum, they could not stand the drought, they wilted and died,” says Titus Mafemba, Humanitarian Response Support Specialist at Plan International in Zimbabwe.

“The information so far shows that we are down from last year by almost 50% in terms of harvest. And as such we have a got a food deficit of up to 600,000 metric tonnes. The western part of the country and the southern part of the country are severely affected with up to 60 to 70% of the households not even going into their fields to harvest anything because there is nothing there.”

The flow-on effect means a disaster for local livestock and a crisis for already vulnerable households who have seen the basics, like cereal, double in price in just a few months.

“Right now we are already receiving distress calls from some communities who have failed to harvest,” says Titus. “What this means is that children will suffer malnutrition because they only have access to grains, not oil and protein. This is the scenario among the most vulnerable households.”

“People are withdrawing school children to go and work for food,” Titus adds. “Last year 23% of children were out of school across the country; when you are distressed you don't have a source of income so the children are put to work.”

Not only are adolescent girls the first to be pulled from school, but they are at increased risk of child, early and forced marriage.

“Parents no longer find it viable to keep girls of 15 or 16 years in their households, when they are starving they take the option of getting them married for food,” he says.

“People are withdrawing school children to go and work for food.”

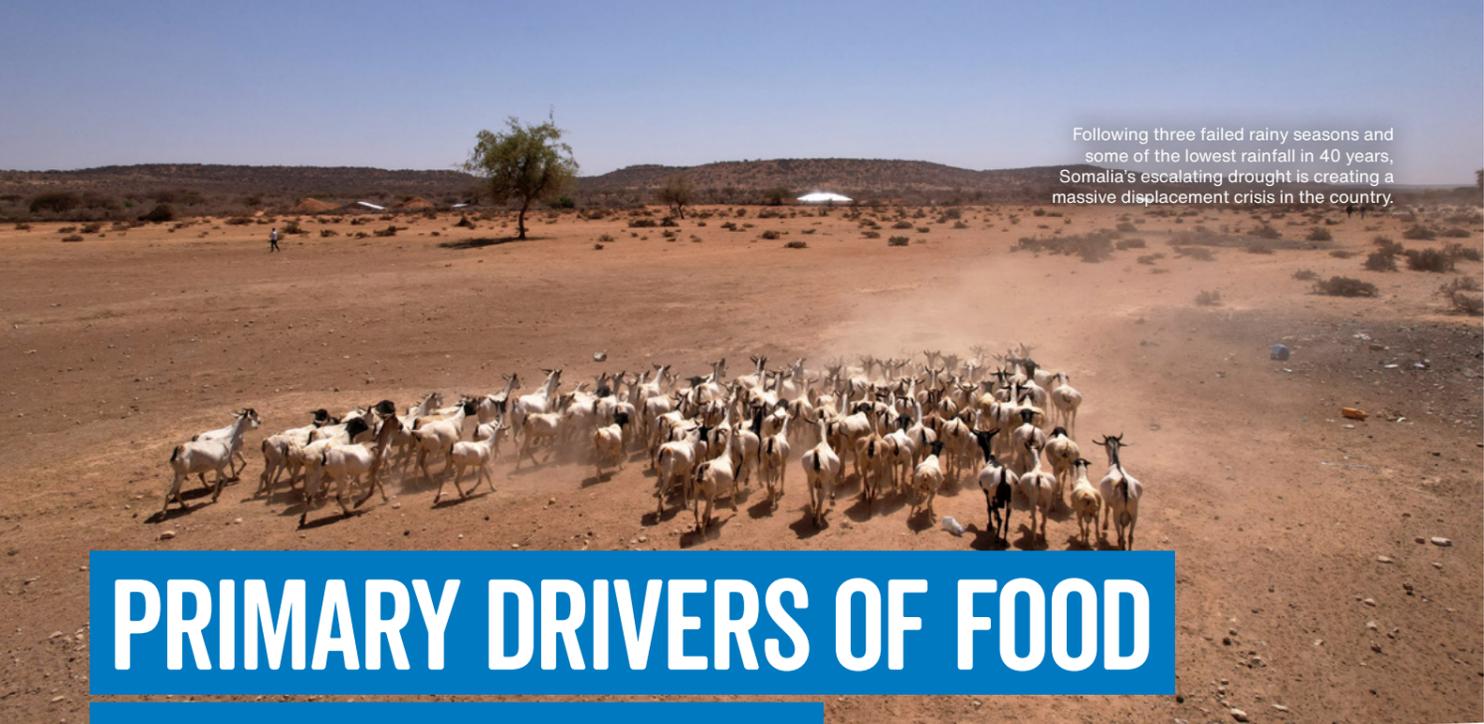
”

Titus says that Plan International is doing all they can to help stem the crisis, but when you are food impoverished you have a single focus.

“People are saying to me ‘How can I attend that meeting when I am hungry, when my children are hungry, I have to go and look for food somewhere else, to go to far away districts to find food to support my family.’”

“Parents no longer find it viable to keep girls of 15 or 16 years in their households, when they are starving they take the option of getting them married for food.”

”



Following three failed rainy seasons and some of the lowest rainfall in 40 years, Somalia's escalating drought is creating a massive displacement crisis in the country.

# PRIMARY DRIVERS OF FOOD

# CRISIS 2020-2022

Food insecurity is surging due to conflict, climate change and, of course, COVID-19. These are not individual factors, but intersecting forces that have combined to create new problems such as rising food prices, which has led to food riots and this, in turn, has created political unrest.

## COVID-19

Almost three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, food availability and access has drastically deteriorated. Various interventions by governments around the world have limited the spread of the virus and saved lives, but they also brought about an unprecedented worldwide economic recession.

161 million extra people faced hunger in 2020, the first year of the pandemic<sup>38</sup> – more than 300 people per minute.

This has exacerbated pre-existing malnutrition problems, lowered already low incomes, and worsened gender inequalities and food scarcity. Women bore the brunt of the pandemic's effects with their paid and unpaid workloads increasing, with the backdrop of their incomes decreasing, and access to nutritious foods being curtailed<sup>39</sup>. Children are therefore also affected at unprecedented levels. Every 33 hours the total number of child deaths from starvation and related causes exceeds the total number of young people who have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic started<sup>40</sup>.

**Every 33 hours the total number of child deaths from starvation and related causes exceeds the total number of young people who have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic started.**

## Conflict

Conflict negatively affects almost every aspect of a food system – from production, harvesting, processing and transport, to input supply, financing, marketing and consumption<sup>41</sup>. More than half of the world's undernourished people and almost 80 percent of stunted children live in countries struggling with conflict, violence or fragility<sup>42</sup>.

There has been a rise in the percentage of countries experiencing conflict and a surge in the number of violent conflicts with conflict-related deaths increasing from an all-time low in 2005.

These conflicts have driven people from their homes, with refugees and internally displaced persons doubling in a decade, from 40 million in 2010 to more than 80 million in 2020<sup>43</sup>.

Disturbingly, the starvation of civilians is sometimes utilised as a method of warfare by parties to conflict<sup>44</sup>.

## Climate change

Climate change has majorly disrupted food production across the globe, with the most pronounced changes in crop growth found in sub-Saharan African countries already at high risk of climate impacts on food availability and affordability<sup>45</sup>.

Maize and wheat are a staple component in the diets of people across many parts of less developed countries. Nearly 950 million metric tonnes of maize and almost 700 million metric tonnes of wheat are consumed annually. Future projections in global yield trends of both maize and wheat indicate a worrying decline due to increasing greenhouse gas emissions. However, it is expected food production must increase by at least 60 per cent to meet the demands of the world's 9.6 billion people by 2050<sup>46</sup>.

## Drought

The eastern Horn of Africa is experiencing severe drought, following a number of below-average rainfall seasons since 2020. Millions of people face water shortages, and these water shortages and a lack of vegetation impact on livestock production. Ethiopia and Kenya have seen over 3 million livestock deaths<sup>52</sup>. Livestock prices have halved in many areas, severely restricting the income of livestock dependent households<sup>54</sup>, whilst food prices have increased. Reduced water availability and the

**Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Sudan and Yemen are among countries where 584,000 people currently face famine-like conditions as climate change intersects with the other huge driver of hunger, conflict – pushing 49 million to the brink of famine. This number has risen from 27 million in 2019<sup>48</sup>.**

consequent reduction in agriculture production is a major reason for undernourishment and hunger.

The Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC) for 2022 indicates that the worsening drought and weather extremes are putting some areas across eight African nations at risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5). Food prices continue to rise sharply due to the high demand and dwindling supply of food.

In 1991-92 the world faced the worst drought in a century. Named the "Apocalypse" drought, this crisis hit most of Southern Africa and caused the death of at least 800,000 people<sup>47</sup>. Almost a decade ago a quarter of a million people died from a drought induced famine in Somalia – half of whom were children under the age of five. The humanitarian sector failed to act in a timely manner, despite the repeated warnings of a food crisis. Following this historical failure, world leaders and humanitarian actors committed to end drought emergencies by 2022. Anticipatory work was emphasized to prevent future famines. A decade later, experts are warning of a similar, if not worse, situation unfolding.



Mother-of-four Mary, aged 22, plans to cook a cup of sorghum a day for her family - all the food they have left.

## War in Ukraine

War in Ukraine and its devastating effects have rippled across the global landscape, undermining food security and nutrition efforts. More than 10 million Ukrainians have fled their homes including four million who have escaped as refugees. However, many hundreds of thousands remain trapped in makeshift shelters without access to safe and nutritious food, water, and medicine. Ninety per cent of those displaced are women and children<sup>49</sup>.

These tragedies have disrupted food production, especially wheat supplies to countries throughout Africa. Ukraine is a major manufacturer and exporter of wheat and the UN World Food Programme – the largest humanitarian food agency and largest provider of school feeding programs – buys half of the wheat it distributes globally from Ukraine. The war has pushed global food prices to new heights and squeezed supplies to countries already struggling with food scarcity, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda and South Sudan<sup>50</sup>.

The war has largely shut off grain exports from Ukraine and is hampering Ukrainian farmers' ability to plant the 2022 crop, which is expected to be reduced by nearly a quarter<sup>51</sup>.

**“The war in Ukraine is supercharging a three-dimensional crisis – food, energy and finance – with devastating impacts on the world’s most vulnerable people, countries and economies.**



– António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations<sup>52</sup>.

# PROJECTIONS FOR 2023 AND BEYOND

The damage wreaked by COVID-19 on global food security could see 660 million people still facing hunger in 2030, which is 30 million more people than in a scenario where the pandemic never occurred<sup>53</sup>.

Since the Sustainable Development Goals were set in 2015, the number of people facing hunger has grown by around 180 million. Much of this increase has occurred since 2019 (150 million). Sadly, the numbers will continue to rise unless immediate action is taken<sup>54</sup>. There is an urgent need for \$21.5 billion for famine relief and prevention, and the WFP is forecast to raise less than half of the required funds<sup>55</sup>.

## Humanitarian interventions

A host of food, education and health programs are helping global communities beat hunger and its devastating ripple effects. The World Food Programme's food assistance scheme provides a critical lifeline to 87 million vulnerable people across the world<sup>56</sup>.

The WFP has outlined six recommended pathways to transform food systems to address food insecurity and malnutrition, and ensure access to affordable healthy diets for all.

These are:

1. integrating humanitarian, development and peacebuilding policies in conflict-affected areas;
2. scaling up climate resilience across food systems;
3. strengthening the resilience of the most vulnerable to economic adversity;
4. intervening along the food supply chains to lower the cost of nutritious foods;
5. tackling poverty and structural inequalities, ensuring interventions are pro-poor and inclusive;
6. strengthening food environments and changing consumer behaviour to promote dietary patterns with positive impacts on human health and the environment<sup>57</sup>.

Climate resilience programs are slowly emerging across developing countries. These hinge on adopting climate-sensitive approaches in food and agricultural investments as well as increased partnerships and large-scale funding to support other programs that mitigate disaster risks.

Examples include agricultural insurance in Zambia available for vulnerable households that adopt conservation agriculture techniques<sup>58</sup> and forecasting tools that give 15 days notice of adverse weather events<sup>59</sup>.

Plan International is working in 16,673 communities across 75 countries to help 6.1 million girls and young women receive better access to education, and support 5.1 million girls and young women to receive sexual and reproductive health services<sup>60</sup>.



In Guatemala nearly half of children (47%) suffer from chronic malnutrition.

Mother-of-four, Kadnok, walks for a full day to reach a food distribution centre. Her card entitles her to 195kgs of sorghum and additional items such as beans, oil and salt, to help feed her family for three months.



# COUNTRY ANALYSIS: SOUTH SUDAN

Food insecurity is worsening in South Sudan. In 2021, it was among the 10 countries with the highest number of people suffering crisis or worse (IPC-3). Now, it is one of four countries at risk of famine, catastrophic level (IPC-5), alongside Ethiopia, Madagascar and Yemen<sup>61</sup>.

## Country profile

Population:

**11.19**  
MILLION  
of which,  
**7.74**  
MILLION

in food crisis  
or worse

Living in:

**80%**  
rural areas

**20%**  
urban areas<sup>62</sup>

Access to  
basic services:

**7%**  
electricity

**41%**  
basic drinking water<sup>63</sup>

Income:

**80%**  
less than \$1 a day<sup>64</sup>

Political stability:

**INDEPENDENCE** >  
from Sudan in 2011

Fragile country torn  
apart by wide-spread  
conflict.

> Beset by political  
unrest<sup>65</sup>, violence<sup>66</sup>,  
and flooding<sup>67</sup>.

Child mortality rate:

**78** deaths  
per **1,000** live  
births

**75 per cent** of child deaths  
are from preventable diseases  
such as diarrhoea, malaria  
and pneumonia<sup>68</sup>.

**4 MILLION** girls affected by early or forced  
marriage in 2022, an increase  
from 2.7 million in 2021<sup>69</sup>

## “The situation is getting worse”

Since 2021, 7.19 million people in South Sudan were in food crisis or worse (IPC-3, 4, 5), meaning their food consumption is inadequate and their nutritional status is serious. Tragically, 110,000 of those people are in food catastrophe (IPC- 5) because their food intake is extremely inadequate and their nutritional status is extremely critical<sup>70</sup>.

The number of people in crisis or worse (IPC-3 or above) increased from 6.5 million in May to July 2020 to 7.2 million by April to July 2021, which is the highest number on record<sup>71</sup>.

Climate change is driving more frequent and intense weather patterns in South Sudan. Unprecedented flooding in 2022 has badly affected 33 of the landlocked nation's 79 counties, making life ever-more precarious for those affected<sup>72</sup>.

The pandemic pushed up food costs because of its disruptions to South Sudan's domestic markets and trade, which were already suffering from high transport costs and low average incomes<sup>73</sup>.

The cumulative impact of COVID-19, conflict and poverty has resulted in 762,000 internally displaced persons (whose main source of food has become food assistance<sup>74</sup> and disrupted essential public services including water and sanitation<sup>75</sup>).

Violence is hurting the people of South Sudan in more ways than one. It is not only taking lives — between June and September last year at least 440 civilians were killed in fighting — but robbing some of the hungriest people of food, denying children access to education and pushing up the cost of living. Warring parties, based on ethnicities and political beliefs, have also disrupted the<sup>76</sup> delivery of critical humanitarian assistance to highly food-insecure people<sup>77</sup>.

The situation is predicted to worsen as rising food prices, in part due to the conflict in Ukraine, have forced donors to cut funding into South Sudan resulting in cuts to food assistance for 1.7 million people this year. A recent Plan International assessment report revealed a girl is at increased risk of being married off after any kind of food assistance has stopped. Communities interviewed as part of the assessment also reported that children are being forced into work and finding food for their families instead of going to school. And this year, according to the UN led Humanitarian Response Plan, 4 million girls were affected by early or forced marriage, an increase from 2.7 million in 2021.



**“Since 2019 the situation has been worsening. In 2019 about 7.1 million people were estimated to be in need. In 2020 this jumped to 7.5 million, in 2021 it was 8.3 million and in 2022 we are talking about 8.9 million, so the situation is actually getting worse and not better.**

**Why this is really concerning is that a lack of food is the basis for everything to degenerate. When there is no food it becomes the survival of the fittest so you are going to have heightened cases of inter-community violence.**

**We may see a situation where, when families do not have food, they try to give the girls away for marriage so that they can get some form of dowry and feed themselves. So we fear there will be an erosion of the gains made over the years in terms of trying to transform communities and trying to promote the education of the girls.**

— Francis Oppong,  
Director of Program Development,  
Plan International South Sudan.



## Hellish conditions for women, children and people with disabilities

The severe lack of food in South Sudan is a heavy burden on its most vulnerable citizens. Three million children under five years were wasted in 2021, including 302,080 severely wasted, and 675,550 pregnant and lactating women were acutely malnourished<sup>78</sup>.

Families are struggling to feed their babies and toddlers with only 13% of children aged six to 23 months receiving the minimum dietary diversity, 23% of them receiving minimum meal frequency and only 7% of them receiving the minimum acceptable diet<sup>79</sup>.

There are currently 1.2 million people living with disabilities in South Sudan, around a fifth of whom have impairments that have been caused by violence<sup>80</sup>. Conflict and poor health resources mean there is little assistance for these people and what's more, limited research on their living conditions.

The risk of gender-based violence increases with food insecurity. Horrifyingly, rape and gang rape is already widely perpetrated by armed forces against women and girls. Instead of opportunistic attacks, witnesses and victims report the attacks usually involve armed soldiers actively hunting down women and girls in a systematic and widespread method. Such violence can be directly related to the withholding of food supplies, or can prohibit women and girls from participating in public spaces and accessing supplies they need.

Numerous reported rapes have resulted in death and for the survivors, the trauma is longlasting. Pregnant women suffering miscarriages, some victims contracting sexually transmitted infections and others who become pregnant as a result of rape being abandoned by their husbands and families<sup>81</sup>.

Even when the country is not in conflict, sexual and, gender-based violence is common across South Sudan. Half of all women are married early, before they reach 18, and the country has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world<sup>82</sup>. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is illegal in South Sudan, however 27.2% of South Sudanese girls under 14 years have undergone FGM<sup>83</sup>. All these circumstances are further exacerbated in times of food crisis.



Around 60% of the population in South Sudan are predicted to face acute food shortages this year, including 1.4 million children under the age of five.

# “We must start saving lives as soon as possible”



**Berhe Tewoldeberhan**  
Plan International Australia  
Head of Disaster Risk Management & Senior Food Security/Livelihood Recovery Program Manager

“I have seen a great deal in the many decades I have been working in South Sudan – but right now I am more worried than I have ever been for this country, and indeed for many other countries that are on the edge of famine right now.

One of my early experiences in South Sudan was in the early 1990s, when it was engulfed in war and internal displacement. Back then, huge amounts of people were totally dependent on aid for food.

There was one situation in South Sudan back in 1992 that will always stay with me, it was a pivotal moment in my career. Due to escalating violence and a number of humanitarian workers being killed while on deployment, all aid groups including the UN were forced to withdraw from communities of internally displaced people we were assisting and leave the country until the situation became a bit safer.

It took two weeks for us to get back to these villages, and we knew it would be bad when we got back because we knew that without aid, these people literally had no food. But even with that knowledge, when we did take that convoy back in, I was shocked, it was unlike anything I had witnessed before. Most of the women were dressed in black – they were in mourning. When I asked them what happened, it turned out most of their children had died of starvation. Up to 50 children had died in those two weeks, just in that community. It was shattering, devastating. We had to start distributing food immediately.

In another community, I met a nine-year-old girl who was the primary caretaker for her two younger siblings, once of those a baby. She had lost both of her parents to hunger-related issues.

The difference between now and then is that in the 1990s there were enough global food supplies we could provide these people – the issues were really around access to communities. But now, in 2022, the food crisis is compounded with climate change, with the economic fall-out from COVID-19, with many wars and internal conflict – and the situation in Ukraine of course. Global

food supplies are a very big issue, I have never really seen anything like this before and it is hugely worrying.

“Most of the women were dressed in black – they were in mourning. When I asked them what happened, it turned out most of their children had died of starvation. Up to 50 children had died in those two weeks, just in that community.”

”

If we don't intervene and act now – we are going to see a lot more deaths of children and vulnerable people. Just recently, two children died of starvation in South Sudan, a worrying sign of things to come.

What lesson can we draw on from that crisis in the '90s? That we need to act now, before it's too late, before this happens again. When it reaches this stage, we must start saving lives as early as possible.”



The conflict in South Sudan has led to a large number of people being displaced.

**Sadly conflict is expected to continue throughout 2022, limiting humanitarian access and spelling tragedy for an untold number of victims.**

Flooding in 2021 has rendered families reliant on markets, while future rainfall forecasts for the 2022 rainy season point to an increased probability of above average rains. This is likely to cause further agricultural losses to crops and livestock, as well as increase displaced populations<sup>84</sup>. The likelihood of cereal prices rising due to the war in Ukraine is due to aggravate the problems of high food costs and food scarcity. South Sudan's economy relies on wheat from Ukraine and the Russian Federation, which is re-exported by Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania<sup>85</sup>.

“I don't have enough milk in my breasts. My two-week old baby cannot stop crying due to hunger. This is the struggle I go through with her. I was eight months pregnant when armed men from neighboring (sic) communities attacked our village. I struggled to run with the rest of the community despite being heavily pregnant, and I managed to get away before the attackers could kill me.”

”

— Kengen, from Greater Pibor

“Before the 2019 floods, I had cultivated and hoped to harvest enough grain. Unfortunately, when the floods came, most of my crop was washed away. The little I harvested was taken away when the attackers hit our village the first time. I ran to save my children and so could not save any grain.”

”

— Mary, 22, from Pibor<sup>86</sup>

“I worry a lot that my children have to go to sleep hungry. I worry that the flood water might take our home and even the school, which they may never get to go to if the conflict continues. I no longer hope to return to home, that hope is slowly fading away. I feel safer here, even though the floods might rise and we would not know where to go.”

”

— Alam, from Greater Pibor

“We share this same room. We have no privacy. Whenever I want to change my clothes, I just raise the bedsheet and then change, which is quite uncomfortable. When one of us is cooking, the rest of us have to wait because we know we will share in the meal. We all take a cup of porridge once a day in order to save our food and make it last longer. Each family takes turns to cook. This way, we save both on meals and firewood for cooking.”

”

— Kogol, 21, from Pibor

# CONCLUSIONS

**The world cannot stand by while millions of people, including children, slide into famine.**

Humanitarian assistance is critical in the 81 countries where 49 million people are dying or soon to die if they don't receive emergency help.

It is critical that funding for food, nutrition, education, child protection and livelihood support is urgently scaled up. This includes essential school feeding programmes to reach the most vulnerable: children, women and girls, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ communities.

The global target of \$6.6 billion to prevent further famine has not yet been met and the world is not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger by 2030. Governments and donors must urgently step up and meet the funding gap if ongoing deaths due to hunger are to be prevented.



In Kenya's Tana River county, Safina's 18-month-old daughter is severely acutely malnourished, despite numerous visits to the hospital over the past few months.

“Here in Australia, we’ve seen our own food prices skyrocket due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic, climate disasters and most recently, the conflict in Ukraine. But in communities and countries where people were already facing life-threatening hunger, this conflict has pushed them to the breaking point. Right now, almost 50 million people are facing famine.

In the world’s hungriest countries, children too young to walk are surviving on one meal a day, sometimes less. Entire classrooms are empty because students are too hungry to go to school, while some families don’t know what or when they’ll eat next.

It’s getting worse by the day. Children are dying.

This is an urgent crisis that cannot wait. But we can make a difference. Without urgent action and collaborative global efforts, more lives will be lost and the devastating effects on the lives of children, especially girls, will be felt for decades to come.

Food is a common ground we humans share. We all need it and understand the consequences of not having it. And right now, we have an opportunity to do something about this escalating global crisis.

We cannot turn away.

”

Susan Legena  
Plan International Australia  
CEO



# Plan International is calling on governments, donors and humanitarian actors to:

## > Halt the global hunger crisis now by investing in anticipatory action to protect people against the risk of hunger and famine.

Prevention and response to the hunger crisis must be tackled from an age and gender perspective by ensuring gender-responsive child protection, gender-based violence prevention, maternal, child and sexual and reproductive health services and education. Adequate, timely and flexible funding must be made available to support interventions such as:

- a. distribution of agricultural inputs to **prevent and mitigate foreseen climate shock impacts** on food production;
- b. **emergency cash transfers** to ensure that vulnerable populations can protect themselves ahead of shocks;
- c. **livestock protection activities**, in particular ahead of drought; strengthened and continuous surveillance and early warning;
- d. **control of pests and diseases; and prepositioning of food**, especially if increases in displacement are foreseen.
- e. **resilience** including alternative livelihoods and shock responsive, flexible social protection systems.

## > Mobilise US\$21.5 billion of flexible, unearmarked funding, for emergency food assistance for famine relief and prevention to assist 49 million people at the brink of famine.

## > Prioritise child safety, dignity and wellbeing during food insecurity programmes

## > Address child malnutrition, including expanding protective targeted supplementary feeding for children under two years and blanket supplementary feeding for children under five years, alongside support for the continuation of Infant and Young Child Feeding.

# Plan International is calling on the Australian Government to:

## > Immediately commit to urgent famine prevention relief of \$150 million in the critical hunger hot spots of Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

The Australian Government should prioritise working in partnerships with NGOs who are already working in hard to reach areas.

## > Develop a long-term strategy that complements and supplements global efforts to address the root causes of food insecurity and invest \$200 million annually over 3 years of new and additional multi-year funding.

This strategy must address the gendered aspects of food insecurity, prioritise locally led responses, and particularly social protection and safety nets for women, adolescent girls and children.

## > Increase Australia's investment in critical school feeding programs, and ensure that school feeding is safeguarded and adapted to the COVID-19 context.

## > Increase the prioritisation of funding for gender responsive child protection, gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support, maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health rights and education interventions, that are integrated into food and nutrition programs.

# Methodology

This report is based on a desk-based review of the quantitative data and literature on the global food crisis. The data was drawn from the period of 2020-2022. It uses the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification for definitions of famine and food insecurity related terms. Plan International staff working directly on the food crisis were also interviewed.

Mother-of-four, Mary, and her children have been surviving on food that their neighbours and extended family are able to share with them.



# Definitions:

## Famine:

Famine exists in areas where at least one in five households has or is most likely to experience an extreme deprivation of food. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition are or will likely be evident. Significant mortality, directly attributable to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease, is occurring or is likely to be occurring.

## Acute food insecurity:

Food deprivation that threatens lives or livelihoods, regardless of the causes, context or duration.

## Chronic food insecurity:

Persistent or seasonal inability to consume adequate diets for a healthy and active life, mainly due to structural causes.

## Acute malnutrition:

A high prevalence of acute malnutrition accompanied by high or increasing levels of morbidity or individual food consumption gaps.

## Integrated Food Security Phase Classification:

**Phase 1 (none/minimal):** Adequate food consumption and food availability

**Phase 2 (stressed):** Minimally adequate food consumption and borderline adequate food availability

**Phase 3 (crisis):** Moderately inadequate food consumption and inadequate food availability

**Phase 4 (emergency):** Very inadequate food consumption and very inadequate food availability

**Phase 5 (catastrophe/famine):** Extreme inadequate food consumption and extreme inadequate food availability.

## Wasting:

Low weight-for-height<sup>87</sup>.

## Stunting:

Low height-for-age<sup>88</sup>.

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